

Introduction

Revelation 6:1-8 ESV

¹ 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!” ² 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. ³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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!” ⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” ⁸ 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.

Last time, we ended our study by looking at the worship in heaven found in [Revelation 5:8-14](#). We saw worship begin at the center with the living creatures and elders, then spread to angels, and finally to all creation. This worship focused on Jesus, the Lamb who was slain. Every group in heaven declared that only Jesus is truly worthy of praise. Worship in heaven is real, deep, and focused on who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

We also learned that believers have a new identity. We are both a kingdom and priests because Jesus died for us. This shapes how we worship and how we live. Our worship flows from gratitude, not from duty. It is full of both truth and emotion, and it joins us to the worship that is already going on in heaven. Knowing that, we can approach God with confidence and hope for the future.

At the end of chapter 5, the Lamb takes the scroll. Chapter 6 shows why this is so important. Jesus, the Lamb, is not only the redeemer we worship, He is the only one who is able and worthy to open the seals of God's plan for history.

There is a sharp contrast as we move from chapter 5 to chapter 6. We move from the peace and beauty of heavenly worship to scenes of shaking and judgment on the earth. What we see in chapter 6 may seem troubling, but we need to remember that the Lamb who opens the seals is the same Lamb worshiped by all of heaven. He is gentle and sacrificed for us, but He is also strong and has authority to act in justice.

As we follow the opening of the seals, we will see how God's plan unfolds for a world that has turned away from Him. We will also find many connections with Old Testament prophecy and with Jesus' own teaching about the end times in [Matthew 24](#) and 25.

Let's begin with the first section: the opening of the first seal and the coming of the white horse and its rider.

I. The First Seal: The White Horse ([Revelation 6:1–2](#))

Revelation 6:1–2 ESV

¹ 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!" ² 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.

A. Jesus' Words as Our Guide

When we look at the first seal, it helps to let Jesus' teaching lead us. In [Matthew 24](#), Jesus describes the signs of the end. He says the first thing His followers should watch for is deception:

Matthew 24:4–5 ESV

⁴ And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray.

Jesus says that at the beginning of the end, people will come claiming authority, offering hope and control. They will look trustworthy and even present themselves as saviors. Many will believe them.

This matches the vision John receives. The Lamb opens the first seal, and a rider on a white horse appears. In Bible times, white could mean victory or purity. But not every white horse means a true Savior. The rider has a bow, a crown, and rides out conquering. He looks like a leader who brings victory, but that does not make him right or good.

B. Using Matthew 24 to Read Revelation 6

Let's make the link clear:

- In Matthew 24:4–5, Jesus warns of false messiahs and spiritual deception.
- In Revelation 6:1–2, the first horseman rides out in the appearance of victory.

The rider on the white horse likely stands for the spirit of false hope, the rise of deceivers and leaders who promise peace and safety apart from Christ. This could be religious deception or political leaders who claim to offer what only Jesus truly gives.

C. Old Testament Echoes

The Old Testament adds more light:

- In Zechariah 6:1–8, horses and riders are sent out to patrol and announce God's judgment.

Zechariah 6:1–8 ESV

¹ Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four chariots came out from between two mountains. And the mountains were mountains of bronze. ² The first chariot had red horses, the second black horses, ³ the third white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled horses—all of them strong. ⁴ Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, "What are these, my lord?" ⁵ And the angel answered and said to me, "These are going out to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth. ⁶ The chariot with the black horses goes toward the north country, the white ones go after them, and the dappled ones go toward the south country." ⁷ When the strong horses came out, they were impatient to go and patrol the earth. And he said, "Go, patrol the earth." So they patrolled the earth. ⁸ Then he cried to me, "Behold, those who go toward the north country have set my Spirit at rest in the north country."

- In Psalms 45:4–5, a victorious king rides with a bow.

Psalms 45:4–5 ESV

⁴ In your majesty ride out victoriously for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness; let your right hand teach you awesome deeds! ⁵ Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies; the peoples fall under you.

Both point to God acting in history through powerful figures, but those figures do not always bring blessing. Sometimes they bring judgment and are part of God's larger plan.

D. Real Life and Historical Context

In John's day, the Romans and even rival powers like the Parthians used the image of the white horse to signal conquest and victory. Rulers would parade this way after winning battles. The early church knew that not every earthly victory was a sign of God's blessing.

Today, the temptation is the same. People still look for new leaders, movements, or teachings to give them security and victory. Jesus already warned us: the world will offer false saviors.

E. Theological Reflection

Letting Jesus' words shape our reading keeps us safe. The first seal tells us that the troubles at the end begin not with war or disaster, but with a spirit of deception that looks appealing. We have to test every offer of hope and every human leader by the words of Jesus.

The first horseman is a warning: don't be fooled by appearances. Only the Lamb, Jesus, is worthy of our trust and worship.

II. The Second Seal: The Red Horse (Revelation 6:3–4)

Revelation 6:3–4 ESV

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" ⁴ 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.

A. Jesus' Words and the Red Horse

After warning His disciples about the rise of false messiahs and religious deception, He immediately speaks about violent conflict:

"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom..." (Matthew 24:6–7a, ESV)

Jesus does not hide the truth. He says that conflict and war will be a normal part of the world's story before His return. He talks about actual wars—those “rumors” that worry people and those conflicts that truly break out. He also points to the deep-rooted hostility between nations and kingdoms, showing that violence won't just happen in one place, but everywhere.

When the second seal is opened in Revelation 6, the red horse comes onto the scene. His mission matches the next stage of trouble that Jesus told His disciples to expect. The rider on the red horse is permitted “to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.” The sequence follows Jesus' words closely: after the deceivers, violence erupts across the world.

It is not just one battle or even a series of wars. John describes a loss of peace, an unraveling of the order that holds society together. The language “people should slay one another” points to widespread conflict—violence that could be international, local, or even personal. Jesus' warning is not only about armies on battlefields, but about the breaking down of peace wherever people turn from Him and from truth.

As Jesus said, “see that you are not alarmed.” He does not want His followers to panic, because these things “must take place.” They are part of the world as it pushes God away. But they are not the final word; they show us our deep need for the true peace that only Christ can bring.

B. Old Testament Background: The Horses in Zechariah

The vision of colored horses in Revelation 6 lines up with the visions God gave to Zechariah, which were given to encourage and warn His people after the exile.

Zechariah 1:8–11

Zechariah sees a man riding a red horse, standing among myrtle trees, with other horses behind him (red, sorrel, and white). These horsemen are described as sent by God to patrol the earth.

“These are they whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth. And they answered the angel of the Lord who was standing among the myrtle trees, ‘We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth remains at rest.’” (Zechariah 1:10–11, ESV)

Here, the red horse is part of a group that brings back a report of peace and rest. But rest is not a lasting condition; it is subject to change depending on God's plan for justice and judgment.

Zechariah 6:1-8

Later, Zechariah sees another vision: four chariots coming out from between two mountains. Each chariot is pulled by strong horses of different colors—red, black, white, and dappled.

“The first chariot had red horses, the second black horses, the third white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled horses—all of them strong. ... These are going out to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth.” (Zechariah 6:2-5, ESV)

John’s readers would have remembered these visions. The four horses represent God sending out agents across the earth to carry out His will. The red horse, in particular, signals God’s action to disturb the false peace of the nations when it is time for judgment.

- **Red Horses as a Sign of Unrest:** In Zechariah, the red horses signify a readiness for battle and a time when God may move the nations from peace to conflict as a response to sin or injustice.
- **God’s Sovereign Control:** The horses do not act on their own. They go at God’s command and return to give Him account. This shows God isn’t helpless or surprised by war. He supervises everything that happens among nations, including when peace is taken away.

Other Prophets:

- Ezekiel 38:21 describes God calling for a “sword” to be set against the enemies of Israel, even leading to neighbor fighting neighbor.
- Jeremiah 25:15-17 talks about God giving the nations a cup of His wrath, which leads to violence and war as judgment for rebellion.

The red horse in Revelation 6 continues the story told in Zechariah. It stands for the loss of peace and the outbreak of violence as God allows human choices and judgments to play out on the world stage. The color red connects to bloodshed and God’s readiness to move the world from a false sense of peace into open conflict when the time is right.

C. Summary of the Second Seal

After the spirit of deception comes the breakdown of peace and the rise of conflict. Jesus predicted this exact sequence in Matthew 24. The red horse in Revelation 6 shows that war and violence are part of the troubles that happen in a world that refuses the peace Christ brings.

III. The Third Seal: The Black Horse (Revelation 6:5–6)

Revelation 6:5–6 ESV

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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!”

A. Jesus’ Words and the Black Horse

When Jesus spoke about the signs before His return, He listed war and violence, then added:

“There will be famines...” (Matthew 24:7b, ESV)

After deception and war, Jesus says that hunger and lack will follow. These are not random details. In times of war and unrest, fields are left empty, people are displaced, and food becomes scarce. All of this fits perfectly with John’s vision of the black horse.

The rider of the black horse carries a pair of scales, used to measure out food. A loud voice announces the high price of the most basic foods: “A quart of wheat for a denarius...” In ancient times, a denarius was the usual wage for a full day’s work. A quart of wheat would feed one person for a day. In other words, a worker’s entire day’s wage would only buy enough to keep himself alive—nothing left over for family or comforts. Barley, which was less expensive and considered food for the poor or for animals, was a little more affordable but still expensive: three quarts for a denarius.

The scales and the prices show a time of scarcity, where survival takes all your time and energy. This is the living picture of famine Jesus warned about. He predicted that the world would see not just conflict, but also a breakdown in supply, daily basics, and security. The black horse brings this to life.

There is a note at the end: “Do not harm the oil and wine!” This could mean that the luxuries of life—oil and wine—are left untouched for now, perhaps only available to the rich. It could also mean that these items are being protected, even while basic needs are in short supply. Either way, the image is clear. This is a world out of balance, where what is most needed is hard to get and what is least needed remains.

B. Old Testament Background

God’s prophets have warned about times just like this:

- **Leviticus 26:26:** God says, “When I break your supply of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven and shall dole out your bread by weight, and you shall eat and not be satisfied.” The practice of weighing food shows severe shortage.
- **Ezekiel 4:16–17:** “Son of man, behold, I will break the supply of bread in Jerusalem. They shall eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and they shall drink water by measure and in dismay.” Both passages show that weighed and measured food is a sign of judgment, anxiety, and deep need.

C. Historical Context

John’s readers lived in an unstable world. Famine was a real threat. War and poor harvests quickly turned cities and villages into places of hunger. Food shortages meant families faced impossible choices. For Christians, who might already be on the margins, this threat was even sharper.

The use of “scales” (Greek: *zygos*) also hinted at unfair business. Crooked merchants could use false scales in the marketplace, causing further stress on those trying to survive.

The black horse and its rider show that after false hope and war, the world cannot escape the results—hunger, scarcity, and inequality. Jesus saw these days coming, and John’s vision puts them vividly before our eyes.

IV. The Fourth Seal: The Pale Horse (Revelation 6:7–8)

Revelation 6:7–8 ESV

⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” ⁸ 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.

A. Jesus’ Words and the Pale Horse

As Jesus continued His teaching in Matthew 24, He described a time of suffering that was more severe than anything that had come before. He said:

“All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.” (Matthew 24:8–9, ESV)

He warned of violence leading to death, and of troubles coming in waves. In Luke's version of the same teaching, Jesus adds:

"There will be... pestilences and famines, and there will be terrors..." (Luke 21:11, ESV)

The pale horse in Revelation 6 pulls together all the earlier troubles and intensifies them. This rider is named "Death," and he is not alone—"Hades" (the realm of the dead) follows behind, swallowing up the victims. The Greek word for "pale" here is *chlōros*, which describes a greenish, sickly, or corpse-like color, matching the theme of death by plague, starvation, exposure, and violence.

The four ways Death is allowed to strike echo the list in Jesus' words:

- **Sword** (war or violence)
- **Famine**
- **Pestilence** (plague or disease)
- **Wild beasts** (chaos and danger unleashed when society breaks down)

All of these match the "birth pains" that Jesus predicted, showing the world in turmoil: widespread death, disease, hunger, and the threats of a world spinning out of control. Jesus said these things would signal the world's brokenness before the end.

B. Old Testament Background

God warned His people through the prophets that when they turned away, trouble would come in these same forms:

- **Ezekiel 14:21:** "For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast!" This is almost the same list John repeats here.
- **Jeremiah 15:2-3:** God says, "Those who are for pestilence, to pestilence, and those who are for the sword, to the sword... I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers... the sword to kill, the dogs to tear, the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy."

Through the prophets, God made it clear that these disasters would follow persistent rebellion. The ultimate result of turning from God was being surrounded by death in many forms.

C. Historical Context

In John's day, all four of these calamities were real dangers. War could break out anywhere across the Roman empire. Famine and plague swept through lands unpredictably. When villages or cities were ruined, wild animals would move into abandoned places. The early church lived with these threats as a daily reality.

The phrase "authority over a fourth of the earth" shows the scale is massive. It is severe but still limited by God's permission.

The pale horse sums up what happens when deception, violence, and scarcity are allowed to run their course: death spreads and multiplies. Jesus foretold all of these sorrows as being part of the world's condition without Him.

Application

1. Stay Alert to Spiritual Deception

Jesus warned first about false teachers who would appear trustworthy but lead many astray. The white horse reminds us that not everything that looks good is from God. Be careful who you listen to. Measure everything by God's Word. Don't follow personality, power, or promises—follow Jesus.

2. Don't Be Surprised by Conflict in the World

War, violence, and brokenness are part of life on this side of Christ's return. Jesus said these things "must take place." The red horse shows that the peace many promise is often shallow. Don't be shaken or discouraged when you see conflict. Remember, Jesus knew it would happen, and He is not surprised or powerless.

3. Respond to Need and Injustice

The black horse shows a world where basic needs are often out of reach and resources are not distributed fairly. If you have enough, thank God and look for ways to help others. If you are in need, bring your situation before God with honesty. As a church, we're called to feed the hungry, care for the poor, and press for justice.

4. Remember the Shortness and Sorrow of Life Without Christ

The pale horse shows what happens when people and societies turn completely from God: suffering increases, and hope runs out. It might feel heavy to think about these things, but it reminds us not to put our hope in anything that won't last. Only Jesus offers true life and hope beyond this world.

5. Trust the Lamb Who Opens the Seals

Above all, the One who opens the seals is the same Lamb who was slain for us. He is both perfectly loving and absolutely in control. He knows all that happens on the earth. When life feels uncertain or out of control, you can go to Him. He understands suffering and leads you through it.

6. Live as People of Hope

Jesus called these troubles the “beginning of birth pains.” Birth pains are real and difficult, but they lead to something new and good. The suffering and brokenness around us will not have the last word. Because of Christ, we can live with hope, help others, and look forward to His return.

Conclusion: The Glory of Christ in the Midst of Judgment

As we come to the end of our study of the first four seals, let's not lose sight of the bigger picture. We began with heaven's worship, focused on Christ—the Lamb who was slain and is now alive forever. That vision must stay at the center as we witness the seals being opened one by one.

Each seal reveals a hard reality of life in a world that resists God: deception, conflict, scarcity, and death. These are not just ancient threats, but ongoing troubles in every age. Every generation tells the story of false saviors, wars that destroy, want that oppresses, and tragedies that take life. And yet, none of these things surprise Christ, and none are outside His control.

The Lamb is the only One found worthy to open the scroll. This means all that follows, even the darkness and pain, unfolds under His authority. No seal breaks apart from His command. No horseman rides without His knowledge. Even as judgment moves across the earth, the risen Jesus remains on the throne—praised in heaven, trusted by His people, and sovereign over history.

Jesus described these birth pains Himself. He did not promise escape from suffering, but He did promise His presence through it and victory at the end. He is not just the Judge; He is the Savior who bore wrath in our place. His scars prove both His love and His power.

When you see heartbreak and turmoil in the world or in your own life, remember this: Christ is glorified not just in moments of beauty and peace, but right in the middle of struggle and loss. The seals reveal what happens when the world trusts in anything other than Him. But for those who belong to the Lamb, every seal broken is a step closer to the day when evil is ended, justice flows, and mourning is swallowed up in the song of heaven.

So, keep your eyes on Jesus. Let His Word shape your hopes and your actions. The Lamb who was slain is worthy of your trust. He is Lord of all—over the heavens, over the nations, over your story, and over the very end of history.

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain—to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! (Revelation 5:12, ESV)