

Revelation 6: The Scroll Seals

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Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Revelation 6, Scroll Seals, Four Horsemen, Pax Romana, Roman Empire, De-creation, Vindication of Martyrs, Day of Wrath

Abstract

In Revelation 6, Dr. Dave Mathewson examines the opening of the first six seals as God's active judgment upon the idolatrous and oppressive Roman Empire. He explains how the four horsemen dismantle the myth of Pax Romana through conquest, bloodshed, famine, and death, exposing the economic exploitation and military violence inherent in the Imperial system. Furthermore, the fifth and sixth seals assure believers of the ultimate vindication of martyrs and the certainty of divine wrath at the end of history. Consequently, the passage serves as a call for the church to remain faithful and resist compromise with worldly empires that are already under divine judgment.

Outline

I. Introduction to Revelation 6 and Hermeneutical Approach

A. Textual Context and Core Questions

1. Opening of the scroll seals from Revelation 5 by the Lamb
2. Central questions regarding the identity and timing of the seal judgments

B. Hermeneutical Principles

1. Exercise of caution due to 2,000-year historical and genre distance
2. Thesis: God's active judgment poured out on Rome's idolatrous and oppressive empire, set against the backdrop of final judgment
3. Application to any nation or system that repeats Rome's mistake throughout church history ("if the prophetic cap fits, wear it")

II. Old Testament and New Testament Backgrounds of the Four Horsemen

A. Old Testament Background: Zechariah 6:1–8

1. Vision of four chariots with colored horses traversing the earth
2. John draws apocalyptic imagery and description from Old Testament prophetic predecessors

B. New Testament Background: Matthew 24 (Eschatological Discourse)

1. Jesus' warning regarding preludes to the end: wars, rumors of wars, nation against nation, famines, and death
2. Signs characterize general church history rather than marking the immediate end itself

III. Analysis of the First Four Seals (The Four Horsemen)

A. Seal 1: The White Horse (Revelation 6:1–2)

1. Description: Rider with a bow, given a crown, riding out to conquer
2. Interpretation: Symbol of military expansion, conquest, and warfare
3. Critique of Pax Romana: Exposes Rome's peace as achieved through violent military force

B. Seal 2: The Red Horse (Revelation 6:3–4)

1. Description: Fiery red horse whose rider takes peace and carries a large sword
2. Interpretation: Symbol of widespread bloodshed, slaughter, and internal/external strife
3. Roman Historical Reality: Assassinations, civil conflict, and emperors vying for control (e.g., AD 68–69)

C. Seal 3: The Black Horse (Revelation 6:5–6)

1. Description: Rider holding a pair of scales with a voice declaring exorbitant food prices
2. Interpretation: Economic disparity, inflation, and famine resulting from warfare and exploitation
3. Economic Imbalance: Staples (wheat and barley) priced at a full day's wage while luxury items (oil and wine) remain untouched

D. Seal 4: The Pale Horse (Revelation 6:7–8)

1. Description: Rider named Death, followed by Hades, given authority over a fourth of the earth
2. Interpretation: Climax and summary of the first three seals (death by sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts)
3. Summary: De-creation of Rome's empire and exposure of its promised peace as a deadly mirage

IV. Theological Synthesis of the First Four Seals

A. Nature of God's Active Judgment

1. Sovereignly controlled by the Lamb and summoned by living creatures
2. Executed through divine "handing over" (similar to Romans 1), letting evil systems reap their self-destructive consequences

B. Impact on Believers

1. Christians are physically affected by societal judgments, but for believers, these refine, test, and produce endurance

C. De-Creation Concept

1. God's judgment acts as a de-creation of the present corrupt order to prepare for the new creation in Revelation 21–22

V. Analysis of the Fifth and Sixth Seals

A. Seal 5: The Souls Under the Altar (Revelation 6:9–11)

1. Shift from earth to heaven: Souls of martyred believers under the altar
2. Temple Imagery: Souls sacrificial and under divine protection

3. Cry for Vindication: "How long, Sovereign Lord?" as a plea for divine justice and validation, not personal revenge

4. Divine Response: Given white robes and told to wait until the full number of fellow servants is complete

B. Seal 6: Cosmic Disturbance and Divine Wrath (Revelation 6:12–17)

1. Cosmic Signs: Earthquake, blackened sun, blood-red moon, falling stars, and receded sky

2. Universal Panic: All social classes (kings to slaves) hiding in caves from the wrath of the Lamb

3. Ultimate Question: "The great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

VI. Conclusion and Pastoral Application

A. Rejection of Imperial Compromise

1. Warning to churches (Chapters 2–3) against compromising with Rome's economy and culture

B. Call to Faithful Resistance

1. Assurance that Rome and all worldly oppressive powers are already under divine judgment

2. Exhortation to persevere in faithful testimony to Jesus Christ