

Dr. David L. Mathewson, Revelation, Session 11,

Revelation 6: Scroll Seals

6-Min. Video Overview

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The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. I mean, wow. It's some of the most powerful and iconic imagery, not just in the Bible, but in all of Western culture.

You've got the White Horse of Conquest, a Red Horse of War, a Black Horse of Famine, and then that Pale Horse of Death, just thundering through history. For 2,000 years, these guys have really captured our imagination. But where do they even come from? And maybe more importantly, what did they mean to the people who first heard this vision described? Are we looking at a prophecy of some distant, far-off future? Or a description of the past? Or is it something else entirely? Okay, let's dive into this, because the original meaning of this vision, well, it's this absolutely fascinating and powerful political critique, all hidden inside a divine code.

Alright, so to really get the Four Horsemen, we first have to understand the language they were written in. You see, this isn't just some random, terrifying nightmare. The author, a man named John, was writing a very specific message for a very specific audience.

People who were living under the thumb of the most powerful empire the world had ever known, Rome. And that is the absolute key to unlocking this whole thing. As scholar Dr. Dave Mathewson puts it, the Book of Revelation, and especially this chapter, is a direct judgment on the Roman Empire.

Every single symbol, every horse, is meant to pull back the curtain and expose the ugly truth behind all of Rome's power and propaganda. What's so cool is how John actually built this message. He wasn't just pulling these symbols out of thin air.

His audience would have immediately recognized this symbolic language. For them, the horses would have been a clear echo of a vision from the prophet Zechariah. And the whole sequence of war, famine, and death directly parallels warnings Jesus himself gave in the Gospel of Matthew.

So John was basically using this shared library of symbols to deliver a powerful, coded message about the empire they were all living in. So let's see how this all builds. As the Lamb on the throne in heaven opens the first four seals of a scroll, a horseman rides out for each one.

And these are not just random disasters, okay? Each horseman unmasks a specific piece of the Roman Empire, revealing the rot that's right at its core. First up, the white horse. Its rider has a bow and a crown and is described as being bent on conquest.

Now, some people over the years have tried to interpret this rider as a good guy, maybe even as Christ. But when you look at him alongside the other three, yeah, that doesn't really hold up. This rider isn't a specific person, like an antichrist.

He's a symbol of military power itself. This is Rome, an empire whose entire existence was built on relentless, violent military expansion. This is the engine that drives everything else that's about to happen.

And this slide really shows you the brutal reality behind the Roman PR machine. The second seal unleashes a fiery red horse, given power to take peace from the earth. This is a direct shot at Rome's greatest marketing slogan, the Pax Romana, the famous Roman peace.

Rome promised peace and prosperity for all. But John is pulling back the curtain to reveal the truth that peace was bought and paid for with the sword. It was a peace built on constant warfare, the brutal suppression of any rebellion, and even incredibly violent internal conflicts as emperors literally assassinated each other to get to the throne.

Then comes the third horseman on a black horse, and he's carrying a pair of scales, a symbol of commerce. And what he announces is a devastating famine. I mean, just look at these numbers.

A single portion of wheat, a basic staple food, costs an entire day's wages. A few quarts of barley, which was considered a cheaper grain, also cost a full day's pay, barely enough to feed a small family. But then you get the punchline.

Do not damage the oil and the wine. So the essential food is impossibly expensive, while luxury goods, they remain untouched and abundant. This was a direct reflection of the Roman economy, where it was way more profitable for wealthy landowners to grow grapes and olives for export than it was to grow grain to actually feed people.

It's a system built on pure exploitation, and John is saying God is judging it. The fourth horseman, riding a sickly pale horse, is the terrifying climax. His name is stated outright: Death.

And he's not alone. Hades, the realm of the dead, follows right behind him. The seal basically just sums up the other three.

The relentless conquest of the white horse leads directly to the bloodshed of the red horse, which in turn creates the economic injustice and famine of the black horse. And what's the inevitable result of this entire imperial system? Death. It's the logical, unavoidable conclusion.

So after all that chaos on earth, the opening of the fifth seal causes this traumatic shift in perspective. The vision suddenly cuts away from the world of empires and judgment to a very solemn, quiet scene right in the throne room of heaven itself. And there, under the heavenly altar, John sees the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God.

These are the victims of the empire, the Christians who were killed because of their faith. And they all cry out with this one, single, burning question for God. Now, that might sound like a simple cry for revenge, right? Avenge our blood.

But it's actually much, much deeper than that. In the ancient world, this is a formal, legal plea for vindication. Think about it.

Rome declared them worthless criminals and executed them. So their cry is a demand for God to step in and prove that their deaths weren't meaningless, that their sacrifice for a kingdom greater than Rome was not in vain. It's a plea for ultimate justice.

The martyrs are told to just wait a little longer. And then, the Lamb opens the sixth seal. And at that moment, all of creation just begins to unravel.

This is it. This is the arrival of the great day of their wrath, the moment of final reckoning for the empire. The very fabric of the cosmos just comes apart.

There's a massive earthquake. The sun goes dark. The moon turns blood red.

But you know what the most telling detail is? It's who is hiding. It's the kings, the generals, the rich, the mighty, the very people who run the empire. And they're hiding in caves, terrified, not of some natural disaster, but of the wrath of the Lamb.

The powers of this world are finally face to face with the true power of the universe. So what's the big takeaway from all this for those first-century churches? Well, the message was an urgent call to stay faithful. John is showing them that Rome, with all its promises of peace and prosperity, is a mirage.

It's a lie. It's a violent, exploitative system that is already being judged by God. So for anyone tempted to compromise their faith just to get along in the empire, the warning is crystal clear.

Do not buy into it. Rome is doomed. And that leaves us with a final and pretty provocative thought.

John's critique was aimed squarely at Rome, for sure. But the biblical scholar Richard Baucom points out that the description itself is timeless. John's vision of an empire that's built on military conquest, that masks its violence with claims of peace, and that creates massive economic injustice? Well, as Baucom says, anyone for whom the prophetic cap fits must wear it.

It's a question that just echoes through the centuries, right? What systems of power in our own world today might find that prophetic cap just a little too snug?