

THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

REVELATION 6 — THE RUMBLE BEGINS

Setting the Scene

Chapter 5 ended with all creation worshiping the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb. The question, “Who is worthy?” has been answered. Yeshua is worthy. The scroll is now in His hands, and He alone can break its seals.

But when the Lamb begins opening those seals, what John sees is hardly peaceful. Horses thunder onto the stage. Conquest is followed by warfare, famine and death. Martyrs cry out from beneath the altar. The earth shakes, the heavens seem to collapse, and powerful people who once appeared untouchable run for the caves.

It sounds as though everything is out of control. But that is precisely what John will not allow us to conclude.

There is a rhythm to this chapter, almost like an orchestral piece building toward its crescendo. With the opening of each of the first four seals comes the command, “Come.” Another horse appears. Another rider enters. The sound grows louder and more complex. The consequences become more severe. I have long thought of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* when reading this chapter. It begins quietly, builds through conflict and competing themes, and finally erupts with bells and cannon fire. Revelation 6 has something of that same rumble.

Yet behind all the noise stands the truth we learned in Chapters 4 and 5. God is still on the throne, and the Lamb is still holding the scroll. That changes the way we hear everything that follows.

Lesson Summary

Revelation 6 begins as the Lamb opens the seals of the scroll. The first four seals release the famous four horsemen: conquest, warfare, famine and death. With each command to “Come,” the scene intensifies. What begins with one rider becomes a growing picture of a world in which human ambition, violence, scarcity and death seem to have been unleashed.

But John repeatedly gives us an important clue: authority “was given” to the riders. They act, but they do not possess unlimited authority. Even in a world that appears to be spinning out of control, God has not surrendered His throne.

The fifth seal takes us from earth to heaven, where those who have been killed because of the Word of God cry out, “How long?” They are not rebuked for asking. They are given white robes and told to rest a little longer. Their suffering has not been forgotten, nor will injustice have the final word.

Then the sixth seal shakes everything people regard as permanent. Earth, sun, moon, stars, mountains and islands are all disturbed. Kings, commanders, the rich, the powerful, slaves and free people alike discover that position and power offer no shelter from the judgment of God. Their question brings the chapter to its climax: “The great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:17).

That question sounds hopeless until we remember the language of the prophets. Jeremiah gives us a striking answer: “If you return, I will restore you; before Me you will stand” (Jeremiah 15:19). Judgment is real, and so is mercy. The Lamb who opens the seals is the same Lamb who was slain for the redemption of His people.

The Big Idea

When the world seems out of control, we gain comfort when we remember that God is not out of control. Human power is limited, suffering is not forgotten, and the Lamb remains Lord over everything that unfolds.

Opening Prayer

Father, when the noise around us grows louder and the world seems to be coming apart, remind us that You have not left Your throne. Help us to hear the warnings of this chapter without fear and to see the Lamb who holds the scroll and our lives in His care. Give us courage when we must wait, faithfulness when following Yeshua turns out to be costly, and hearts that return to You in quiet confidence. Teach us what it means to stand before You because of Your mercy. Amen.

Commentary

The Four Horsemen — The Orchestra Begins

When the Lamb breaks the first seal, one of the four living creatures says, “Come!” John sees a white horse whose rider carries a bow and receives a crown. He goes out “conquering and to conquer” (6:2). Then the second seal is opened: “Come!” A red horse appears, and its rider is permitted to take peace from the earth. The third seal: “Come!” A black horse enters carrying scales. The fourth: “Come!” A pale horse appears, and its rider is named Death, with Hades following behind.

Listen to the rhythm. Come. Come. Come. Come.

John is doing more than giving us four disconnected pictures. The repetition binds them together. Each horse adds another sound to the orchestra, and the consequences grow. Conquest leads to bloodshed; bloodshed contributes to scarcity and famine; and finally, death gathers up the results.

We should also remember what we noticed previously about the number four. Four can suggest something reaching outward in every direction—the four winds, four corners of the

earth, four living creatures. As a result of that outward reach, the number takes on a ‘universal’ meaning. A comprehensive, nothing-is-left-out approach. Here the four horsemen portray troubles with a sweeping reach. But even then their authority is not absolute. John is careful to tell us that authority was given to them (6:2, 4, 8). They do not seize the throne. They operate only within limits allowed, even assigned to them.

That passive phrase is one of the most important theological details in the chapter. John is writing as an exile. His fellow believers know persecution. Rome looks powerful, and Caesar can certainly make life miserable. Yet John sees beyond Caesar. Human rulers may conquer for a season, wars may rage, economies may collapse and death may appear triumphant, but none of them is sovereign forever.

The Lamb is opening the seals.

The White Horse — Conquest

The first rider comes on a white horse. He has a bow, receives a crown and goes out “conquering and to conquer” (6:2). The color white will later be associated with Yeshua, of course, which has led some interpreters to identify this rider with Messiah or with the spread of the gospel. But the company he keeps here should make us cautious. He belongs to a sequence of conquest, war, famine and death.

This rider represents the human hunger to conquer. I compare him with Nimrod, the first great empire-builder of Genesis. Nimrod becomes “a mighty one on the earth” (Genesis 10:8), and his name is associated with the beginning of kingdoms. Revelation knows this recurring human story. There seems to always be someone who wants another territory, another people, more taxes from others, even another crown.

But notice again that the crown is given to him. He may look powerful, but he is not ultimately in charge. His authority is received and therefore limited.

The Red Horse — War

When the second seal is opened, the second living creature says, “Come!” A fiery red horse appears. Its rider is permitted “to take peace from the earth, so that people should kill one another,” and he is given a great sword (6:4).

The progression is already becoming clear. Conquest does not remain a political conversation. It produces bloodshed. Peace disappears and violence becomes normal.

John's first readers did not need a lesson in the brutality of empire. Rome advertised the *Pax Romana*, Roman Peace, but that peace was maintained by armies and the threat of violence. Revelation pulls back the curtain and shows what is behind it: the propaganda. Human beings can announce peace while sharpening their swords.

Again, however, John says that it “was granted” to the rider to take peace. Even the red horse does not have unrestricted authority. The sword is real, the suffering is real, but the rider is not ultimately sovereign.

The Black Horse — Famine and the Scales

The third “Come!” introduces a black horse, and its rider holds a pair of scales. Then John hears a voice announcing extraordinary prices: “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius” (6:6).

A denarius was roughly a day's wage. Now a worker can spend an entire day's income merely to obtain enough wheat for one person. Barley is cheaper, but even three measures of barley cost the day's wage. This is not ordinary inflation. John is describing a collapsing economy under severe stress.

I remember an oil crisis in the late 1970s when the phrase, “A bushel of wheat for a barrel of oil” was introduced by an American journalist. He wanted fair trading; the oil-producing countries needed American grain and America was desperate to fill gas tanks with oil. But the price differential never allowed for such a bargain. John's vision here seemed to portend this call.

These scales are important. We often associate scales with justice, but these are marketplace scales—the equipment used to weigh what someone is buying. The Tanakh repeatedly insists on honest weights and measures because economic injustice matters to God (Leviticus 19:35–36; Proverbs 16:11; Amos 8:5; Micah 6:11). In Revelation 6, however, the problem goes beyond dishonest measurement. There simply is not enough food, and scarcity drives the price beyond what ordinary people can afford. It's the old law of supply and demand.

Yet there is a strange qualification: “Do not harm the oil and the wine” (6:6). The famine is severe, but it is not absolute. Once again there are limits. And one of the themes I see throughout this book is that word. Troubles come and will come in great measure, but even they are limited. The takeaway from that reality will show itself throughout Revelation. Limitation has its commensurate takeaway: comfort.

War and famine have always travelled together. Crops cannot be planted or harvested normally. Trade is disrupted. Supply becomes uncertain, prices rise, and those with the least resources suffer first. Human greed can make an already desperate situation worse. Times of scarcity can become opportunities either for generosity or for exploitation.

Revelation does not allow us to regard economics as somehow separate from spiritual life. The black horse reminds us that when human power goes wrong, people eventually feel it at the dinner table and the gasoline pumps, in what a person cannot afford.

The Pale Horse — Death

The fourth living creature calls, “Come!” and John sees a pale horse. The Greek word for pale is *chlōros*, a sickly greenish or ashen color—the color of a person from whom life seems to have drained away. This time John even names the rider: Death, and Hades follows him.

The orchestra has reached its darkest movement.

Authority is given to them over “a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth” (6:8). Those four judgments should sound familiar to readers of the Tanakh. Ezekiel speaks of God’s “four severe judgments” against Jerusalem: “sword, famine, wild beasts and plague” (Ezekiel 14:21). Similar combinations appear elsewhere in the Torah and the prophets (Leviticus 26:22–26; Deuteronomy 32:24; Jeremiah 21:6–9).

John repeatedly expects us to recognize the Tanakh. These horsemen are not strange creatures dropped suddenly out of nowhere into the final book of the Bible. Their imagery comes from Israel’s Scriptures, especially the prophetic warnings that persistent rebellion has dire consequences.

And notice the fraction: a fourth of the earth. The number is frightening, but it also tells us something important. Death, no matter its hunger, does not receive everything. Its reach is terrible, yet limited.

Evil continually behaves as though it were universal and permanent. Empires do the same. Every tyrant imagines his kingdom larger than it really is. But John keeps putting boundaries around their claims. They have power. They do not have the throne.

The Fifth Seal — “How Long?”

With the fifth seal, the rhythm changes. An interlude. No horse appears. Instead, John sees “underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained” (6:9).

These are martyrs. The Greek word behind our word *martyr* originally means a *witness*. These people have borne witness to God, and their testimony has cost them their lives. John himself is writing from exile because of “the word of God and the testimony of Yeshua” (1:9). This is not an abstract subject for him or for the congregations receiving his Revelation.

And they cry out: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (6:10).

“How long?” is one of the great prayers of the Tanakh. “How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever?” (Psalm 13:1). “How long, O God, will the adversary revile?” (Psalm 74:10). “How long, O LORD? Will You hide Yourself forever?” (Psalm 89:46). Habakkuk begins his prophecy in much the same way: “How long, O LORD, will I call for help, and You will not hear?” (Habakkuk 1:2).

These are not the words of unbelief. They are the words of people who believe so strongly in God's justice that they cannot understand why He has not yet acted. That is worth hearing. Revelation does not tell suffering believers that faithful people never ask difficult questions. These martyrs are already in God's presence, and they are still asking, "How long?" Of note, they are asking for the people experiencing troubles and tribulations currently. I'm reminded of the verse in Hebrews, "Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body." (13:3)

God does not rebuke them. Each receives a white robe and is told to rest "for a little while longer" (6:11). Their question is legitimate, but the answer requires patience. God has not forgotten them. Their blood matters. Their testimony matters. Their vindication will come.

I've read stories of believers who paid for their testimony with their lives, including Jan Hus (Bohemia, 1415) and the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (Lesser Armenia, in modern-day Turkey, 320 CE). The stories are separated by centuries, but the issue is the same: there are circumstances in which allegiance to Yeshua becomes enormously costly. Modern-day martyrs abound and the question remains—how long?

Revelation was written to people who also knew the possibility of martyrdom. Its message is not that believers will always escape suffering. It is that suffering cannot separate them from the Lamb, and death cannot erase their testimony.

The Sixth Seal — When the Permanent Becomes Impermanent

Then the Lamb breaks the sixth seal. The crescendo returns and becomes almost deafening. There is a great earthquake. The sun becomes black. The moon becomes red like blood. Stars fall to the earth. The sky is split apart "like a scroll when it is rolled up," and every mountain and island is moved from its place (6:12–14).

To modern readers this can sound like John has suddenly abandoned biblical language and begun describing some extraordinary astronomical event with comet and meteor showers. But his first readers would have heard the prophets.

Joel writes of "wonders in the sky and on the earth," with the sun turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the day of the LORD (Joel 2:30–31). Isaiah describes the heavens trembling and the earth being shaken from its place in the day of God's anger (Isaiah 13:10, 13). Haggai speaks of God shaking "the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land" (Haggai 2:6). The same language appears again in Hebrews 12:26.

John repeatedly expects us to recognize the Tanakh. This is prophetic language for the collapse of things people assumed could never collapse. The sun should always rise in the East and shine each day. Stars should remain where they belong. Mountains should not move. Islands should stay put. Yet in the presence of God's judgment, everything that looked permanent suddenly proves fragile.

John's readers also lived in a world where such imagery had a recent physical counterpart. Mount Vesuvius had erupted in AD 79, burying Pompeii and Herculaneum. Earthquakes were well known in Asia Minor. The image of an apparently stable world suddenly being overturned would not have seemed remote.

But the greatest shaking is not merely tectonic or geological. It is human. Kings, great men, commanders, the rich, the strong, slaves and free people all hide themselves among the caves and rocks (6:15). Notice how comprehensive John's list is. Rank no longer matters. Wealth no longer matters. Political office, military strength and social standing offer no advantage.

They call to the mountains and rocks: "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (6:16).

There is an extraordinary phrase: the wrath of the Lamb. Lambs exact no wrath on others. They are the gentle and tame in children's stories. The Lamb we met in Chapter 5 was standing as though slain. He purchased people for God from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. Yet the Lamb who offers mercy is also the One here before whom evil finally must answer. We should not separate those truths. His judgment matters precisely because His mercy has been rejected.

Who Is Able to Stand?

The chapter ends with a question: "For the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (6:17).

That question has deep roots in the Tanakh. "Who can stand before His indignation?" asks Nahum (Nahum 1:6). Malachi asks, "Who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?" (Malachi 3:2). Psalm 130 asks, "If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3).

If Revelation 6 ended there, we might conclude that the answer is simply: Nobody. But there is another prophetic word that I believe God wants us to hear. I remind you what God says through Jeremiah: "If you return, then I will restore you—before Me you will stand" (Jeremiah 15:19).

That gives us the other side of the question. Who can stand? Not the person who trusts in political power, wealth, military strength or any other human security. Revelation 6 systematically strips those things away. But God still calls people to return to Him. Judgment is not presented because God delights in destruction. The Lamb who opens the seals is the Lamb who was slain.

The chapter therefore leaves us not merely with terror but with a choice. We can cling to the things and our old ideas that are being shaken, or we can return to the One whose throne cannot be shaken. Jeremiah was right: "If you return, I will restore you. Before Me you will stand."

And that prepares us beautifully for Revelation 7, because John has just asked who can stand. The next chapter shows us a people who do.

Takeaways

1. When the world appears to be out of control, God is not. All the problems of this world, along with its leadership and their dominance, are limited.
2. Suffering believers are not forgotten even when vindication does not come immediately.
3. Our confidence must rest in the One who cannot be shaken.
4. The Lamb who offers mercy is also the Lamb who judges.
5. The proper response to the warnings of Revelation 6 is not speculation or fear, but returning to confidence in the One True God.

Memory Verse

Revelation 6:17

“For the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

What's Next?

Revelation 6 ends with the question, “Who is able to stand?” Chapter 7 answers by showing us people standing before God.

Before the seventh seal is opened, John sees four angels holding back the four winds of the earth. Once again the number four points us toward the universal. Then his attention narrows to a very Jewish scene: 144,000 are sealed from the tribes of Israel.

Who are these 144,000? Why are they marked on their foreheads? And what does their sealing have to do with the great multitude John sees immediately afterward—a multitude no one can count, “from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” (7:9)?

Chapter 7 brings together Israel and the nations, sealing and suffering, the Lamb and the Shepherd. And it gives us one of Revelation's most comforting pictures: people who have come through great trouble standing before the throne, while God shelters them and wipes every tear from their eyes.

Listen to the Teaching

Listen to Revelation 6 — The Four Horsemen <https://youtu.be/EvIiMB5OhZY?si=a4EcQBROHyzdKQk&t=31>

The teaching here began to be given at Beth Messiah in Sydney on 8 January 2005.

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— VERSE BY VERSE COMMENTARY —



THE REVELATION OF YESHUA HA MASHIACH



THE WORTHY LAMB. THE FAITHFUL KING.
HOPE FOR GOD'S PEOPLE. LIGHT FOR THE NATIONS.

*"Blessed is the one who reads aloud
the words of this prophecy, and blessed
are those who hear, and who keep what
is written in it; for the time is near."* — REV. 1:3



CONFIDENCE IN HIM

He is worthy.
We are secure.



COMFORT FROM HIM

He is with us.
We will endure.



WORSHIP TO HIM

He is exalted.
We give Him glory.



ROOTED IN THE
HEBREW SCRIPTURES



GOD'S PEOPLE.
GOD'S PROMISES.



FOR EVERY TRIBE, TONGUE,
PEOPLE AND NATION

BOB MENDELSON
MESSIANIC JEWISH BIBLE TEACHER