Revelation 6:1–17

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

> *And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see. And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer. And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword. And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine. And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.*

The Structure of the Judgments — Seals, Trumpets, Bowls

The book given to the Lamb in chapter 5 — written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals — is the book of God's judgment. As each seal is broken, the book unrolls further, until with the opening of the seventh seal the whole book lies open and the trumpet judgments begin. The seals, the trumpets, and the

bowls are sequential, not overlapping: the seven bowls are explicitly called the seven last plagues, so there can be no overlap with the trumpet plagues that precede them. The seven bowls are poured out rapidly at the very close — blow after blow in quick succession. The seven seals, by contrast, appear to cover the first half of Daniel's seventieth week, the providential judgments that build toward the great crisis at the middle of the week.

The seventh seal comprehends within its sounding everything that follows, all the way to the great white throne. When the seventh trumpet sounds and speaks of the time of the dead, it is not that the great white throne judgment occurs at that moment, but that everything is unleashed from that point — the bowls, the coming of the Lord in judgment, the setting up of the kingdom, the judgment of the nations, and finally the great white throne. The reverberations of the seventh trumpet carry all the way through.

The Four Living Creatures and the Four Riders

The first four seals are each introduced by one of the four living creatures calling the rider forth. The call — *Come* — is a summons to the rider to advance at the appointed time. Each living creature is associated with one of the four aspects under which the Lord Jesus is presented in the four Gospels: the lion of kingship (Matthew), the ox of service (Mark), the face of a man in Luke's perfect manhood, and the eagle of John's Gospel where he is the one from heaven. The rejection of the Lord in each of those characters has its corresponding judgment: those who rejected the King get the false king; those who rejected the Servant get the sword; those who rejected the one who met every human need get famine; those who rejected the life-giver get Death and Hades.

The First Seal — White Horse: The Conqueror

The rider on the white horse goes forth conquering and to conquer. He carries a bow and has been given a crown — the bow suggesting far-reaching power, the conquest suggesting something achieved without open bloodshed, a bloodless coup. Many expositors identify this rider with the coming Roman prince — the head of the revived Roman Empire in the early part of the seventieth week — rising to power and establishing his dominion over the western confederacy. The horse in Scripture symbolises a subduing power going forth. White is associated with victory, and this conquest has the character of something that appears righteous and owns God's blessing, even though its true nature will emerge later.

The Second Seal — Red Horse: War and Civil Strife

The red horse rider takes peace from the earth, so that men kill one another, and a great sword is given to him. Red speaks of bloodshed. The scale of the conflict — civil strife, upheaval, the breakdown of peace — is characteristic of the Roman earth in particular. The prophecy throughout is concerned primarily with the western powers, the dominions of the fourth empire, not with the whole globe indiscriminately. The phrase *them that dwell upon the earth* throughout Revelation does not mean every person alive on the planet — it is a moral class, the apostates of Christendom and of Judaism who give themselves over to the worship of the beast. If it meant every last person, none would be left to enter the millennium.

The Third Seal — Black Horse: Famine

The black horse rider holds a pair of scales, and a voice announces a measure of wheat for a denarius and three measures of barley for a denarius. A denarius was a day's wage for a common labourer — so a day's work buys barely enough grain to feed one person. Famine follows in the wake of war. But the voice adds: *hurt not the oil and the wine.* These are commodities that the wealthy can afford and

have stored. The scarcity falls hardest on the poor. However theories of equitable distribution may read on paper, famine conditions never produce equality in practice — they expose the real disparities that exist.

The Fourth Seal — Pale Horse: Death and Hades

The pale horse carries a rider named Death, and Hades follows after him. Power is given over the fourth part of the earth — to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and with the beasts of the earth. Death and the body belong together: Death refers to the state of the body, Hades to the state of the soul. At the great white throne, both death and Hades are cast into the lake of fire — because when the wicked are raised in resurrection, what held their bodies in death and their souls in Hades is, in that sense, done away with, cast into the lake of fire with them.

The fourth part — not a third, which brethren have associated with the Roman earth in particular — suggests something less than the full extent, but still a vast and awful scope of destruction.

The Fifth Seal — Souls under the Altar

When the fifth seal is opened, John sees under the altar the souls of those slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. They cry: *How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?* This is not a Christian prayer. The imprecatory cry for vengeance is entirely at home in the Psalms, where the godly remnant under persecution cried in that way. These are martyrs from the first half of the week — Jewish believers who have been killed for their testimony. They are in the context of law, not of the dispensation of grace, and their cry is consistent with that context.

They are given white robes — the righteousness that God clothes His saints with, not their own. As Balaam said from the mountain looking down upon Israel: *He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob.* That is God's view of His saints as He has constituted them. And they are told to rest yet a little while — there are more martyrs yet to come in the second half of the week.

The Sixth Seal — Universal Upheaval

The sixth seal brings a great earthquake, the sun becoming black as sackcloth, the moon as blood, the stars falling, the heaven departing as a scroll, every mountain and island moved from its place. These are not to be taken as literal astronomical events. The book of Revelation from chapter 4 onward is couched in symbol and figure — as distinct from the prose of Exodus where the plagues are literal. There is no gigantic woman with her feet on the moon in chapter 12. The sun, moon, and stars in this symbolic language speak of authority: supreme power, derivative power, and lesser powers. Their collapse depicts the overturning of all the constituted order of the western world — governments, institutions, powers, all cast down.

This connects with what may be the mortal wound of the beast. Something so catastrophic happens to the power structures of the west that the whole edifice appears to collapse — only for Satan to come in directly and energise the beast with such force that it looks like a dead man revived. The whole earth wonders after the beast. And the people cry to the mountains and rocks to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb — *for the great day of his wrath is come.* Their conscience tells them God's hand is in it. But they do not repent. A bad conscience can say many true things about where things stand without turning the soul to God.

— Study ends —