

*I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was **a white horse!** Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.*

*When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" Then another horse came out, **a fiery red one.** Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword.*

*When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was **a black horse!** Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "Two pounds of wheat for a day's wages, and six pounds of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"*

*When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was **a pale horse!** Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.*

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded ['split apart'* NASB] like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.*

*Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For **the great day** of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?"*

The very first word of this last book of the Bible is "apocalypsis": "*The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John*" (1:1 NKJV). That is why we often refer to this book as the "Apocalypse." The Greek word literally means "an uncovering, disclosing, unveiling." It is the Greek word for "revelation". In the book of Revelation we have an uncovering of the unknown future, what could not be known, except by divine revelation. In popular usage, apocalypse refers to catastrophe, disaster, and tragic events such as nuclear holocaust, the collapse of civilization, the total destruction of the planet, or the end of time itself. It fascinates as well as terrifies at the same time. It is the theme for numerous movies and video games filled with mystery, uncertainty and horror. Chapter six of Revelation is clearly apocalyptic.

The Greek word translated "signified" (NKJV; 'communicated' NASB; 'make known' NIV) means "to give a sign, to signify, indicate, make known, point out." John uses the word three times in his gospel with prophetic significance (12:33; 18:32; 21:19). He implies that the message he has received is given to his readers by signs or symbols. Revelation is a book full of symbols; it is written in code for the protection of its readers. John uses symbolic language and vivid poetic visions to make known the hidden realities of human history, and God's hand in it. Interpreters do not agree as how literally, symbolic language should be understood.

Christians have interpreted and understood the symbolic language, and OT imagery of Revelation, in four different ways, though each of the four points of view has numerous variations:

1. It is a review of history that is mainly fulfilled in the first century of the Roman Empire. Yet the climax of the book is the return of Christ.

2. It is a preview or forecast of history that is mainly unfulfilled and relates to what will happen at the return of Christ. Yet this view robs the book of much of its relevance to the readers of John's day.
3. It is an identifying of history between the first and second comings of Christ. However, different historical interpretations change from age to age.
4. It is a symbolic view of history, an allegory, with timeless spiritual truths, or principles, in the war between good and evil, between Satan and God, with no reference to time. Yet Revelation was specifically written to the existing churches of the first century.

It seems to me that all of these interpretations of John's prophetic symbolism have a measure of revelation, and spiritual truth, applicable to **all** periods of history. My approach is to combine the strengths of all four views. This chapter paints a broad-brush history of the world in biblical terms. The return of Christ will be preceded by many historical disasters, that both prefigure and influence the present order, in one way or another. Although John is confident Christ will return and ultimately judge, and bring deliverance to this evil world, he warns every generation of believers of persecution and martyrdom, as God's people have experienced in previous ages. Chapter 6 applies to **all** periods of history, particularly to the end time.

Chapter six has disturbing and complex imagery beyond our imagination. Yet human history is in the hand of Christ; it is all working toward a certain end. The "Amen" of creation declares that the ascended Christ reigns (5:14). "Come" asks that he prevail on earth as in heaven (6:1). In response, Jesus opens six of the seals to unroll the book of history. The contents of the scroll reveal mankind's depravity and show God's authority over the events of human history. As the Lamb opens each of the first four seals, one of the living creatures shouts "Come!" and a horse with its rider responds. The horses and their riders have been riding over the earth **throughout** history, but their horrors increase as the end of this age of grace draws near.

Four horsemen ride out: white for military conquest; red the colour of blood, for bloodshed and war; black for severe scarcity, inflation, poverty and famine; and pale, a yellowish-green colour, the colour of corpses, for plague, disease and death. All four riders are essentially evil, sinister and destructive. Each colour is symbolic of a particular tragedy. They are adapted from the four horsemen of Zechariah (1:8-11). There is also a close parallel with Ezekiel 14:21. Calling them out is not calling them into existence. God did not create these horrors. They have been around as long as sinful human pride, cruelty and greed, whether an ancient flood, a medieval plague, or a modern catastrophe. Yet, even evil is under God's control.

White is the symbol of victory. Some think the rider on the white horse represents Christ (19:11) or the triumph of the gospel. However, this rider, armed with a bow (like the Parthians, a frequent enemy on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire), best symbolises military aggression; a "might is right" attitude. Christ does not fit this gruesome sequence of the horrors of war. Others think this rider on the white horse represents a European Antichrist. The one event gives rise to the others: war leads to famine, which leads to plague and so on. They are all inter-linked. Food shortages lead to inflation. A denarius was a day's wages for a labourer. The authority of death and hades to kill is limited to "a fourth of the earth" (8). God's mercy restrains his wrath. Here "Hades" does not refer to hell but, to the grave.

The four riders represent the four main aspects of invasion and war in general. War is the supreme evidence for the sinful nature and inner depravity of humanity. Its roots lie in greed: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight" (James 4:1-2). Jesus also taught that sin comes from within: "All these evils come from inside and defile a person" (Mark 7:23). Revelation reveals the reality of the tragedy of a broken and fallen world at war with God.

Sin is self-destructive. There is a moral foundation to history: "Those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it" (Job 4:8). God governs this world by the unchanging spiritual law of sowing and reaping. Hosea warned Israel, "They sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind" (8:7). People may fool themselves, but they cannot fool God. The horsemen reveal the consequences of a sinful and godless society

that rejects God. Yet everything, even the worst wickedness of human sin, will be compelled to serve his purposes of salvation in the world. Therefore, God's people should not be discouraged when the appearances of history seem contrary to God's promises. This is not some future scenario, but the world as it has always been. These forces have caused havoc and chaos throughout all history, and in today's unstable world. Lord Acton famously observed, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." If you don't believe me, read history, open a newspaper or watch the TV news!

The fifth seal changes the pattern of judgment and destruction. We see the martyred saints in heaven. Suffering comes to the earth and the faithful servants of God face persecution for bearing witness to Jesus. Some Christians pay a high price for their loyalty to Jesus. God's people, far from being spared, are at times, singled out unjustly for suffering. John describes the Christian martyrs in heaven crying out to God with the question, often asked by Israel's psalmists in the past, and the suffering Church throughout the ages: "*How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?*" (10).

In ancient sacrifices, the blood which symbolised life, was poured "*under the altar*" (9) i.e. at the base of the altar, a position of honour. There John saw the souls of all Christian martyrs, at the time of his writing, and by implication, until the return of Christ. They were praying for God's righteous justice, not for vengeance. The "white robe" represents purity and victory. They are told "*to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been*" (11). God restrains his wrath until the last martyr has been killed. "Martyr" means "a witness." It is sometimes said that the second coming is delayed so that the total number of the saved may be gathered into the Church. Here the delay is so the total number of the martyrs may be complete! He patiently delays his answer to their prayers, and his final judgment on a world that has rejected Jesus, to give the lost time to repent, even though his people continue to suffer. God is concerned for both justice, for his people, and mercy, for those who are not.

With the sixth seal comes the end, of both the violence of the world, and the persecution of God's people. By the same act of judgment God will both judge sinners and deliver the saints. The "*great day*" (17) is also known as the "*day of the Lord*". Joel says: "*The day of the LORD is great, it is dreadful. Who can endure it?*" (2:11; cf Isaiah 2:12ff). God comes in direct intervention in wrath and final judgment, in frightening images that symbolise the end of the universe as we know it (12-17). The sixth seal describes a cosmic catastrophe, worldwide upheaval and universal terror, beyond our human imagination. Can you imagine this terrifying scene of destruction with its severe earthquake, black sun, blood-red moon, and the stars falling to earth?

There are parallels between Ezekiel's four disasters (14:12-21), and Christ's prophetic words recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, and what John wrote in Revelation 6: "*When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains*" (Mark 13:7-8). The metaphor of "birth pains" describes the increase in frequency and duration of these events. The OT prophets use the metaphor to depict severe suffering followed by delivery and fulfilment, marking the transition from one age to another age (Isaiah 13:8-10; Hosea 13:13; cf 2 Peter 3:10). Here the old order is passing away and a new order is being established.

Jesus' prophetic preview of the general conditions of the earth, characterize the entire age, before he returns: "*Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken*" (Matthew 24:29). At Pentecost, Peter quoted the OT prophet Joel: "*The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*" (Acts 2:20; Joel 2:28-32). The "name of the Lord" that saves is Jesus. Isaiah had foretold the darkening of the sun: "*I clothe the heavens with darkness and make sackcloth its covering*" (50:3). Isaiah also foretold the falling of the stars and the rolling up of heaven (34:4). The return of Christ is a literal event, in which Christ "will come in the same way" that the disciples saw him go into heaven (Acts 1:11).

The scene is catastrophic for everyone one on earth regardless of their social class (15). No one is exempt from the judgment of God. The images, whether literal or symbolic, indicate the end of this age. They indicate the collapse and disfunction of all that seems fixed and stable in life. Symbolically, it may represent the collapse of government and established authority. The sun and moon not merely give light but also fix the seasons. The stars speak of God's sustaining role in creation. Just as an island seems to provide stability in the midst of stormy seas, so the mountains seem to be a stable element in a changing landscape.

At Sinai an earthquake announced the frightening presence of God in his glory (Exodus 19:8), but God's final coming will shake both earth and heaven: *"Now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain"* (Hebrews 12:26-27; Haggai 2:6). The apostle Peter describes in similar terms the return of Christ: *"That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells"* (2 Peter 3:12-13). Jesus returns to establish righteousness and bring justice. The hope of believers is not just the destruction of the wicked and their works. Their hope is in the promise that God will bring about a transformed universe, a "new heaven and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; Revelation 21:1–22:5), which will be their eternal home.

This chapter is a preview of the coming destruction of the first heaven and earth: *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea."* (21:1). It is the climax of judgment at the end of this age. Seven aspects of creation and seven classes of people are affected. This is *"the great day"* (17) of the wrath of God the creator and Christ the redeemer. No individual or nation can escape the consequences of their sin. God's wrath is both present: *"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness"* (Romans 1:18); and future: *"He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty"* (Revelation 19:15). The Bible warns about the severity of God's wrath against evil and wickedness. Those who reject grace now, will not repent when judgment comes: *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them"* (John 3:36). Then, the unsaved will be beyond the day of grace.

The key question *"who is able to stand"?* is answered in chapter seven. Some understand the Church to be raptured out of this trouble and to be safe in heaven. Others understand God takes his people through trouble, not out of trouble, as in the historical examples of Noah and Lot, referred to by Jesus, to reveal God's power and glory (Luke 17:28-29). Unrepentant people try in vain to hide from God. Their desperate question: *"Who is able to stand"?* assumes no one can, except those who stand by grace in Christ before this time of judgment. The unsaved do not cry out for salvation. Their cry for the rocks and the mountains to hide them is found in Hosea (10:8) and Isaiah (2:19). Jesus predicted the same reaction from the people of Jerusalem when God's judgment fell on them: *"They will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!"* (Luke 23:30). By this time the gospel has been preached to all nations: *"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world to all nations, and then the end will come"* (Matthew 24:14).

We live a life of faith in the midst of all these troubles. For believers, the returning Messiah is a gentle Lamb; for unbelievers, he is a fierce Lion. The ultimate destruction of evil and the triumph of good are inevitable. Rather than being fearful by what is happening in our world, we should confidently wait for Christ's return to bring righteousness, justice and restoration to his people. Then everyone will say: *"There truly is a reward for those who live for God; surely there is a God who judges justly here on earth"* (Psalm 58:11, NLT).

APPLICATION TO DAILY LIFE

1. What part should the wrath of God have in our proclamation of the gospel? The judgment of God may seem unloving to us. But as the world increasingly hates Christians, and as tragedies and disasters increase, let us be glad that a new world of justice is coming (Isaiah 13:11; John 3:16-18).
2. As a group, pray for Christians around the world today who are suffering for their faith, that they may know God's protection. God is still on his throne. He has the last word (Psalm 58:11).