

Revelation 6:1-11 The First Five Seals



UNFOLDING OF EVENTS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

We have seen in the early chapters of Revelation that the book is written to Gentile ecclesias in a Roman world. Old Testament Jewish symbols are applied to spiritual Israel, Gentile believers in Christ. In **Rev 1-5**, Christ encourages and comforts ecclesias with visions of the Kingdom. In **Rev 6** we now have the unfolding of a new historical phase from the time Revelation is written (AD96) through to Constantine's revolution in AD312. The seals trumpets and vials take us through to Armageddon in **Rev 16:16**. These are interspersed with visions of the Kingdom to encourage believers. See the previous Bible Marking sheets on *Revelation Introduction and Overview* and *The Continuous-Historic Interpretation of Prophecy*.

FIRST SEAL: PEACE AND PROSPERITY (AD96-183)

v1 Lamb opened one of the seals: Answer to prayers of saints in **Rev 5:1-8**. Refer to notes on **5:1-8**. **I heard, as it were the noise of thunder:** Symbol of judgement. See notes on **Rev 4:5**. The sixth seal concludes with judgment on pagan Rome: **Rev 6:12-17**. The seventh seal opens up further judgments on Rome in the trumpets and vials.

Four beasts: In **Rev 6** these are not wild beasts as in **Dan 7:1-8; Rev 12:3; 13:1,11**. They are *living creatures*, the cherubim of **Rev 4:6-7; 5:8-10**. They symbolise the saints. Living creatures introduce the seals because the **prayers of believers** actively bring about God's purpose. God's judgments come as a result of these prayers: **Rev 5:8; 6:9-10; 8:3-5**. **v2 White horse:** The horse symbol is in the first 4 seals, each with a rider. Coins circulating in the Roman Empire at the time had the horse symbol on them with the words "Roma" or "Romano".

The horse was therefore an everyday picture in those times. Believers would be able to clearly identify what the horse represented. Scripture uses the horse as a symbol of war and armies in battle: **Job 39:19-25, Jer 8:6; Zech 10:3, Rev 19:11-21**. White is a symbol of peace and prosperity: **Isa 1:18; 32:17**. It was in a time of peace in the Empire. It is *contrasted* with a red horse in **6:3-4**, confirmed by the words "take peace". **Bow:** In **Hab 3:9**, a bow is used for conquering. This describes the spread of the truth through the empire despite persecution. But no arrow here! This is not by physical might but by the power of God's Word: **Zech 4:6**. In **Psa 64:3** the bow symbolises God's Word.

A crown was given: The *stephanos*, a *victory* crown, not one of government. The *stephanos* crown was given at the Olympic Games: **1 Cor 9:25**. See notes on **Rev 3:11**. **Conquering:** By God's word: **2 Cor 10:3-5, Eph. 6:12-20**. These describe conquests of the gospel by the analogy of a soldier.

SECOND SEAL: VIOLENCE IN THE EMPIRE (AD183-211)

v3 Opened the second seal: A new period of time, following from the first.

v4 Horse that was red: A completely opposite colour to the first seal. Similar contrast is in **Isa 1:18**. **Power given him to take peace:** The first seal was replaced by the second. This is an important phrase to show that the seals are separate *chronological* events. **Given him a great sword:** Literally a *knife*, a short dagger used as a weapon. Some Roman emperors at this time were poisoned and murdered.

THIRD SEAL: FAMINE (AD212-235)

v5 Black horse: Depression, mourning and death: **Job 30:25-31; Lam 4:8**. **Pair of balances:** Symbol of justice, as it still is today. Roman coins from that period have this symbol.

v6 Measure of wheat for a penny: A time of famine where food is scarce. This was a time of heavy taxation and therefore finances were tight.

AND ¹ I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, ^a as it were the noise of thunder, ^b one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.

² And I saw, and behold ^f a white horse: ^h and he that sat on him ⁱ had a bow; and ^k a crown was given unto him: and he went forth ^m conquering, and to conquer.

³ And when he had opened the second seal, I heard ^o the second beast say, Come and see.

⁴ And there went out another ² horse that was red: and ^q power was given to him that sat thereon ^s to take peace from the earth, and that they should **kill one another**; and there was given unto him a great sword.

⁵ And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo ^v a black horse; and he that sat on him had ^b a pair of balances in his hand.

⁶ And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, ³ ^c A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou ⁷ hurt not the oil and the wine.

⁷ And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see.

⁸ And I looked, and behold ^k a pale horse; and his name that sat on him was ^m **Death**, and ^o **Hell** followed with him. And power was given ⁴ unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to **kill** ^r with sword, and with hunger, and with **death**, and ⁴ with the beasts of the earth.

⁹ And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw ^t under ^u the altar the souls of them that were **slain** ^v for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

¹⁰ And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, ^e holy and true, dost thou not ^d judge and ^e **avenge our blood** on ^v them that dwell on the earth? [?]

11 And ⁷ white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, ^u that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be **killed** as they were, should be fulfilled.



Three measures of barley: Barley was a poor-man's grain and was less highly taxed, hence a difference in weights. **Hurt not the oil and the wine:** An expression showing the most basic commodities were not taken away for good. At the end of the seal, the emperor significantly reduced taxes.

FOURTH SEAL: DEATH (AD235-303)

v8 Behold a pale horse: a "pale green" colour, the colour of someone's skin when they are dying or are dead. In 50 years, 39 of the emperors died violent deaths. **His name was Death:** Confirms the deathly pale green colour. **Hell followed with him.** Gk. "Hades" meaning "the grave", a concealed or unseen location, a covering.

Power given unto them over the fourth part of the earth:

The Roman Empire at this time was divided into 4 administrative areas. Under Constantine these became the prefectures of Italy, Gaul, Illyricum and the east." **To kill with sword, and with hunger:** A longer dagger compared with the word used in **Rev 6:4**. Hunger comes in a time of famine. **With death:** so widespread that it is said that half the human race died as a result of wars, pestilence and famine. **Beasts of the earth:** The Barbarians who attacked the Roman Empire during these years, cp. **Titus 1:12**.

FIFTH SEAL: SOULS UNDER THE ALTAR (AD303-311)

v9 Under the altar: Represents Christ. The law of the altar is in **Ex 20:24-25; Deut 27:5**. Under the law, the altar was first cleansed, then it made holy those who touched it: **Ex 29:37**. We touch the Christ altar when we are baptised "into Christ". Those who die "in Christ" are "under the altar": **Heb 13:10-12; 1 Cor 9:13**. They are true Israelites: **Eph 2:14-15**.

Souls: Literally means "lives" cp. **Rev 16:3**. **The testimony they held:** Means they *witnessed* for Christ. See notes on **Rev 1:9**. **v10 Cried with a loud voice:** This is a desperate prayer for deliverance. Abel's blood cried out from the ground: **Gen 4:10**. **How long, O Lord:** The answer to this prayer came with the fall of paganism in 312AD, in the sixth seal: **Rev 6:12-17**. Believers of every age echo these words as they suffer persecution and death: **Rev 2:8-11; 13:10**.

v11 White robes: Immortality in the Kingdom: **Rev 7:9,13,14; 19:8**. See notes in **1:13; 3:4-5,18**. **Rest yet a little season:** A very short period of relief in AD312. Ultimate rest only comes in the Kingdom: **Psa 94:1-4,13-14; Hab 3:13-16**.

Colour code: Blue (God and Jesus Christ); Red (sin/devil/judgment of wicked); Green (Kingdom); Orange (important words & phrases); Purple (return of Jews to the land); Yellow (practical exhortation). Prepared for Rathmines Bible School Teenagers.