



Date: 3-29-2026

Sermon: When the World Falls Apart

Text: Revelation 6

We need to be cautious when reading the images in revelation. We should approach this in a semi-literal way. The images are symbolic but also may be literal.

Our goal is not to decipher every symbol rather to understand the message that the author is communicating.

Where is God when the world is falling apart?

Is God actually in control... or are we just hoping He is?

Revelation 6:1-8 NLT

As I watched, the Lamb broke the first of the seven seals on the scroll. Then I heard one of the four living beings say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" I looked up and saw a white horse standing there. Its rider carried a bow, and a crown was placed on his head. He rode out to win many battles and gain the victory.

When the Lamb broke the second seal, I heard the second living being say, "Come!" Then another horse appeared, a red one. Its rider was given a mighty sword and the authority to take peace from the earth. And there was war and slaughter everywhere.

When the Lamb broke the third seal, I heard the third living being say, "Come!" I looked up and saw a black horse, and its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard a voice from among the four living beings say, "A loaf of wheat bread or three loaves of barley will cost a day's pay. And don't waste the olive oil and wine."

When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the fourth living being say, "Come!" I looked up and saw a horse whose color was pale green. Its rider was named Death, and his companion was the Grave. These two were given authority over one-fourth of the earth, to kill with the sword and famine and disease and wild animals.

A Tale of Two _____

First Seal: A white horse & a Bow

Notes:

Second Seal: A Red Horse & a Sword

Notes:

Third Seal: A Black Horse with scales

Notes:

Fourth Seal: Pale Green accompanied by Death & Hades

Notes:

Revelation 6:9-11 NLT

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of all who had been martyred for the word of God and for being faithful in their testimony. They shouted to the Lord and said, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge the people who belong to this world and avenge our blood for what they have done to us?” Then a white robe was given to each of them. And they were told to rest a little longer until the full number of their brothers and sisters—their fellow servants of Jesus who were to be martyred—had joined them.

Justice for the _____

Notes:

Revelation 6:9-11 NLT

I watched as the Lamb broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake. The sun became as dark as black cloth, and the moon became as red as blood. Then the stars of the sky fell to the earth like green figs falling from a tree shaken by a strong wind. The sky was rolled up like a scroll, and all of the mountains and islands were moved from their places.

Then everyone—the kings of the earth, the rulers, the generals, the wealthy, the powerful, and every slave and free person—all hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. And they cried to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to survive?”

Pride that leads to _____

Notes:

Philippians 2:9-11 NLT

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

What are you trusting in to hold your life together?

Application:

1. Stop placing ultimate trust in temporary systems
2. Reframe how you see suffering and chaos
3. Take seriously the call to faithfulness
4. Don't wait until it's too late to recognize Jesus

**Are you surrendering to Jesus now... or just
acknowledging Him from a distance?**

Study Questions – Revelation 3

Digging Deeper:

How does Revelation 6 challenge the way we interpret chaos, suffering, and world events from an “earthly” perspective?

What do the seals reveal about where we tend to place our trust (power, security, finances), and how does heaven’s perspective correct that?

3. Application

What is one area of your life where you need to shift your trust from worldly systems to full surrender to the Lamb this week?

Commentary

The First Seal; The First Horseman

Revelation 6:1-2

Historicist

The **white horse** (v. 2) and rider of the first seal refer to the period of Roman imperialism from the death of Domitian (a.d. 96) to the peace made by Commodus with the Germans in a.d. 180. This was the period of the five good emperors: Nerva (96–98); Trajan (98–117); Hadrian (117–138); and the two Antonines, Antoninus Pius (138–161) and Marcus Antoninus Aurelius (161–180). These five expanded Rome by military conquest until occupying most of the territories formerly ruled by the three preceding empires, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece.

The **bow** (v. 2) in hand may refer to the fact that Nerva (and the dynasty he established) was not of Roman but of Cretan descent. The Cretans were known as a race of bowmen, a fact commemorated on their coins by a figure of a Cretan with a bow in his hand.

Historian Gibbon refers to this period as the “Golden Age” of the Roman Empire. Toynbee has called it the “Indian Summer” of Rome’s greatness. Barnes writes, “It was in general a period of prosperity, of triumph, of conquest—well represented by the horseman on the white horse going forth to conquest.” In support of this he cites from Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: “If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus.”

Alternatively, a few *historicists* (e.g., Matthew Henry and Adam Clarke) interpret the breaking of the seven seals essentially as do the *preterists*. That is, the whole vision applies to the fall of Jerusalem in a.d. 70. In the breaking of the first seal, they are inclined to see the progress of the gospel. Thus, Matthew Henry writes, “The Lord Jesus appears riding on a white horse.... He had a bow in his hand. The convictions impressed by the word of God are sharp arrows.”

The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge comments that “this seems to be the representation of the person and dignity of Christ, and the mild and beneficent triumphs of his Gospel over all the powers of paganism.”

Seventh-Day Adventist Pinkoski writes:

Now because the first horseman with the crown carried a bow, that does not necessarily mean he is a bloodthirsty warrior—arrows can easily carry messages, and the message of Christianity spread fast in the first century.

Preterist

Jay Adams, following Pieters, suggests that the seven seals are in a row on the overlapping lip of the document, thus rendering it impossible even to begin opening the scroll until all seven seals are removed. In this view, nothing happens historically until the seventh seal is broken in 8:1:

A careful study of the passage shows that during the seal-breaking, no action takes place. The most that chapters 6 and 7 do is introduce the reader to the main characters, forces, and circumstances with which the rest of the section is concerned. They are preparatory to the action which will take place once the book is opened.

Others believe that, with the breaking of the first seal, the progression of events leading to the destruction of Jerusalem (in a.d. 70) begins. Horses represent war. The first four seals, when broken, release horses with their riders, hence, warfare and its accompaniments. David S. Clark writes that:

there is no reason for assuming that these four seals or four horses are successive events to the extent of representing successive ages. It is not true to fact that conquest comes in one age, war in another, famine in another, and death in another. They all belong to the same age; they are parts of the same affair; they all go together, conquest, war, famine, death. And if these symbols point to any specific time there is every reason to believe that they point to the very period in which John was writing and in which his churches were living; and that they had specific reference to the last days of the Jewish state, at the destruction of Jerusalem.

Since the holocaust of a.d. 70 was preceded by three years of war between the Jews and the Romans, some take this rider on the white horse to be Vespasian or Titus at the head of the Roman armies. Russell writes: "In this first scene we see the Roman invader advancing to the combat. Yet the war has not actually begun." He is **given** (v. 2) his crown (i. e., victories) by God Himself, who is sending these calamities upon the apostate city that killed the prophets and crucified Christ. "These are the days of [God's] vengeance" (Luke 21:22).

Alternatively, the rider could be Christ, seen as going forth to war against His murderers through the calamities about to be revealed. Each horseman is summoned by the heavenly authority, saying, "Come!"—a textual reading that many prefer to **Come and see** (vv. 1, 3, 5, 7).

Futurist

With the breaking of the first **seal** (v. 1), the Tribulation begins. There are some *futurists* (e.g., Kuyper, Ladd, Morris), who see this rider on the **white horse** (v. 2) as Christ. Similarly, Ladd interprets this rider as the proclamation of the gospel in all the world. White, he argues, is always a symbol of Christ, something associated with Christ, or of spiritual victory. F. A. Jennings rejects this adamantly:

The whole context and character of these seals absolutely forbid our thinking of this rider being the Lord Jesus, as so many affirm. His reign shall not bring war, famine, and strife in its train.

He suggests that the rider “may be a personification of government or rule in the last days in the hands of Gentiles.” Similarly, Mounce sees this seal as a symbol of conquest and militarism and invasion from without.

Most *futurists* (e.g., Walvoord, Ryrie, Lindsey, and others), believe that the **white horse** (v. 2) and its rider represent Antichrist riding forth to conquer the world. The **crown given to him** (v. 2) is not a symbol of legitimate sovereignty (for then the word for crown would be *diadēma*), but a crown acquired by conquest (*stephanos*). Who “gives” the Antichrist these victories and this power? It is the dragon Satan (cf. Rev. 13:2 and 2 Thess. 2:8–10). Satan once told Christ that all the kingdoms of the world were his to give to whomever he wished (Luke 4:6). Here we see the one to whom Satan finally gives these kingdoms.

Gaebelein distinguishes between this rider and the Antichrist, though the things he says about this rider are the things most *futurists* would apply to the Antichrist:

The rider here is a great counterfeit leader, not the personal Antichrist, but the little horn which Daniel saw coming out of the ten-horned beast (Daniel 7). We are now in the most solemn and ominous times the world has ever known. Many are the voices calling for a European confederacy and for some great leader, another Napoleon.... And the Lord will permit such a one to come, deceiving the world so that they will say “peace and safety” (1 Thessalonians 5:1–3). This coming leader of the revived Roman empire will go forth to conquer and become its political head.

Walvoord clearly has the same cross-references in mind, though he equates them all with the Antichrist himself:

The rider on the white horse is none other than the “prince that shall come” of Daniel 9:26, who is to head up the revived Roman Empire and ultimately become the world ruler.... He is Satan’s masterpiece and the counterfeit of all that Christ is or claims to be ... the world ruler of the tribulation, same individual described as the beast out of the sea in Revelation 13.

Spiritual

As each of the first four seals is broken, **one of the four living creatures** (v. 1) says “Come” (preferred textually by most rather than **Come and see**—(v. 1). The call is not for John to come and see, since he need not go anywhere in order to see the visions, but the call is to the respective horsemen, emphasizing the divine origin of the events they represent.

Wilcock, however, suggests the following alternative:

Three of the four horses do not “come” at all, but are simply revealed to view. Whom then do the living creatures call? There is someone whose coming is both promised and desired. Hear the cry of 22:20: “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! Hear the echo of 1:6, 7: “Amen. Behold he is coming!” ... Both God’s people and God’s creation yearn for the coming of Christ to deliver them from suffering (Rom. 8:19–22).

According to Biederwolf, “Almost all scholars down to a.d. 150 took the image as a symbol of the preached gospel and its success.” This is still the view of many modern commentators, including Alford, Hendriksen, and Hailey. Hendriksen writes: “Our Lord is riding forth victoriously, conquering and to conquer. That, in all probability, is the meaning of the rider on the white horse.”

However, Wilson expresses doubt about this identification:

The rider on the white horse is often identified with Christ or the progress of the gospel in the world, but the Lamb who opens the seal cannot be expected to reappear as the rider thus sent forth.

But Hendriksen answers this objection:

An objection often advanced is that Christ cannot at the same time be the One who opens the seals and the contents of the first seal. But why should this be considered impossible? By the same process of reasoning should we not reach the conclusion that Christ cannot lay His right hand on John (1:17), for in that right hand He is holding seven stars (1:16)?

To many, the four horsemen represent the universal sequence of conquest, war, famine and death, oft repeated in history, but here revealed as proceeding from God’s sovereign purpose in judging a corrupt humanity. On this view, the **white horse** (v. 2) and rider represent the generic concept of military conquest, at whatever time or place in history it may occur, and is seen as God’s way of raising up and removing kings (Dan. 2:21). The ebb and flow of political empires are in the hand of God. He does not always give such government as a people would prefer, but may give them oppressors that will serve His ends of judging a wicked society (Prov. 17:11). Of this rider, Leon Morris writes:

Doubtless he thought of his own might as producing the victory. But John is sure of the sovereignty of God. The conqueror has only what God allows him to have.

Herschel Hobbs' *historical background* approach sees the horsemen in the manner just described except that, in addition to the general meaning, they emphasize the historical manifestation of these principles in John's own day (which he takes to be the time of Domitian). That is, the horsemen, in addition to representing conquest, war, famine, and death *in general*, also focus on these forces as agents of the coming downfall of the Roman persecuting power, thus encouraging the persecuted readers of John's day.

The Second Seal; The Second Horseman

Revelation 6:3-4

Historicist

Most relate the second seal (v. 3) to the period from the accession of Commodus (a.d. 180) to the accession of Diocletian (a.d. 284). As Elliott says, "It was the period of civil wars and bloodshed in the Roman Empire." This summary comment is expanded in Sismondi's *Fall of the Roman Empire*:

With Commodus commenced the third and most calamitous period. It lasted ninety-two years, from 192 to 284. During that period, thirty-two emperors, and twenty-seven pretenders alternately hurled each other from the throne by incessant civil warfare [which] taught the world on what a frail foundation the virtue of the Antonines had placed the felicity of the empire.

The fiery red (v. 4) horse rider thus depicts these civil conflicts that spelled the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire.

Alternatively, historicist Adam Clarke, agrees with preterists at this point, understanding the phrase to take peace from the earth (v. 4) as meaning "to deprive Judea of all tranquillity.... This was literally the case with the Jews, while besieged by the Romans." Also in possible agreement is Matthew Henry:

The next three seals give us a sad prospect of great and desolating judgments with which God punishes those who either refuse or abuse the everlasting gospel.... Some understand them of the persecutions that befell the church of Christ, and others of the destruction of the Jews.

Preterist

The second horseman represents the loss of peace from the “land” (a preferred translation to earth—v. 4) of Israel. Besides the war that the Jews were fighting against the Romans (suggested by the first seal), there were civil wars among the Jews themselves. J. Stuart Russell explains:

The Jewish war, under Vespasian, commenced at the furthest distance from Jerusalem in Galilee, and gradually drew nearer and nearer to the doomed city. The Romans were not the only agents in the work of slaughter that depopulated the land; hostile factions among the Jews themselves turned their arms against one another, so that it might be said that “every man’s hand was against his brother.”

Josephus describes the situation in these terms:

Every city was divided into two armies encamped one against another ... so the daytime was spent in shedding of blood, and the night in fear.” (Wars, 2:18:2)

In the end, during the siege of Jerusalem, there was deadly fighting among three or four antagonistic Jewish camps within the besieged city. The Jews had rejected the Prince of Peace, who had said, while weeping over Jerusalem, “If you had known ... the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42). The next words Jesus spoke predicted the Roman armies invading the land and leveling the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:43–44). What could speak more directly to the fulfillment of this threat than for Revelation to speak, as here, of one sent to take peace (v. 4) from the land? Zechariah also had predicted this as a consequence of the Jews’ rejection of Christ (Zech. 11:10–14).

Futurist

The fiery red (v. 4) color of this horse suggests bloodshed, and speaks of a time of war that comes upon the earth as the Tribulation progresses. Walvoord writes that

the constant tension among nations and the ambitions of men have their climax in this period before Christ comes. Though ‘wars and rumors of wars’ (Matt. 24:6) are characteristic of the age, it is evident that warfare occupies a large place in the consummation of the age with a resultant great loss of life. There apparently is a series of wars, the greatest of which is under way at the time of the second coming.

Hal Lindsey identifies the rider on the red horse with Russia, with her Arab allies in the Middle East, attacking Israel (Ezek. 38; Dan. 11), and places this at the midpoint of the Tribulation. Lindsey writes: “The war escalates until it involves all the major powers on the earth and becomes the greatest battle in the history of mankind—the Battle of Armageddon.” Ray Stedman writes “Understandably, many Bible scholars today view this

‘large sword’ as a symbol of the awesome power of the nuclear bomb.” After raising the question of whether Revelation really does describe modern-day warfare, he concludes that

we have to admit that it is only in our century, with its efficient, high-tech approach to killing, that the fulfillment of these terrible predictions could even come about.

Henry Morris believes that this vision also speaks of a time of civil wars erupting within nations, organized crime running rampant, and individual feuds generating waves of murders.

Spiritual

If the white horse represented conquest in general, then the fiery red (v. 4) horse represents war in general, or civil war in particular. Swete writes: “Victory, white-horsed and crowned, wears another aspect when viewed in the lurid light of the battlefield.”

Empires established by conquest often dissolve as the result of the lack of internal solidarity, leading to revolution and revolt. The horrors and carnage of war are another means by which God judges sinful societies. “If a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people be afraid? If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it?” (Amos 3:6). As the story of civilization is the story of war and conflict, the judgment of God can be seen everywhere throughout man’s career. Friedrich von Schiller wrote: “The history of the world is the judgment of the world.”

Applying the principle to the concerns of the original readers, Hobbs points out that the Roman Empire, built through warfare, “would ultimately perish by it,” thus fulfilling Jesus’ axiom that “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt. 26:52).

On the other hand, Hendriksen and Hailey, who saw the white horse as Christ riding forth in the perpetration of the gospel, now understand the red horse to represent the persecution of the church that inevitably follows the spread of Christianity into heathen lands. Their argument rests partly on the parallel they see between this vision and the statement of Jesus in Matthew 10:34: “I did not come to bring peace but a sword.” In that passage, Jesus was warning the disciples about opposition they would receive for their loyalty to Him.

The great sword (v. 4) given to this rider is the machaira, the same word used in Christ’s statement just cited. It was a short sword or knife suited for the killing of a sacrificial animal, such as that used by Abraham when he intended to slay Isaac (Gen. 22:6, 10 lxx). Also the word kill (v. 2) is sphatto, a word used elsewhere of the killing of Christ the Lamb (cf. 5:6) and of those whose souls were seen “under the altar” (6:9). It properly means “slaughter” and thus could point to the sacrificial character of the faithful martyrs’ deaths.

The Third Seal; the Third Horseman

Revelation 6:5-6

Historicist

Many see the black horse (v. 5) as the fiscal oppression imposed by some of the emperors of the third century. Taxes could be paid either in money or in produce—particularly in grain, oil, and wine. For the purpose of paying these taxes, produce was given a value of monetary equivalence. This is possibly the meaning of the statement, A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius (v. 6). Elliott believes that the phrase do not harm the oil and the wine (v. 6) would be better translated “be not unjust in the oil and the wine.”

Caracalla (218–222) granted citizenship to all free men in the empire, but only so he could tax them more. Gibbon refers to “the land tax, the capitation, and the heavy contributions of corn, wine, oil, and wheat, exacted from the provinces for the use of the court, the army and the capital” of this period. He also says, “The great body of Caracalla’s subjects were oppressed by the aggravated taxes, and every part of the Empire crushed under the weight of his iron scepter.”

Barnes also sees this seal as representing general economic deprivation caused by heavy taxation, but of a later period. Upon the abdication of Diocletian, Galerius assumed the title of Augustus and greedily raised real estate taxes to an unprecedented level.

Oppressive laws demanded that land be heavily taxed based on its productivity. This led landowners to deliberately reduce grain production to avoid the high taxation. The practice of destroying crops to avoid taxes became so widespread that the government issued an edict forbidding the destruction of olive trees and grapevines (do not harm the oil and the wine—v. 6). These details are recorded by Gibbon and Lactantius (cited by Barnes).

Some *historicists* (e.g., Clarke and Henry) go along with the *preterists* in identifying this seal with the food shortages in besieged Jerusalem in a.d. 70.

Preterist

The scales in the hand of the rider of the black horse (v. 5) seem to indicate that men must eat their bread by measure, as God warned the Jews that they would have to do if they rebelled against Him (Leviticus 26:26). This horse represents famine or shortage of food. The color black also is reminiscent of famine: “Our skin was black like an oven, because of the terrible famine” (Lam. 5:10). The denarius (v. 6) was a day’s wage for the average laborer. In return for his work he is to get a mere quart of wheat, or about one person’s daily

ration. Thus a man would have to work a full day just to earn enough to fill his own belly. To feed a family, he must turn to cheaper grain, which costs only one-third as much.

The Jews in Jerusalem suffered terrible food shortages during the Roman siege. Though initially there was enough food stored up to last a long time, the warring factions in the city, out of sheer spite, regularly destroyed the grain stores of the opposing factions! Thus food became so scarce that Josephus records at least one case of a mother eating her infant (compare Deut. 28:53 and 2 Kings 6:28f). It was with reference to this time that Jesus had said, “But woe to those who are ... nursing babies in those days!” (see Luke 21:20–23; 23:28–29). Consider the verbal parallels between this horseman’s decree and this description in Josephus:

Many there were indeed who sold what they had for one quart; it was of wheat, if they were of the richer sort, but of barley, if they were poorer. (*Wars*, 5:10:2)

The statement, do not harm the oil and the wine (v. 6) could allude to the fact that some sacrilegious Jews pillaged the oil and wine from the temple. Josephus writes that John Gischala, the leader of one of the factions, confiscated the sacred vessels of the temple:

Accordingly, drawing the sacred wine and oil, which the priests kept for pouring on the burnt offerings, and which was deposited in the inner temple, [John] distributed them among his adherents, who consumed without horror more than a hin in anointing themselves and drinking. (*Wars*, 5:13:6)

Futurist

Most *futurists* understand this horseman to represent famine conditions brought on by the warfare in the previous seal during the future Tribulation. Few fail to point out that the quart of wheat (v. 6) mentioned was a man’s approximate daily need for sustenance, while the amount of money (a denarius) was what a common laborer would earn in a day. Thus the expression meant that it would consume a day’s wages to buy a day’s supply of wheat, or the same price could buy enough cheaper grain to feed a few more mouths.

Henry Morris, taking a different course, sees in this seal a reference to the power of commerce to generate prosperity or calamity, inflation or depression, opulence or starvation. International capitalists will take advantage of the period of peace to gain full control of the oil, food, and money resources of the world. This is similar to the view of Ray Stedman:

Another possible explanation of the third seal is economic upheaval—inflation, recession, panic.... Inflation may well be the justification the Antichrist will use to impose rigid controls over buying and selling, as we shall see in Revelation 13.

On do not harm the oil and the wine (v. 6), Ryrie writes:

Apparently luxury items will not be in short supply, but of course most people will not be able to afford them. This situation will only serve to taunt the populace in their impoverished state.

Ironside also believes the oil and wine represent luxuries. He writes: “The rich seem to escape a part of this judgment for the oil and the wine, the luxuries of the well to do, are not to be hurt.” He adds: “They will receive their share of judgment later.”

Walvoord does not see the oil and the wine as luxuries, pointing out that these were considered staples in the ordinary household in biblical times:

There would be no money left to buy other things, such as oil or wine, which were considered essential in biblical times. To put it in ordinary language, the situation would be such that one would have to spend a day’s wages for a loaf of bread with no money left to buy anything else. The symbolism therefore indicates a time of famine when life will be reduced to its barest necessities.

Spiritual

Possibly as a consequence of war (the red horse), or simply as the result of God-ordained drought (Deut. 28:23–24), famine comes as a judgment upon sinners. It is one of the “four severe judgments” (Ezek. 14:21) by which God takes vengeance on corrupt societies.

“When I send against them the terrible arrows of famine which shall be for destruction, which I will send to destroy you, I will increase the famine upon you and cut off your supply of bread” (Ezek. 5:16). In modern societies, this may simply refer to economic disruption and inflation.

A denarius (v. 6) was the average laborer’s daily wage. Wilson explains:

At these ‘famine’ prices, which were twelve times the ordinary rate, a man’s daily wage would only buy enough wheat to support himself, and if he wished to provide something for his family he would have to buy barley instead. The command not to hurt the oil and the wine limits the extent of the famine. The drought is severe enough to destroy most of the cereal crops, but the deep-rooted olive and the vine are not seriously affected.

A common explanation of the reference to the oil and the wine (v. 6) is that these constitute luxuries, whereas grain is a staple of survival. Even in famine times, the rich somehow manage to maintain their luxurious life-styles. Wilcock points out that this is one indicator that the third seal “stands for partial hardship rather than total famine.”

Hobbs gives another angle on the expression do not harm the oil and the wine (v. 6), pointing out that, in a.d. 92, Domitian had endeavored to interfere with the cultivation of grapes in the provinces. The angry reactions of the people around Smyrna influenced the emperor to abandon the policy and not interfere with wine production. Thus, “do not harm ... the wine” would convey to the Asian Christians that they need not fear for their vines, for Domitian would not hurt them. Moffatt considers this detail to be a “watermark of the Domitianic date” of the writing of Revelation.

An entirely different approach to the seals is that of Hendriksen and Hailey, who understand the second and third seals to be consequences that follow upon the first seal, which they took to be the advance of the gospel in the earth. The second seal represented bloody persecutions of the believers, whereas this third seal speaks of economic persecutions of the same. Hendriksen writes:

That believers were poor, lacking the comforts which others enjoyed, is very clear from the book of Revelation. The first readers would immediately understand the symbol.... How often have the children of God been crowded out of their job, business, or profession, because they insisted on being true to their convictions?

The Fourth Seal; the Fourth Horseman

Revelation 6:7–8

Historicist

The time of fulfillment, according to Barnes, is the twenty years from a.d. 248 to 268, encompassing the reigns of Decius, Gallus, Aemilianus, Valerian, and Gallienus. Barnes quotes Gibbon:

from the great secular games celebrated by Philip to the death of the emperor Gallienus, there elapsed twenty years of shame and misfortune. During this calamitous period of time ... every province of the Roman world was afflicted by barbarous invaders and military tyrants, and the ruined empire seemed to approach the last and fatal moment of its dissolution.

Gibbon also writes that, from the years 248 to 296, “five thousand persons died daily in Rome; and many towns that escaped the hands of the barbarians were entirely depopulated.” Does this not correspond well with the figure of Death and Hades riding rampant in the earth?

Of the four judgments listed in verse 8, sword, with hunger, with death (pestilence), and by the beasts of the earth, Gibbon documents that three—sword, famine, and pestilence—did indeed wreak havoc in the empire and estimates that half (not the conservative *fourth* of Scripture) the human population of earth was killed in this period. Eusebius adds information about the beasts of the earth [dogs]:

Death waged a desolating war with ... famine and pestilence ... Men wasted away to mere skeletons, stumbled hither and thither like mere shadows, trembling and tottering. They fell down in the midst of the streets.... Some indeed were already the food for dogs.

(*Ecclesiastical History*, Book III, Chapter VI)

Elliott prefers to translate a fourth of the earth (v. 8) as does the Latin Vulgate, “over the four parts of the earth,” referring to the four sections into which the Roman Empire was divided at that time.

Preterist

The Greek word translated pale (v. 8) actually denotes a pallid yellowish-green. To kill ... with death means “with pestilence,” as the Hebrew word for pestilence, used about fifty times in the Old Testament, is translated in the Septuagint more than thirty times by the Greek word *thanatos* (“death”).

Because of the internal fighting and starvation of the Jews, conditions in besieged Jerusalem in a.d. 70 could readily be described in the terms found here. The reference to the means of death, sword, hunger, death [i. e., *pestilence*], and beasts of the earth (v. 8), are a deliberate echo of Ezekiel 14:21, where “sword and famine and wild beasts and pestilence” are called God’s “four severe judgments on Jerusalem.” In Ezekiel, God used these means to inflict judgment at the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 b.c., which was a precursor of this event, similar in detail and in significance, in a.d. 70.

Josephus describes the carnage and death in Jerusalem during the siege in the following terms:

So all hope of escaping was now cut off from the Jews, together with their liberty of going out of the city. 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 seditious ... as not enduring the stench of the dead bodies ... had them cast down from the walls into the valleys beneath. However, when Titus, in going his rounds along those valleys, saw them full of dead bodies, and the thick putrefaction running about them, he gave a groan ... and such was the sad case of the city itself (*Wars*, 5:12:3–4).

Futurist

Applying these seals to the end times Tribulation, Kuyper writes:

Death and Hell now attack human society, and the great destruction sets in, the first effect of which is bewilderment and general havoc, as a fourth part of the inhabitants of the earth is destroyed by the sword or by starvation or by deadly disease or by wild beasts.

Walvoord adds:

The area covered by this judgment, described as the earth (Gr. *gē*), though sometimes only of the promised land given to Israel, is a general word referring to the inhabited world and in this context apparently extends to the entire earth.... Treated geographically it would be equivalent to the destruction of more than the entire population of Europe and South America.

Because of the current world population being so great, one fourth of the inhabitants would represent a number larger than those destroyed in Noah's day. Therefore, this would be the "Great Tribulation" of unprecedented magnitude spoken of by Jesus in Matthew 24:21. Since "Great Tribulation" is the term that technically refers to only the final three and a half years of the seven-year Tribulation, some (e.g., Walvoord) believe that these seals apply strictly to that end period. Others place the beginning of the "Great Tribulation" at chapter 11.

Spiritual

The pale horse and its rider represent Death (v. 8) by various causes: sword, famine, death, and beasts of the earth. In a sense, this summarizes all four horsemen. Hades (v. 8), the place of the dead, follows close behind to receive the dead. The first four seals are thus summarized by Swete: "This series of pictures repeats itself in history, and the militarism and lust of conquest ... are among the forces set loose by the hand of Christ to prepare the way for His coming and the final publication of the secrets of the Sealed Book." The reference to the death of a fourth of the earth (v. 8) emphasizes the fact that we are not at this point seeing a global catastrophe, but only recurring instances of geographically limited judgments. Wilcock writes:

The wiping out of a quarter of the human race sounds like a disaster of the first magnitude, until one realizes that nothing has been said to indicate that this is a single catastrophic event. After all, every man dies sooner or later, and what is probably meant here is that a sizable proportion of those deaths are the unnecessary ones caused by war and famine and kindred evils.

Hobbs writes that the results mentioned in connection with this seal “summarize the effect of the four horsemen ... And in large measure they combined to destroy the Roman Empire. Rome herself had contributed her share of all these destructive forces. And she would, in turn, become their victim.” Thus the recurring patterns suggested by these seals had a contemporary relevance to the original readers in that they predicted the means by which the Roman persecutors would meet their end.

Hailey and Hendriksen interpret the seals in connection with their effects upon the church, in contrast to the later trumpet judgments of God upon the unbelieving world. Of the fourth seal with its four severe judgments, the sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts, Hendriksen writes: “These four, moreover, are symbolical of *all* universal woes which believers suffer along with the rest of humanity throughout the entire dispensation.”

The Fifth Seal

Revelation 6:9-11 NLT

Historicist

In a time of persecution of Christians, the souls of martyrs are consoled that it will be only a little while longer (v. 11) before their persecutors are judged and their persecutions ended.

Most *historicist* interpreters take this to be the ordeal of the church under Diocletian, whose reign began in 284 but who did not begin to persecute Christians until 303. Gibbon writes:

Perhaps it was represented to Diocletian, that the glorious work of the deliverance of the empire was left imperfect so long as an independent people [the Christians] were permitted to subsist and multiply in it.

Others give slightly different dates for the age of martyrs:

This seal seems a prediction of the terrible persecution of the church under Dioclesian (sic) and Maximian, from a.d. 270 to 304, which lasted longer, and was far more bloody, than any or all by which it was preceded, whence it was called “the era of the martyrs” (*Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*).

Barnes notes that:

Diocletian ascended the throne a.d. 284, and resigned the purple a.d. 304. It was during this period ... that the tenth persecution of Christians occurred—the last under the Roman

power; for in a.d. 306 Constantine ascended the throne, and ultimately became the protector of the church.

Many details of this persecution are recorded by Gibbon and Neander, cited by Barnes. Constantine's conversion occurred during the battle of Milvian Bridge, in 312, which made him the sole ruler of the Western Empire. The following year, he issued the Edict of Toleration, granting to "Christians and to all others full liberty of following that religion which each may choose." This was the official end of the era of martyrs in the Roman Empire.

Adam Clarke, still agreeing with the *preterists* at this point, holds this seal to apply to Christians who died under Jewish persecutions in the early years of the church. He writes concerning the expression, those who dwell on the earth (v. 10): "Probably meaning the persecuting Jews; they dwelt 'upon the land,' a form of speech by which Judea is often signified in the New Testament."

Preterist

As the blood of sacrificial animals was poured out at the foot of the altar (Lev. 4:7), so the souls of the martyrs (slain like animals by the Jewish priests) are seen under the altar (v.9). "The soul [Heb. *nephesh*] of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev. 17:11). Their blood cries out for vindication, as did the blood of Abel (Gen. 4:10). The fact that the martyrs are asking for the avenging of their blood upon those who dwell on the earth [or land] (v. 10) suggests that their persecutors were still alive on earth at the time John saw the vision. Prior to a.d. 70, the main persecutors of the righteous Jews and Christians were the leaders of the Jewish nation, headquartered in Jerusalem (Luke 13:33). These thoughts are brought together by Jesus when He predicted:

that on you [Jerusalem] may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah ... whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.... All these things will come upon this generation (Matt. 23:35f).

The destruction of Jerusalem in that generation was the sentence of the divine Judge in response to the cries of the blood (souls) of the righteous ones slain by her leaders. Russell writes that:

it is impossible not to be struck with the marked resemblance between the vision of the fifth seal and our Lord's parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8): 'And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith in the land?' This is more than resemblance: it is identity.

When Jesus was told that Pilate (a Roman) had mingled the blood of some Jewish worshipers with their sacrifices, He responded, “unless you [Jews] repent, you will all likewise perish [i. e., at the hands of the Romans]” (Luke 13:1–3). This seal reminds us of the reasons that the judgments on Jerusalem are taking place (cf. Num. 35:33).

Futurist

These souls under the altar (v. 9) are persons martyred during the Tribulation period. “The introduction of these martyred dead in heaven at this point immediately after the fourth seal seems to imply that these martyrs have come from the tribulation scene on earth” (Walvoord). Gaebelien, despite the mention of “souls,” contends that “They are risen from the dead and are in glory with redeemed bodies.”

To the dispensationalist, this scene applies to a time after the Rapture of the church, and the martyrs cannot, therefore, be identified with Christians of the church era. Their cry for vengeance indicates that they stand on other than Christian ground. “Christians are not supplicating for vengeance on their foes. The prayer for vengeance refers us to the imprecatory Psalms prewritten by the Holy Spirit in anticipation of the final persecution of Jewish believers” (Gaebelien). It seems that anyone converted after the Rapture must be martyred, “except the remnant of Israel, who are sealed for protection” (Phillips).

Whether the vision pertains to those slain only in the first half (Gaebelien, Ryrie) or the second half (Walvoord), or throughout the entire Tribulation period is a debated point.

Moorehead believes that the martyrs in this vision are indeed church Christians killed during the Tribulation, and Mounce sees the vision as an interpretation of Christian martyrdom.

Spiritual

This vision reveals to the suffering church the present state of those who have already died for their faith. They were “judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit” (1 Pet. 4:6).

The picture of the martyrs presented here emphasizes the sacrificial character of their deaths. Thus, their souls are under the altar (v. 9), where the blood of sacrificial victims was poured in the temple (Lev. 4:7). Hobbs writes:

Like the Lamb they had had their throats cut—this is the meaning of “slain” here and in 5:6. But it is a symbolic word. We are not to understand that these peoples’ throats were cut any more than was that of Jesus ... These martyrs had been sacrificed because of their faithfulness.

Whether these martyrs “represent all who suffer in any way for Christ’s sake” (Wilcock), or stand particularly for those slain by Domitian (as Hobbs thinks), the vision reminds us that the martyrs of Christ from every age live on before God. They anticipate eventual vindication, which is not complete until their murderers have been brought to justice. They are, however, consoled by the giving of white robes, meaning they are pure and incapable of defilement. They are at rest: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them’ ” (Rev. 14:13).

The Sixth Seal

Revelation 6:12-17 NLT

Historicist

These great apocalyptic signs may symbolize the fall of paganism to Christianity in the Roman Empire, associated with Constantine’s accession and conversion. The earthquake (v. 12) is a prophetic metaphor for political or spiritual revolutions. Sun (v. 12), moon (v. 12), and stars (v. 13) represent earthly dignitaries, political authorities, and great “lights” in the political or religious “heavens.” Elliott calls this the dissolution of the “Pagan firmament.”

Some relate this vision to the division of the empire in 395 between the East, under Honorius, and the West, under Arcadius. This is taken as a portent of the eventual fall of the empire, which did not occur until 476.

Barnes applies this seal differently, seeing in it the invasions of the Roman Empire by the northern hordes of Goths and Vandals, between 376 and 418. Thus he sees the sixth seal as fulfilled by the same events depicted in the early trumpet judgments which follow.

Adam Clarke waffles at this point between the view of the *preterists*, that this is a.d. 70, and that of other *historicists*. He writes: “All these things may literally apply to the final destruction of Jerusalem, and to the revolution which took place in the Roman Empire under Constantine the Great. Some apply them to the ‘day of judgment’; but they do not seem to have that awful event in view.”

Matthew Henry, in most respects a *historicist*, applies this seal in a *preterist* manner. He considers the earthquake (v. 12) to represent the shaking of the foundations of the Jewish church and state, the darkening of the heavenly lights to represent the fall of the chief governors and rulers of the land, the heavens being rolled back like a scroll to “signify that their ecclesiastical state should perish and be laid aside forever,” and the moving of every mountain and island (v. 14) to be the general terror that should affect all men of perception.

Preterist

Russell writes: “This is ... ‘the great and terrible day of the Lord’ predicted by Malachi, by John the Baptist, by St. Paul, by St. Peter, and, above all, by our Lord in His apocalyptic discourse on the Mount of Olives.... It is impossible to overlook the connection between the seventeenth verse and the language of Malachi 3:2, ‘But who may abide the day of his coming?’ ”

The vision depicts the end of the Jewish state and the fall of its leaders. David Clark writes:

It may doubtless be taken for granted that these convulsions of nature were seen in vision and are not to be looked upon as actual occurrences. As no one would assume that the four horses actually rode over the earth, but were symbolical representations of things that were to happen, so these convulsions of nature were probably to be understood in the same way.... Striking and terrible things seen in the visions foretold striking and terrible judgments upon the wicked persecutors of the church.

The language used here to depict these events may seem strange to modern ears, but it is commonly used in the Old Testament, as denoting the end of temporal empires in prophecy—e.g., of Babylon (Isa. 13:10) and of Egypt (Ezek. 32:7–8). The images of the stars falling like figs (v. 13) and the heavens being rolled up (v. 14) echo Isaiah’s prophecy about the fall of Edom (Isa. 34:4). The same terms are used by Jesus in predicting the disaster that would befall the Jewish nation in that generation (Matt. 24:29, 34). David Clark writes:

I am not sure but that it is a feature of biblical symbolism to make sun, moon, and stars, and such phenomena to represent the strong social and political powers, or men in high places like kings, princes, or priests, or high officials of church and state. And in confirmation you will notice that the following verses refer to just such men, as if to be a sort of commentary on these symbols.

J. Stuart Russell, anticipating the objection that the fall of Jerusalem was not as catastrophic as the language of this seal would suggest, writes:

Prophecy is poetry, and Oriental poetry also, in which gorgeous symbolical imagery is the vesture of thought. Besides, the objection is based upon an inadequate estimate of the real significance and importance of the destruction of Jerusalem. That event is not simply a tragical Historicist incident; it is not to be looked at as in the same category with the siege of Troy or of Carthage. It was a grand providential epoch; the close of an aeon; the winding up of a great period in the divine government of the world.

Not all the language is strictly symbolic. That the people of Jerusalem would seek refuge in caves (v. 15) and under the rocks (v. 16) at this time, for example, was predicted by Christ (Luke 23:28–31) and verified as Historicist by Josephus, who wrote:

So now the last hope which supported the tyrants and that crew of robbers who were with them, was in the caves and caverns underground; whither, if they could once fly, they did not expect to be searched for; but endeavored, that after the whole city should be destroyed, and the Romans gone away, they might come out again, and escape from them. This was no better than a dream of theirs; for they were not able to lie hid either from God or from the Romans. (*Wars*, 6:7:3).

Futurist

Mounce sees this seal, and the catastrophes that go with it, to be heralding the beginning of the last days through great cosmic disturbances. For example, the earthquake (v. 12) was a regular feature of divine visitation (cf. Ex. 19:18; Isa. 2:19; Hag. 2:6). He does not commit himself to a strictly literal interpretation of the phenomena mentioned, but sees them as “signs in the heavens” that are both symbolic and literal. The reader is thus left wondering whether some of the phenomena are literal and some symbolic, or if they are literal, but with symbolic significance. The former of these possibilities is favored by Gaebelien:

Most of it is symbolical, yet at the same time great physical phenomena are also involved. The earthquake possibly means a literal earthquake.... Everything is being shaken in this poor world. The civil and governmental powers on earth all go to pieces; every class from kings to slaves is affected by it and terrorized. The political and ecclesiastical world is going to pieces.

Ironside takes the vision symbolically. He writes:

It is therefore not a worldwide earthquake ... but rather the destruction of the present order—political, social, and ecclesiastical—reduced to chaos; the breaking down of all authority, and the breaking up of all established and apparently permanent institutions.

In contrast, ultradispensationalist E. W. Bullinger writes: “It is impossible for us to take this as symbolical.... The difficulties of the symbolical interpretation are insuperable, while no difficulties whatever attend the literal interpretation.”¹⁰

Ryrie (in company with Walvoord, Morris, and others) takes this passage quite literally (except in the case of stars falling, which he thinks refer to a meteor shower). He identifies six catastrophic events calculated “to strike terror into the hearts of men living on the

earth.... At this point men will know assuredly that the tribulation has begun, for they recognize it as 'the great day of his wrath.' ” Henry Morris explains that:

the vast worldwide network of unstable earthquake belts around the world will suddenly begin to slip and fracture on a global basis and a gigantic earthquake will ensue. This is evidently, and naturally, accompanied by tremendous volcanic eruptions, spewing vast quantities of dust and steam and gases into the upper atmosphere. It is probably these that will cause the sun to be darkened and the moon to appear blood-red.

Hal Lindsey contends that this seal describes the first nuclear exchange. A nuclear explosion will trigger the worst earthquake (v. 12) ever. The smoke will darken the sun and make the moon appear red. The falling stars (v. 13) are Russian bombs. This is similar to the view of Ray Stedman:

The sun and the moon will appear darkened, probably as a result of dust and ash. This may well be the effect astronomer Carl Sagan has dubbed “nuclear winter,” the darkening of the sun by clouds of dust and ash thrown up by the mass detonation of nuclear weapons.

Spiritual

Some consider this too early in the book to portray the final judgment of the world at the Second Coming of Christ, since, in their view, John’s vision does not deal with this until Revelation 20:11–15. These interpreters would see these calamities as representing the judgment of God upon those who were oppressing the Christians in John’s day, i. e., the Roman Empire.

A more common view however, is that we do have the Second Coming of Christ presented here. The events of the first five seals are social and political upheavals that recur often in history, but this “great day of His wrath” represents a climax of all the cycles of judgment. The seals are a self-contained series, culminating in this ultimate judgment at Christ’s eschatological coming in glory. There are additional cycles to come in the book (e.g., the seven trumpets and the seven bowls), which will bring us to the same climax in their respective turns. Alford writes: “We may unhesitatingly set down as wrong all interpretations which view as the fulfillment of this passage any period except that of the coming of the Lord.”

Mention is made of seven structures of creation: earth, sun, and moon (v. 12), stars (v. 13), sky, mountains, and islands (v. 14) and seven classes of men: kings, great men, rich men, commanders, mighty men, slaves, and free men (v. 15), in order to symbolize the universality of the disasters. Wilcock writes:

The question of whether the earthquake, the darkened sun, and so on, are to be taken literally or metaphorically, misses the point. That day will spell the end of the entire universe as we know it (Heb. 12:26), and the end of the planets and galaxies as well as the end of the human institutions they may symbolize.

Wilson writes:

With the opening of the sixth seal John is given his first vision of the end.... The final shaking of the universe will convince the proudest rebels of their arrogant folly (v. 15) ... John shows how the unleashing of God's judgment completely shatters what the ancients regarded as the fixed points of an ordered world.... This terrifying judgment reduces men of every class to the same condition of abject fear, as they vainly seek refuge in the caves and rocks of the mountains (Isa. 2:19).¹

¹ Steve Gregg, [*Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary*](#) (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), 120–125.