

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Lecture 11, Revelation 6 The Scroll Seals

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his teaching on the book of Revelation. This is session 11, Revelation 6, The Scroll Seals.

Revelation chapter 6, which records the events that take place when the seals are released and opened from the scroll of chapter 5, reads like this.

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say, in a voice like thunder, Come. I looked, and there before me was a white horse. Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown. He rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, Come. Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given the power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other.

To him was given a large sword. When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, Come. I looked, and there before me was a black horse; its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand.

Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures saying, A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine. When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, Come. I looked, and there before me was a pale horse; its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him.

They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, plague, and by the wild beast of the earth. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood.

Then, each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed, as they had been, was completed. I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake, the sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, and the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.

The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called out to the mountains and to the rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.

For the great day of the wrath has come, and who can stand? One of the questions that most are interested in asking and trying to answer is twofold. Number one, what are these seals, especially the ones associated with the four horses? And second, when did these occur? Are these things that have already taken place? Is John depicting a future series of seals or a series of events that are going to take place? When did these take place, and what exactly are these seals, especially the first four horses? One thing I think we need to start with is to realize that we need to be cautious in trying to identify these, exactly what these are, and exactly when they took place or will take place. Because 2,000 years later, we are reading something that we are foreigners looking into.

We are looking back nearly 2,000 years to something that the first writer and the first readers probably would have understood to a large degree. And now, 2,000 years later, we look at this and try to make sense of it. So, I think it requires a fair amount of caution, recognizing the difference in genre and the historical distance that we face in trying to overcome.

But I want to suggest to you right out front that I think chapter 6 of Revelation is doing this. My thesis is that God's judgment is being poured out on Rome's idolatrous, godless, oppressive empire and its economy. And any other nation or any other people that participates in Rome's mistake, but also any other nation, because, as we've seen, because this series of seals leads up to the second coming of Christ, seal number 6 brings us to the great day of God's wrath at the end of history.

Because of that, I would suggest, therefore, that although Rome is the center of attention, the author takes a situation and places it against the backdrop of the final judgment, of the day of the Lord, of the great day of God's wrath, therefore, any other people or any other nation that participates in and repeats Rome's mistake at any point in history, also it could be referred to, not that John saw different successive empires, but that he uses images that reach all the way to the second coming of Christ. So, anyone, as Richard Baucom says, anyone for whom the prophetic cap fits must wear it. As we've already said, the first four seals go together.

And the reason is, we've said logically, we're going to see all these events kind of relate to each other, result from one another. And second, they're all united with the image of a horse that rides out upon the earth. The background, one of the primary backgrounds for the horse imagery, again, is the Old Testament.

If you go back to Zechariah chapter 6, and as we've seen, I'm convinced John actually had a vision of these horses, but he interprets them clearly in light of other prophetic visions in his prophetic predecessors to make clear and to interpret and describe for his readers exactly what it was he saw. And in Zechariah chapter 6, which also, as a prophet, also much like Ezekiel, much of it is in the form of a vision, kind of a precursor to later apocalyptic works, such as Daniel and Revelation, first Enoch that we read from a little bit earlier. But here's what Zechariah says, chapter 6, and I'll read the first eight verses.

I looked up again, and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains, mountains of bronze. The first chariots had red horses, the second black horses, the third white, and the fourth dappled, all of them powerful. I asked the angel who was speaking to me, What are these, my Lord? The angel answered me: These are the four spirits of heaven going out from standing in the presence of the Lord and the whole world; the one with the black horse is going towards the north, the one with the white horse is going towards the west, the one with the dappled towards the south.

And when the powerful horses went out, they were straining to go throughout the entire earth. And he said to them, Go throughout the earth, so they went throughout the earth. Then he called to me, Look, those going towards the north country have given my spirit rest in the land of the north.

My point of reading that is simply to demonstrate that although John appears to do something a little bit different from them, John draws his imagery and his description of his vision from text, especially one like Zechariah chapter 6. But I think John may also have another text in mind, and that is another place where we find a more specific account of the types of plagues and things that John identifies the horses with is found in Jesus' eschatological discourse in Matthew 24. At the very beginning of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24, he begins to recount things that must take place before the end. These are not signs just of tribulation that guarantees that we're in the end.

In fact, Jesus says the opposite. It's interesting, he says; these things have to take place, but the end is not yet. So don't be deceived when you see these things.

It's usually the opposite of what we do today. We see earthquakes and wars and famines, and we're convinced that this must be the end. But Jesus warned against that and said, Don't be deceived.

These things must happen. Yes, there are signs that the end is coming, but they have to happen, and they are not to be confused with the end itself. So here's what the signs that Jesus says will happen.

And I think Jesus is suggesting these are the kinds of things that will characterize church history, the history of God's people, until the coming of Christ, when he does come back to bring history to its consummation. So, starting at verse 4 of chapter 24, Watch out, then, that no one deceives you, for many will come in my name, claiming, I am the Christ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars.

So keep that in mind, wars, and rumors of wars. But see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.

Nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these things are the beginning of the birth pangs.

Then, you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death. You will be hated by the nations because of me. At that time, many will turn away and betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.

Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of many will grow cold. And I'll stop right there. But I want to draw your attention to some of the things that Jesus mentions that we just read about in the four horses, the seals, or the seal plagues that are connected with the four horses.

Note Jesus' emphasis on war and rumors of war, as well as nation rising up against nation, kingdom against kingdom. Notice the mention of death. Notice the mention of famine as well.

All of those emerge in chapter 6, so that most likely, along with texts like Zechariah 6, John is probably aware of Jesus' own eschatological discourse and the sorts of things that would happen that would function as preludes to the coming of Christ, to the second coming, or to the day of the Lord that would come in the future. Now, what I want to do then is think about and look at each of the four horses, especially the other two seals as well, ask questions about what these seals might signify, and look at possible background information that might help us to figure out exactly what's going on. How are these judgments upon the world? In what way is the Lamb now pouring out his judgment on humanity? As I said, I am convinced that primarily, chapter 6 is meant to be a judgment on Rome's way of doing things.

This is God's judgment on an empire that is idolatrous, wicked, and oppressive, and violent, by judging its economy, by judging its entire empire, and the way that it is doing things. So, starting with horse number one, or seal number one, and that is the white horse. Now, the white horse is described as one who goes out and conquers, who is bent on conquering, and who wears a crown and has a bow.

Interestingly, there have been a couple of ways to understand this, whether negatively or positively. Some have actually taken this positively and said that this first horse actually refers to the person of Jesus Christ, who also wears a white robe and rides out on a horse and conquers, in Revelation chapter 19 and verses 11 and following. And so, some are convinced that this is a picture of Jesus Christ who comes out and conquers.

And there have been other positive suggestions as to how we understand this. Some have suggested this is a picture of the triumph of the gospel or something like that. However, what is intriguing is that the other three horses, as we'll see, and as you picked up on when you read it, the other three horses seem clearly to be negative and seem clearly to be images of judgment.

So that there's a good reason then to take this first horse also as an image of judgment. And especially if we're to correlate this with Zechariah 6 and also with Jesus teaching in Matthew 24, I think there's good reason to take this not as a positive image of Christ or the gospel conquering, but instead to take it as an image of judgment. And we'll see what that might be.

A second view, another common view, is that some take this as a reference to a future antichrist. That is, this person riding out on the horse, this rider on the horse is an actual person. It would be the end-time antichrist.

And those approaches to Revelation that see chapters 4 through 22 as solely future often see this as the end-time antichrist. That after the church has been removed, now the antichrist emerges on the scene to wreak havoc and to cause problems. So, some would see this as a solely future event in person.

I'm going to argue, though, in just a moment and try to demonstrate that we probably should not limit this to a future person or event, which brings me to a third approach. I think a preferred view is that this rider, not the writer, but the rider, symbolizes, is simply a symbol of conquest and military power.

It corresponds to Jesus' statement that you will hear of wars and rumors of war. Nation will rise up against nation. Kingdom against kingdom.

And so here we find a symbol of military power and conquest in the context of warfare. And in my opinion, this image fits Rome perfectly. That is, Rome established its peace through military conquest and military power.

In fact, we might, perhaps the way to connect this was chapter 19, with Jesus Christ coming out on a horse and wearing a robe and coming out on a white horse, to see this as a parody of Christ. Again, this is to be seen as a poor reflection of the conquest and a perversion of the conquest and the victory that Jesus Christ himself

will eventually win. But this probably reflects the military expansion, the conquest, and the violent fighting that characterized the Roman Empire.

Perhaps it also reflects the fact that Rome tried to conquer the saints. Later on in chapter 12, especially chapter 13 for example, we'll see that Rome comes to defeat and it comes out and does war with, it does battle with the saints. So, horse number one probably refers to Rome as a mighty military.

It refers to it as bent on conquest, and it achieves peace at the expense of fighting and conquest. It conquers through warfare; it expands its boundaries only through its military might. In a sense, this might be a critique of the Roman myth of Pax Romana, that Rome provides peace.

And now John, by contrast, says no, Rome actually brings peace at a price. I think this will be true of the second horse as well. Rome brings peace at a price, that is through violence and through warfare.

This brings us then to horse number two. Horse number one then symbolizes the fact that Rome is bent on conquering and conquest and warfare and that's how it establishes peace. Horse number two then, seal number two, is a red horse which indicates and symbolizes bloodshed and slaughter.

Notice that the rider in this horse is also given a sword. Again, the picture here, in my opinion, is that John is dismantling a view of Rome. Again, that holds to the myth of Pax Romana, that Rome benefits all its people.

Rome is here to establish peace. Rome has brought blessing, prosperity, and peace to the entire empire. But again, John reminds us that it has been done with a price.

Rome's promise of peace comes at a price and that is warfare and bloodshed and violence. The sword here, again, may contrast with the sword that comes out of the mouth of Christ. Yes, Rome does violence and accomplishes and conquers and accomplishes victory.

But Christ, ultimately, with his sword will do so. We saw that image in chapter one. You see that again in chapter 19.

So, the sword is probably meant to contrast with that. Rome also wields the sword, but it does so with violence and bloodshed. It conquers and establishes peace at a cost.

So Rome is portrayed here as a violent and bloodthirsty empire. And this becomes clear when you begin to study the history of Rome. You find that it is one of conflict, both externally and internally.

Yes, Rome, again, conquers nations by bloodshed. It would subdue nations. It brought peace to the empire.

It expanded its empire through violence and bloodshed. But even internally, Roman emperors would slaughter each other, or others whom they saw as a threat to the throne. Vying for control and vying for the throne resulted in an interesting series of acts of bloodshed and acts of violence.

For example, even right at the beginning, in 44 BC, Julius Caesar is assassinated. After that, an interesting series of events of rivalry follow in an attempt to succeed him. And we find story after story of rivals being executed.

In AD 68 and 69, there was actually a series of three emperors during that very short period of time who came to power but were soon killed. Roman history is one of bloodshed and slaughter to gain power, control the world, and spread its rule. So, already we see then, in contrast to the way Christ conquers, back in chapter 5, as a slain, slaughtered Lamb through a suffering sacrifice, by contrast, Rome conquers through its military might, through violence and through bloodshed, and through unending strife and conflict.

Horse number three then, equivalent to seal number three, is described as a black horse. And this horse, the rider on this horse comes carrying a scale. Immediately, a first century reader would read this and recognize a scale symbolized imbalance, especially in commerce.

You can also go back to a couple of the Proverbs in the Old Testament and elsewhere to understand this language on an unjust scale. Justice was perverted when the scale was not balanced appropriately in situations of commerce and trade. And so, by carrying a scale, this suggests and symbolizes that this seal and this horse is going to have something to do with an imbalance in commerce, or in my opinion, an imbalance and a perversion of justice in the Roman system of, Roman economy and Roman system of commerce.

And this horse then clearly suggests suffering and famine as a result of that. One can see the progression again from war and desire to conquer and desire to spread one's rule, and through military might and bloodshed and internal conflict, the result often of such a situation would be famine and suffering for many of the people involved. And so, there's sort of a progression here.

The statement, interesting feature about this seal is the statement that comes from an anonymous voice in verse 6, where there is a voice among the four living creatures; it's not clear if this is one of the four living creatures, more likely an anonymous voice among them. Is this God himself speaking? Is it the Lamb? It's not

in red letters in my Bible, so it can't be the Lamb; it can't be Jesus. No, we simply don't know who this voice exactly is, and we find a number of anonymous voices in Revelation where it's not clear is this God or the Lamb or some angelic being? But what is important is what this voice says, a quart of wheat for a day's wages and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not harm or do not damage the oil and the wine.

Now, what is going on here is simply this. What is portrayed here does seem to be a famine, a situation of famine where wheat costs an entire day's wage, that is enough wheat for just a daily amount of wheat. In other words, when it says in verse 6, where was that? A quart of wheat, the NIV translates it, a quart of wheat would have been enough to feed one person.

And now the author says a quart of wheat for a day's wages. In other words, some of your translations may say a denarius. It was well known that a denarius was roughly a day's wages.

But to feed one person with wheat, which wheat would have been a necessary staple, that was a common and desirable something to eat to sustain someone. But for only one person, let alone an entire family, for one person the daily ration of wheat would cost an entire day's wages. And then he says after that, three quarts of barley for a day's wage.

Three quarts of barley was about enough to feed a family, but it also cost an entire day's wage. And furthermore, barley was not as desirable as wheat. It was not as beneficial and perhaps nutritious as wheat.

And so three quarts of a less important grain, which would be barley, roughly enough to feed a small family would also be a day's wage. So you have this situation where wheat and barley are scarce. And again, the image may be as a result of warfare, et cetera, et cetera.

You now have a situation of famine. And now, because of the famine, the staples, the most important staple, wheat, enough to feed one person, costs an entire day's wage. So there's not enough left for your family.

And three quarts of barley, which is less desirable, but still a staple of sustenance, enough to feed a small family, was still an entire day's wage. So these exorbitant prices for these staples are not food for the wealthy; this is just common food that would sustain someone for a day, is scarce, and the price is exorbitant because of inflation. But there's also another interesting part of this.

And one other thing to say, the wheat and barley were not for the rich, but just food of the rich. It was a common staple for rich and poor alike. But in this case, only the rich could ever afford enough to feed their family.

So you begin to see the situation is an economy that is out of balance. It's perverted. It's oppressive.

But there's something else that's interesting. The voice also ends by saying, do not damage the oil and the wine. Now, what is going on here? To feed a growing population, as Rome began to grow and expand, the city itself, it required importing grain, such as wheat and barley and corn and things like that.

So, for Rome to sustain its ever-burgeoning city and empire, it required importing grain. But often, this took place at the expense of the rest of the empire, at the expense of some of the provinces, which they would often exploit; they would import grain from the provinces to feed an ever-growing population in Rome, which meant the provinces are then going to have less. On top of that, where does the oil and wine come in? When the author says, don't touch the oil and wine.

Although some suggest that oil and wine would be food for the rich, oil and wine probably were not limited to the rich. Again, this was just a staple and would have been there for common consumption, oil and wine. But the point is that oil and wine are not staples like wheat and barley.

So what you have, again, is something out of balance. While the staples and necessity of life, wheat, and barley, are scarce and exorbitantly priced that only the rich could afford it, and most people won't in a situation of famine. Ironically, the very things that are not necessary, oil and wine, are now in abundance.

Reflected in this language, do not damage the oil and the wine. And what might lie behind that is this. What often happened is that because trading and exporting oil and wine to Rome was more lucrative, many wealthy landowners, instead of growing wheat and corn and staples and things like that, would grow vineyards and olive trees for oil and wine because those were more beneficial for trade.

So, again, you have this economy out of whack or upside down, especially in the provinces, where the necessities of life, the staples of life, like wheat and even lesser things like barley, were scarce and so exorbitantly priced, most people couldn't afford them, while things that were not staples, such as oil and wine, things that were not necessary for life, are now in abundance, perhaps, again, because wealthy landowners would find it more lucrative to grow those things and to export them for their own commerce. So you have an economy or commerce that is sort of upside down, and where now you have wealthy landowners benefiting from wine and oil, and all the staples are scarce and can't be afforded by many; only the wealthy could

possibly afford them, although John doesn't emphasize that. So you have things upside down; Rome ends up, its economy is exploitative of the provinces around it, and in my opinion then, what John is doing is attacking Rome's economy to demonstrate what happens when you have an oppressive, godless, idolatrous, violent empire that is bent on conquest, bent on establishing its own rule, then what happens is not only violence and bloodshed, but then famine and an economy that is perverted and is upside down, and is all out of whack and all out of balance.

In other words, the city of Rome survived at the expense of other nations, and at the expense of the rest of the empire. In fact, we know that numerous famines took place in Rome. I doubt that John is referring to one specific famine.

There are some who have even suggested this language does not damage the oil and the wine. Some have suggested this may have reflected an edict from Domitian that all the vineyards be cut down because of a shortage in grain; that is, vineyards that would be used for growing things for wine should be cut down and instead replaced by growing corn and other grain, because of the shortage, and that the empire rebelled against that, and again, because wealthy landowners would want to grow those things, would be most lucrative and beneficial, such as things for oil and wine. I'm not certain at all about what is reflected here.

I'm not quite convinced that this reflects the edict of Domitian. Instead, I think again, the voice is just a way of demonstrating and pointing out the inequity and the imbalance of the Roman economy as part of God's judgment on the Roman Empire due to, again, their violence and their arrogance, their godlessness, their idolatry, their being bent on conquest and conquering, and now this is part of the judgment on a nation through an economy that is upside down. In fact, it appears, if you read it carefully, Domitian's edict is just the opposite of what the voice here is saying in chapter 6 and the third seal.

So, the first seal judgment was on Rome's desire for conquest and spreading its kingdom, perhaps an attack on Pax Romana. Seal number two, as a result of that, its desire for conquest means that it accomplished peace at a price that is bloodshed and violence, both externally and perhaps internally. And then finally, the result of that was often famine and an economy that was upside down, and an economy that was out of balance and lacked equity and was oppressive and unjust.

And then finally, horse number four, or seal number four, which is a pale horse, and as you hopefully can see, the colors, in a sense, are representative of what the colors of the horse are representative of what happens as each of the horses ride out. But horse number four, then, is a pale horse that is the climax of the first three. And again, the pale horse is described as, when he comes out, described as Death, the rider is named Death, and Hades follows close behind.

They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, which sort of summarizes the first two seals, and then famine and plague, which would summarize, and wild beasts would then summarize seal number three, especially famine, the unjust, and plague, the unjust economy, and the famine that results from warfare. So seal number four, horse number four, sort of stands at the climax and summary of the first four. So seal number four, then, signifies death and Hades, Hades being the place of the dead, the place of death, a term that will crop up later on in Revelation.

Again, resulting from warfare, resulting from conquering, resulting from bloodshed, famine, and an upside-down economy, then death on many of the earth, and especially within the Roman Empire, is the result. So, putting all these together, in my opinion, the first four seals expose Rome's military expansion, its economic practices, its claim to provide peace, benefits, and prosperity for the entire empire, and these seals, then, as God's judgment, and as the Lamb's judgment on Rome, remind us, then, that Rome's promise of peace and prosperity comes at a price. It comes at the price of unsettlement, conflict, and constant strife.

It comes at the cost of bloodshed, violence, and death. It comes at the cost of famine and an economy that is out of balance and upside-down, and then the result of that is the death of those within the Roman Empire. So, you have a picture of an empire that is being turned upside-down.

In true apocalyptic fashion, John is exposing Rome for what it really is. It is really a bloodthirsty, violent, oppressive empire that exploits others within its empire and exploits other nations and really does not promise that the peace and the prosperity that it promises is really a mirage because in the midst of that, there is famine and there is death and there is bloodshed in order to maintain its empire and to try to maintain its rule over all things. So, you find an empire that is wracked by conflict and warfare and bloodshed and strife and violence and economic disparity and collapse.

These are seen as judgments of God upon Rome. I want to talk about that in just a moment. But, again, it is important to see.

I think one of the things John is doing is attacking Rome's own claims of *Pact Romana* and bringing peace and security. And so, back to chapters 2 and 3. How does this relate back to chapters 2 and 3? For those churches that want to compromise with the Roman Empire, for those churches that are dependent on Rome for their wealth and their prosperity, for those that think it is okay to participate in Rome's commerce, in Rome's religion, and to buy into Rome's promises of peace and prosperity, chapter 6 then demonstrates that, actually, if you want to do so, you also must participate in Rome's judgments in chapter 6. Instead, it reminds us that Rome

does not deliver what it promises. For the faithful, it is a reminder that God is already judging the wicked Roman Empire.

God is already in the process of establishing his own kingdom by beginning to undo the kingdom of Rome and the empire of Rome. So therefore, resist and do not compromise. Instead, maintain your faithful witness in Jesus Christ because Rome is already under God's judgment.

Now, three further issues to talk about before we move on to the last two seals. First of all, one might ask, how are these God's judgments? How are these God's active judgments? And I would suggest that they are. Notice how many times, with each of the four seals, it begins with the horse being called to come by one of the four living creatures.

And it begins in chapter 6, verse 1. I watched as the Lamb opened the six seals. So, these judgments cannot take place until the Lamb opens the seals and until the horses are summoned to come by the four living creatures. And then notice, in a couple of places, we find the passive form of the verb.

For example, in verse 4, to him was given. A couple of times, we find the passive form was given, suggesting that these things can only happen by permission. So, you have this picture where the Lamb and this would also include chapters 4 and 5, which all these judgment scenes in chapter 6 and beyond, in subsequent chapters, issue from and come from the throne.

So, what you have here is a scene where the Lamb and God are sovereign over these events. But the question is, how are these judgments? The fact that they go out and conquer, and there's internal conflict and fighting and warfare and dissension, where there's bloodshed and violence to sustain and maintain their rule in the empire, and even internally for an emperor to remain on the throne, where there is famine, where there is an economy that actually is out of balance and out of whack, that results in famine and death of many people. How is that God's judgment on the Roman Empire? Don't those sound more like natural consequences that happen when any empire does this? Well, first of all, I would say, in a sense, these do look like natural consequences that occur, but at the same time, Revelation 6 makes it clear that this is still God's active judgment on Rome.

This is not just God simply turning his back, and then Rome kind of does its thing, and all these bad consequences happen. Instead, I think we should see this perhaps in light of the way I think we should read Romans chapter 1, where Romans chapter 1 and verse 18 begin by God indicting humanity, especially Gentiles, for their refusal to acknowledge God and for their refusal to give God glory. Instead, what they do is they would rather worship the creation; they would rather worship idols than worship God.

Verse 18 begins in Romans chapter 1 by saying that the wrath of God is already being poured out. The active wrath of God, God's judgment on sin and sinful humanity is already being poured out. But when you read the rest of Romans, you find this interesting phrase, that God hands them over.

Three times, it says, God handed them over to their sins, and God handed them over to their sins, and God handed them over to their sins. So, what I think we find going on here is something similar. God's judgment on Rome is by handing them over to their sin, by handing them over to their desire to conquer, to the fact that they're bent on warfare, to their violence, to their economic practices.

God now will hand them over to that, and they will indeed reap the consequences of their evil, godless, idolatrous practices. But that is part of God's judgment on the Roman Empire. And that is God's judgment on any other nation or empire that absolutizes its power, that sets itself up as God, that rules and spreads its rule, and maintains its kingdom through violence, warfare, and bloodshed.

This, then, is God's judgment by handing them over to those sins and the disastrous effects of those sins. A second issue is whether Christians are also affected by this. I mean, if anyone living in the Roman Empire, even Christians, could not have been, you could almost not help but be affected by warfare and bloodshed. If you're a Christian living in Rome or any of the Roman provinces of the seven cities, from chapters 2 and 3, you could not help but be affected by famine and plague and some of the things listed here.

So are not Christians affected as well? How can these be God's judgment if Christians are also affected? A suggestion by Greg Beal, again, in his commentary, I think is helpful. He suggests that, yes, Christians would have been subject to these things, but for them, these were not judgments but served to refine them, test them, and produce endurance and faithfulness. Only for unbelievers would these result in judgment.

In fact, as we have already seen in chapters 2 and 3, some of the churches were already suffering because of what Rome was doing and because of what was going on in the Empire. So Christians would not necessarily be physically protected from these things, but for them, it would not function as a judgment, but would function as a means of strengthening and refining and bringing about perseverance and faithfulness in the people of God and producing endurance in God's people. Finally, number 3, the same is true with the seals, as I think is the case with the trumpets and the bowls later on, is, again, what is going on? One of the themes that is taking place here is in the context of God's judgment on Rome and on wicked humanity and, again, any other empire that chooses to follow in Rome's footsteps is God is now

seen as judging and dismantling this present creation in sort of a de-creative act in preparation for a new creation that will emerge in chapters 21 and 22.

So by judging Rome and its empire and its economy, God is, in a sense, judging and dismantling or de-creating this present world in order to bring about the emergence of a new creation in Revelation chapter 21 and 22. Now, that brings us to seal number 5. Seal number 5 is of a very different character than the first four seals, which were four plagues that revolved around four horses. Seal number 5 is not a plague necessarily.

There is a message of judgment inherent in seal number 5, but seal number 5 itself is not a record of a judgment or an event in the same manner as the first four seals, which were identified as the four horses. Instead, in seal number 5, in chapters 6, 9, and 11, I think we might find a description of what happens to those faithful followers of Jesus Christ that are affected by the first four seals. That is, those who primarily are slaughtered or put to death by the Roman Empire.

In John's day, particularly, it would be people like Antipas and others who were put to death at the hands of the officials in the provinces of Rome. But what happens to those affected, to the faithful followers of Jesus Christ, who are affected by the first four seals? Those who have been put to death because of their faithful witness for the person of Jesus Christ. Now, the scene shifts again from earth back to heaven with seal number 5. Again, answering the question, what about God's people in the context of these judgments in chapter 6? And what this seal does is raise an important issue for the rest of the book of Revelation.

That is the vindication of God's people. God's people who suffer at the hands of Rome for their faithful witness. Now, in chapter 6, the fifth seal anticipates an important theme.

That is their vindication. Their suffering, even to the point of death, their faithful witness that led to their suffering, even to death, must be shown not to be in vain. God will vindicate his faithful people who suffered and died even for their faith.

Notice in this seal, in seal number 5, notice again the temple imagery. It begins by the souls of those who have been put to death because of their faith, now under the altar in the seal. The altar also, this is probably the same altar that will crop up again in chapter 8, in verses 3 and 5. The fact that the souls are under the altar, the altar probably reflects the altar of burnt offering in the temple.

It may also be a combination of the altar of incense and the altar of burnt offering. But the fact that the souls are found under the heavenly altar, again, the heaven is being portrayed as a temple. This is God's dwelling place.

You find the heavenly counterpart in the form of the altar to the physical temple and the physical features of the temple. But the fact that the souls are under the altar probably suggests their protection. And what they do, those who have been put to death, the souls of those who have been put to death, the souls here probably suggesting the life that continues even after physical death.

So the souls of those who have been put to death because of their witness for Christ, those who have been slaughtered, notice the language here. It says in seal number 5 that those who are under the altar have been slain. That is the same word used for the Lamb who was slain or slaughtered back in chapter 5. They have been slain for the same reason Jesus was: because of their word of God and because of their faithful witness or their testimony.

These terms we were introduced to all the way back in Chapter 1. Now because of their faithful testimony, they have suffered the same fate as Jesus Christ and now their souls are protected in heaven under the altar. And what they do then is they cry out for their blood, for their enemies to be punished and for their blood to be avenged. Now a couple things about this.

Number one, the fact that they are found in association with the altar probably also views their death as a sacrifice. Their language of their blood in association with the altar probably portrays their deaths in sacrificial terms as a sacrifice. But the other thing to say about this before we look at the cry that they make and God's response to it is this is where we begin to see the language of those who have been put to death because of their faithful witness.

Whereas we've only seen so far that John is aware of one person named Antipas who has given his life, who has died because of his faithful witness. But an image like this probably suggests that there is a lot more to come. This is where we often get the idea that Revelation is primarily meant to be an encouragement to those who are suffering persecution for their faith.

And that is indeed true. But we've seen, at least at this point, there is no empire-wide persecution. There is no officially sanctioned persecution by the empire going out and dragging Christians out into the streets, into the amphitheatres and putting them to death.

That came later in the 2nd, 3rd, and beginning of the 4th century. But at this point, I think John is aware that the clash between the Roman Empire and the Church is only going to get worse. And there will be many, many more who, in fact, will, because of their faithful witness, it will result in their death and experiencing the same fate as their master, Jesus Christ.

Now, their cry for vengeance then in verse 10 needs to be understood more accurately, I think, again, in light of Old Testament imagery. This cry, when the saints say, How long, O Lord before you judge the inhabitants of the earth? Inhabitants of the earth is an important term for those who dwell on the earth. That occurs throughout Revelation in negative terms as those who side with the beast, those who are under the authority in the kingdom of Satan, and those who persecute and resist and oppose God's people.

How long until you judge them and avenge our blood? I think it's important to see that this is not so much a cry for personal revenge on one's enemies as much as this is a cry in Old Testament terms, again, for their blood to be vindicated, for their death to be shown to be not in vain. In other words, they have suffered death. Rome and the world's evaluation of Christians has been that they're worthless, and we can put them to death.

Their witness was in vain. They sacrificed their lives for nothing. They died needlessly and senselessly for nothing.

They died for what is a lie. And so what needs to take place is they need to be vindicated. They need to show that their suffering and death were not in vain.

They need to be vindicated and rewarded, which will actually happen in Chapter 20 and the following. But they have suffered at the hands of the evil empire, and that means justice in terms of judgment on those who have put to death and killed God's people and opposed God and His kingdom but also vindication and reward showing that their death and their suffering and death because of their faithful witness was not in vain. In fact, one finds a similar cry in Psalm chapter 79 for vengeance.

For how long, O Lord, until you act on our behalf? -- Hosea 1:4. God promises to avenge the blood of His people. So again, John is picking up Old Testament language, where God promises that His people's suffering will not be in vain. He will judge those who have put them to death and He will reward them and vindicate them showing that their suffering was not in vain.

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his teaching on the book of Revelation. This is session 11, Revelation 6, The Scroll Seals.