

The First Six Seals: The Tribulation Begins (Part 1)

Revelation 6:1-17

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Well, I encourage you to turn with me to Revelation 6. I'm excited about beginning, again, our study of this great letter and the wonderful recounting of the future that awaits us. I was thinking as I was preparing this week about the last 120 years of human history. None of us here, of course, were alive for all of those years - some of us more than others - but they were truly remarkable. I mean, think about all of the major earth-changing events that occurred. There were countless wars across the globe, including two massive world wars that claimed millions of lives. There were times that promised peace, unparalleled world peace. People were hopeful times like that between the world wars and like that at the fall of the former Soviet Union. Pandemics paralyzed the world over the last 120 years including, obviously, the current one, to some extent. But if you read anything about it far more devastating the Spanish Flu that took between 50 and 100 million lives in the early 1900s. There have been cataclysmic natural disasters that have ravaged our globe - massive earthquakes, devastating volcanoes - like the one just this week - hurricanes, typhoons, tornadoes, prolonged famines, unparalleled heat waves, and unthinkable periods of incredible cold. When you think about the politics of the last 120 years, they have been racked with political Intrigue assassinations. There have been dictators like Chairman Mao, and Joseph Stalin who massacred tens of millions of their own citizens. And, of course, there are so many other events over the last 120 years.

Now, I want you to imagine that all of those events and so many others that I haven't mentioned by name happen not over 120 years, as they did in this last century, but in seven years. And then imagine that those events were exponentially worse than the historical ones that have occurred over these last decades. If you can imagine that, then you began to get a small glimpse of what God in His wrath will inflict on this planet and its peoples during a future seven-year period called the tribulation.

In the Olivet Discourse. Jesus compares the wars, and pandemics and disasters, and persecution that have happened throughout history to the Braxton Hicks contractions that a woman experiences before she actually enters labor. Then He compares the coming tribulation to hard labor. Tonight, we began to study the tribulation, which is the bulk of the Book of Revelation,

chapters 6-18. You see, in the future at the end of human history, there will be a period of seven years during which God will unleash His wrath against this earth and its people and it's that time period that John got to see unfold in symbols and realities and that we want to study together.

Now, before we get into the specifics, let me just remind you of the structure of this book. Jesus' words to John in 1:19 provide the natural framework and outline for the book. He says, "therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things." Using that framework, here's the outline that I've suggested to you: "'The Things Which You Have Seen': The Setting of Jesus' Prophecy" (chapter 1). "'The Things Which Are': The State of Jesus' Church" (chapters 2-3) - the letters to the seven churches. And "'The Things Which Will Take Place': The Stages of Jesus' Final Triumph" (chapters 4-22).

Now, let me break down for you that third part, "The Things Which Will Take Place" after these things, "The Stages of Jesus' Final Triumph," because that's where we find ourselves, chapters 4-22. We have so far studied as sort of the first major subdivision of that great portion, chapters 4 and 5, "The Lamb & the Seven-Sealed Scroll." The next major section is the one we enter tonight, "The Seven-Year Tribulation." That section runs all the way from chapter 6-18.

Now, let me fill out that seven-year tribulation period for you. I'm not going to go through all these in detail. We're going to see them unfold as we go through there. But let me just give you sort of an outline to follow. In chapter 6, you have "The First Six Seals." Then in chapter 7, there's an interlude where we look at the "Tribulation Saints." Then in chapters 8-9, you have "The Seventh Seal: The First Six Trumpets." And then there's another interlude where we learn about "A Little Book & Two Great Witnesses" (10:1—11:14). Then in chapter 11:15-19 through the rest of chapter 11, you have "The Seventh Trumpet." Chapters 12 through 14 is an interlude in which we learn about "A War in Heaven," "The Beast & False Prophet," and "Announcements from Heaven." Chapters 15 and 16 "The Seven Bowls." And then chapter 17 and 18 "The Destruction of Babylon" - both its religion and its business. So, that's an overview of these chapters that articulate and detail the seven-year tribulation. We're going to march through them together so, if you didn't get all of that, that's fine. You will by the end. That's just sort of giving you the 30,000-foot level before we get into the into the forest.

So, you have “The Lamb & the Seven-Sealed Scroll” in chapters 4 and 5. You have “The Seven-Year Tribulation” in chapter 6-18. “The Second Coming” in chapter 19. “The Thousand-Year Kingdom” of Christ, the Millennium, in chapter 20: 1-6. You have “The Final Rebellion” in chapter 20:7-10. “The Great White Throne Judgment,” 20:11-15. And then “The Eternal State” in chapters 21 and 22. Chapter 22 ends with a little “Epilogue” beginning in verse 6, in which we are called to respond and told how we should deal with these things. So, you can see that this unfolds in not only a logical but a chronological order. And we'll see that as we walk through this together. So, that is an overview of what we'll study. From Revelation 6-18, then, we're going to learn about this coming period called the tribulation.

Now, before we get into the details of it, again, let's look at this period that is the tribulation. First of all, the English word “tribulation” comes from the Latin word “tribulum.” That's an agricultural tool for separating the chaff from the grain. What they would do is they would take a heavy board and they would put sharp objects on the bottom of that board, usually nails and rocks and things like that, and then they would sit on top of that board heavy weights and they would drag that heavy board with those pieces of rock and other embedded things across the grain and it would separate the real grain from the husk. That's the process. That's the tribulum. The process was called the tribulatio, in Latin. In Greek, the word is “thlipsis” for tribulation. It means, literally, a pressing together. You can see where it came from - that the idea of a tribulum where something was pressed under a heavy weight. When this Greek word for thlipsis or tribulation is used of the study of last things, it refers to a future event. It's used this way five times in the New Testament. Let me give them to you. Matthew. 24:21, Jesus says in the Olivet Discourse, “for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.” Matthew 24:29, “immediately after the tribulation of those days,” and He talks about the signs in the heavens. Mark 13 19, “those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of creation which God created until now, and never will.” It is a unique time in human history. By the way, Mark 13 is Mark's version of the Olivet Discourse. So, these are parallel passages. Mark 13:24, “in those days, after the tribulation, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.” And then Revelation 7:14. “I said to him, ‘my Lord, you know (who these people are).’ and He said, ‘these are the ones who came out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’” So, notice in every one of those cases, the event Jesus was speaking

about was future in His time and it's still future unless we completely redefine the signs in the heavens because we haven't seen the sun darkened, the moon not giving its light, and the powers of heavens shaken and the stars falling. So, unless we've seen those things, this is still future, and there are other reasons, by the way, it's future. I just mentioned that. Now, a couple of times the adjective "great" is added in. You'll notice in Matthew 24, "a great tribulation." Revelation 7:14, "the great tribulation." Now, the great tribulation likely refers not to the entire seven years, but rather to the last half. The reason I say that is in Matthew 24, Jesus describes an event called "the abomination of desolation." We'll talk about that at some point, but it's when the Antichrist sets up an alternative object of worship in the temple in Jerusalem, "the abomination of desolation." Daniel, 9:27 puts that event at the midpoint of the seven years. So, after Jesus describes that event, which is at the midpoint, we read this in Matthew 24:21, "for then (that is, after the abomination of desolation, which is at the midpoint) there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred." So then, what you have is, you have all seven years as the tribulation, the last three and a half are called "the great tribulation." The Great tribulation.

Here's an overview and, if you don't like charts, ignore it. But, if it helps you, you can look at it. You can see, on the left side, is the rapture. That is when the church is taken out of this world. The Lord comes for us. Shortly thereafter, the man of sin is revealed. A covenant is made. And then you have what Jesus calls "the beginning of birth pangs." Those are the "Seals 1-5" that we're going to begin studying tonight. At the midpoint of the tribulation - at three and a half years - the man of sin breaks his covenant with Israel and he sets up the abomination of desolation. As I said, the second half, then, is called the "great tribulation" and "Seals 6 & 7" which contain the seven trumpets and the seven bowls and Jesus likens that last three and a half years, not to the beginning of birth pangs, but to hard labor. And then you have, at the end of the seven years, the second coming. So, the whole seven-year period is the tribulation. The abomination of desolation, when the Antichrist sets up an alternative object of worship in the temple himself, that marks the midpoint and the beginning of the second half, which is called the great tribulation. And the great tribulation is not called that because it's different in character from the first half, but because it will be much more intense. All of it is tribulation, the second half will be great. After tonight, it's hard to even imagine something that's worse than the things we'll study that happen in the first half, but that's the reality.

Just to give you some descriptive terms of this period from the human perspective. It's called: "birth pangs," the "day of trouble, the time of Jacob's trouble," the "day of distress," the "day of darkness, and gloom, and clouds." And from the divine perspective, this period of time is called: the "day of the Lord," the "day of vengeance," the "day of punishment," the day of destruction," the "day of judgment," the "day of the Lord's anger," and "the day of wrath or of the Lord's wrath." You can tell quickly the tenor of these times.

Some key passages - this isn't all of them, but some key passages that as we study these chapters, we will refer to. You have, in the Old Testament, Daniel chapter 9, the prophecy of the 70th week, in 9:24-27. Daniel also comes back to this time of trouble in 12:1. In Zephaniah 1 and in Zachariah chapters 12-14. When you come to the New Testament, in the Olivet discourse, I think - just in case you don't know what that means, near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, He delivered a message to His disciples from the Mount of Olives looking back over the temple. When He told them that the temple would be completely destroyed, they asked Him in response to that, "what are the signs of Your coming?" And He delivers what's called the Olivet Discourse because it was preached from the Mount of Olives. And He talks about the future. He talks about the tribulation and the second coming. And so, in both Matthew's version, Matthew 24, and Mark's version, Mark 13, we learn about this event. In 1 Thessalonians 5:1:3 and in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. And of course, especially in Revelation 6-18.

Now, let me show you the focus of this time because I don't want you to lose your focus. What is this time period about? There are a lot of moving parts, different characters, a lot of things going on. But what is the tribulation about? Let me show you this. Turn with me to a couple of passages. Revelation 6:15. This is with the 6th seal that, Lord willing, we'll get to next week.

Then the kings of the earth and the great men, and the commanders and the rich
and the strong, and every slave and free man

- You get the idea. Every human being on earth –

hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. And they said
to the mountains and to the rocks, "fall on us and hide us from the presence of
Him who sits on the throne and from the Wrath of the Lamb;"

- Now, notice verse 17, this is the tenor of the great tribulation –

for the great day of Their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

Turn over to Revelation 11:17.

We give thanks to You, O Lord, God the Almighty, who are and who were, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your bond-servants and the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth.

Look at chapter. 14:10. Speaking of those who worship the beast and his image, verse 10 says:

he will also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image and receives his mark.

Verse 14, you see this image of

a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, having a golden crown on His head and a sharp sickle in His hand.

- This is our Lord, a picture of our Lord. –

And another angel came out of the temple, crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, “put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.” Then He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped. And another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, and he also had a sharp sickle. Then another angel, the one who has power over fire came out from the altar; and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle saying, “put in your sharp sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, because her grapes are ripe.

Where's this going? Verse 19

So the angel swung, his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth

- These are human beings –

and threw them into the great winepress of the wrath of God.

Look at chapter 15, verse 1. “I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished.” In these things, the wrath of God is displayed in finished. Verse 7, “and one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever.” Chapter 16:1, “I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, ‘go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.’” Verse 19, “the great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nation's fell. Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath.” And then, lastly, look at chapter 19 - the second coming, Revelation 19:15. Speaking about our Lord, “from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the winepress of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.”

Now I think you can see that the focus of the tribulation is not on what the beast is doing, or the false prophet is doing, or what the nations are doing to Christians or to Israel. The point of the tribulation is what God is doing. It is the unleashing of His wrath and the wrath of the Lamb against this rebel world.

So, with that overview and background, let's go back to chapter 6 and read our text for this evening 6:1.

Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” I looked, and behold, a white horse, and the one who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, “Come!” And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that people would kill one another; and a large sword was given to him. When He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying,

“Come!” I looked, and behold, a black horse, and the one who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine.” When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, “Come!” I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and the one who sat on it had the name Death, and Hades was following with him. Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, and famine, and plague, and by the wild animals of the earth.

We’ll stop there. In the verses I just read for you and in the rest of chapter 6, Jesus Christ initiates the devastating judgments of the seven-year tribulation period and He does so with the breaking of the first six seals on the scroll. You remember the scroll that He’s taken is the title deed to the earth and the seven seals describe a series of sequential divine judgments that will be poured out on the earth. The first four, the ones we just read together, occur in the first half of the seven-year period. The fifth of the seals begins in the first half and spans shortly into the second half. And then, the sixth and seventh seals along with the trumpets and bowls - seven trumpets and seven bowls - describe events that happen in the second half of the tribulation. And the seven seals that we’re going to study together here in Revelation parallel the judgments that our Lord describes in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. So, let’s look at these seals together.

In verses 1 and 2, John watches as the Lamb, first of all, breaks the first seal. And, in verse 1, the first thing that we’re exposed to is the first seal and the summons that comes with it. Look at verse 1. “Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals.” Now, remember the context. Back in chapter 4, we were ushered into the throne room of God and watched the worship of God as Creator. In chapter 5, we’re given a new glimpse of Him and early in chapter 5 we see the Father sitting on His throne with a scroll in His outstretched hand. And, after a search of the universe, heaven learned that there’s only one person worthy to open that scroll and to look at its contents, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. And then in chapter 5, the Lamb that had been slaughtered, as He’s described, came and took the scroll, the title deed to the earth, out of the

hand of the One who sits on the throne. In chapter 6, the Lamb then, having taken that scroll begins to break one by one the seven seals that secure it. In verse 1 of chapter 6, John is allowed to be an eyewitness and watch as the Lamb breaks the first of the seven seals. Can you imagine that scene? Can you imagine the eagerness and anticipation to learn what could be in this scroll and what happens as He unrolls it? Verse 1, when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, “I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, ‘Come!’”

Now the first four seals, the ones I read a moment ago to you that we're going to study tonight, share certain features in common. First of all, each of them is accompanied by a summons from one of the living beings. Remember, there are four living creatures around the throne - we studied them together, angelic beings – and, in the case of each of these, there is a summons by one of those four living beings. In each case, that summons is followed by the appearance of a colored horse with its rider and these four seals are unique in that way. In other words, these first four are distinct from the other seals and they belong together. The first four seals with their four horses and four riders are, as you know, commonly referred to as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus places events that parallel these first four seals into the first half of the tribulation. And so, that's how we know that's where they belong.

Now, as soon as Jesus broke the first seal, verse 1 tells us John heard one of the four living beings - those majestic and angelic beings around the very throne of God - he heard one of them issue a summons, “come,” with a voice like a clap of thunder. For those of you who are literature fans, it's interesting that the Greek word for thunder, in this context is “brontí.” Do what you will with that. But, thunder.

Now, some argue that the summons here to come is to John. “John, come. Come see what's going to happen.” Or even some say to Christ. But clearly, as this unfolds, the summons to come is to the horseman, one after another. So, in response to this first living creature saying, “come,” in response to that command, you have the appearance of the first horse. Verse 2, “I looked, and behold, a white horse.” “And behold,” points out the fact that John was taken aback. He was startled by what he saw. This first horse is pure white. Now, the colors of the other horses, as we'll see, have significance so the color of this horse likely does as well. White in Revelation, as you know, everywhere symbolizes righteousness. However, the rider of this horse clearly represents the forces of evil. So, this isn't real righteousness. It has to be a counterfeit

righteousness. What this horse and its rider represents gives every appearance of being outwardly good, and right, and just, and desirable. That's the first horse.

Then we're introduced to the first rider. Verse 2 goes on to say, "and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer." Now, there's been a lot of debate about the identity of this first Horseman of the Apocalypse. Some have suggested the identity of the rider was the Roman emperor of the time. Others, a personification of judgment. Some have even said it's a representation of God's word - I don't get that one - or the victorious course of the gospel. Some have even said it must be Christ. Now, can you think about why they would argue that this is Christ? It's because in chapter 19, Christ comes from heaven on a white horse. That's true, however, this rider wears a victor's wreath, a stephanos, and carries a bow, but the one in chapter 19 is crowned with many diadems and has a sharp sword that comes from His mouth. And, as we'll see, more to the point, it's clear with the other horses and their riders, they are not persons, but rather they are forces. They are events that unfold and it's best to take this first one in the same way. This horse and its rider, just like the other three, personify something that is happening on the earth, this particular one comes with the beginning of the tribulation.

Notice verse 2, "and he who sat on it had a bow." Now, you understand that a bow is traditionally associated in the Old Testament and the New Testament with a warrior. But did you notice what's missing? No arrows. The bow implies the threat of war but the absence of arrows implies that that war never occurs. Instead, there is a bloodless victory, apparently accomplished through peaceful means. Verse 2 goes on to say, "and a crown was given to him." "Was given," is passive. It's what theologians call the "divine passive." In other words, he receives this authority, this crown, only by permission of God Himself. In fact, this verb "was given" only occurs in Revelation about divine permission. So, the point here is everything that says the seals are broken, even though it represents evil being done on the earth, is under the authority of God accomplished through the agency of the Lamb. "A crown was given to him and he went out conquering and to conquer." He is victorious. He gains many victories but those victories don't come with the use of arrows – instead, through treaties and other peaceful means. "Conquering" implies a career marked with many victories, a series or string of victories, conquering one after another. And "to conquer" means, literally, that he might conquer. This is his goal. It is to subdue

this planet under his authority - overwhelming victory. The picture here in this first Horseman of the Apocalypse is a picture of a rapidly expanding kingdom accomplished, not through actual bloody war, but rather through treaties and diplomacy. In other words, this horse and its rider pictures the false peace that Antichrist will orchestrate. If you look at parallel texts, especially at Daniel 9, you discover that the Antichrist will accomplish his worldwide expansion of his rule not through battles, but through treaties and covenants and agreements. That's what this pictures - not Antichrist himself, but what will be accomplished through him. So, the first part of the tribulation, at the very beginning of the tribulation, it will be characterized by the rapid growth of a world empire under Antichrist achieved, for the most part, without bloodshed and a kingdom that promises world peace. What could be better? But it's a charade. It's a false peace, as we quickly learn with the second seal.

Again, as Christ breaks the seal, there is a summons. Look at verse 3. "When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, 'come!'" Just as with the first seal, when Christ breaks this second one, John hears the second living creature calling out for the horse and its rider, "come." And then we're introduced to the second horse. Verse 4 says, "and another, a red horse," in response to that summons went out. The color of this horse is fiery red because this horse brings civil war - war between countries, and even world war - and that becomes very clear when we learn about the second rider. Look at verse 4. It goes on to say, "and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth." So, at the very beginning of the tribulation period, there will be the promise of world peace under a new world leader who is a charismatic individual who will accomplish his victories, not by warfare but by treaties and covenants, and his purpose is to bring the entire world under his control. And he will do so successfully, offering peace.

But that peace is quickly shattered by the next horseman. Notice verse 4 says, "it was granted" - again, by God - that this horse and its rider, "should take peace from the earth." So, the second Horseman of the Apocalypse, shortly into the seven-year period of the tribulation, ushers in worldwide conflict. This horse and its rider symbolize violent bloodshed and the horrors that accompany war. There is an outward temporary peace ushered in by the first rider, but it quickly proves to be a false peace. It is a cheap imitation of the everlasting peace the Prince of Peace will someday bring. Notice he says, "peace is going to be taken from the earth." The impact of this

seal is worldwide. Verse 4 says, “and that men would slay one another.” Here we learn how peace will be destroyed, “by slaying one another.” The Greek word translated “slay” is a broad word that includes all violent taking of life in war. In other words, when Christ breaks this seal, it will result in unspeakable carnage, in war across this planet. Verse 4 says, “and a great sword was given to him.” This horse and his rider is given the sword that Roman soldiers carried into battle. That's the Greek word that's used. And it obviously symbolizes a conflict, violent death. There has always been war on this planet. There are wars raging today, but the second Horseman of the Apocalypse will usher in a time of unparalleled war.

That brings us to the third seal. Verse 5, “when He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, ‘come!’” Again, in response to the summons of this third living creature, John saw the third horse. Verse 5, “I looked, and behold, a black horse.” The black color of this horse implies, obviously, darkness, but the concept of grief and mourning. Why? Well, we discover, why when we meet the third rider. Verse 5 goes on to say, “and he who sat on this black horse had a pair of scales in his hand.” This rider holds a bar with scales suspended at both ends. In other words, the ancient tool for weighing food. You've all seen pictures of them, perhaps even have an example in your home. Verse 6 says, “and I heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures.” At this point, John hears another announcement, but this announcement doesn't come from one of the four living creatures. Instead, notice, it's “like a voice” and it comes from the center of the four living creatures. Now, back in chapter 5, verse 6, we learned that at the center of the four living creatures is the throne of God. So, this is the voice of God Himself. God speaks these words and it is a reminder that all of this is unfolding in His sovereign purpose and plan.

Notice what God says about this horse and it's rider. Verse 6 says, “saying, ‘a quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius.’” Now, let's take that apart a bit. Those are obviously ancient terms that we have to understand to catch what is being communicated here. First of all, the Greek word that is in our version translated “quart” is a dry measure similar to our quart. Actually, our quart is slightly more than the ancient Greek measurement, but you wouldn't understand the Greek word. It wouldn't help you. So, quart is a good translation. Think of a dry measure, a quart jar. Wheat was the primary food of the ancient world. It was the better-quality grain was more expensive than barley and a quart of wheat that's described here was the

amount that it was understood one person needed every day to sustain life. So, quart - one person, one day. A denarius was what the average worker, like a common worker, earned in a day. So, think about this: the prices caused by this famine will require a full day's pay to purchase enough wheat for just one person. Normally, in the first century, a denarius would have bought ten quarts of wheat. This is a massive famine and God, the Father, goes on to say, notice, "and three quarts of barley for a denarius." Barley was the cheaper grain. In fact, it was often fed to animals, but poor people ate it regularly. But here, we're told a common worker is going to have to work an entire day to provide just enough food to provide for a family of three - no extra money, just enough food for the family. Normally, by the way, in the first century, the same amount of money would have bought thirty quarts of barley, instead of three. So, you can see the famine has created incredible inflation. So, this rider symbolizes, then, the scarcity of food caused by famine.

And doesn't that make perfect sense? I mean, the second seal caused worldwide war. Famine and hunger are always in the aftermath of war. War and famine create scarcity and scarcity drives prices up. The resulting inflation in this context means most, people will barely have enough food to survive. The common people will have to work just to feed their families and have nothing left over when it's done.

But God adds, verse 6, "and do not damage the oil and the wine." Oil and wine were often associated with the rich in that culture. So, this may mean that the poor will struggle just to eat, but the wealthy will see very little Interruption to their lives. Robert Thomas writes in his commentary about this expression, "the privileged lifestyle of the rich remains completely intact." That's one possible interpretation. There are others who think that that oil and wine, these important commodities, will be so hard to come by that they will need to be carefully protected. And that's the idea here of, "make sure you 'don't damage your oil and wine.'" You need to make sure you care for these precious commodities. Regardless of that last expression, what we see in this third Horseman of the Apocalypse is the most severe worldwide famine that has ever struck the globe.

That brings us to the fourth seal and we see the summons that comes with it. Verse 7, "when the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, 'come!'" And again, in response to the command of the fourth living creature, comes the fourth horse. Verse 8,

“I looked, and behold, an ashen horse.” Now, the Greek word for “ashen” is actually the word from which we get our English word chlorophyll. It describes something pale green. Here, it's a sickly, yellow green. It's the color of a corpse in an advanced state of decay. That's the color of this horse and that's certainly appropriate in light of the rider and how he's described. The fourth rider we meet there in verse 8. “And he who sat on it had the name Death, and Hades was following with him.” This horse and it's rider personify death in all its forms, and it's accompanied by Hades.

Now, we've looked at this word before back in Chapter 1, verse 18. Hades is used in two different ways in the New Testament. Sometimes it's used of the place of conscious punishment where the wicked go after death or hell. Other times, as here, it's used of the state of death that both believers and unbelievers enter when life is over. In other words, “the grave” would be another way to say it. And that's the idea here. You have death accompanied by the grave. Verse 8 says, “authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth.” That is unbelievable. God will give this horse and it's rider authority to kill one fourth of the earth's population. Now, think about that with me for a moment. Today in our world, the population of this planet is eight billion. If one fourth of our current population died. It means two billion people would perish in what's a very short period of time. Just to give you an idea of how many people that is, it would be as if suddenly every single person in India and every single person in China died and just went away. With this fourth seal, a fourth of those who have survived the carnage of war, who survived the decimation of the famine, will die. Many have already died, but a fourth more will die in this seal. Nothing like this has ever happened in history. “Death and Hades will be given authority,” notice, verse 8, “to kill with the sword, and with famine, and with pestilence, and by the wild beasts of the earth.” Death comes in four ways in this seal: the sword, of course, - the word used here is the great two-edged sword that pictures death by violence and war – famine, - the famine that began in the third seal will only grow worse and more will die – pestilence, - diseases will be rampant and fatal. Think about it if in today's world two billion people suddenly died, there would be no way to process those deaths. Think about what we've encountered just with the few deaths that have come with our last couple of years. Freezer trucks parked outside of cities. Can you imagine if two billion people or more, at that time, were to die? So many die that burial doesn't take place immediately and from those rotting corpses additional diseases create new sources of death - and then he adds beasts of the earth. Hunger, the one drive that

expels the fear of man from wild animals and man won't be the only ones affected by the famine, so will the beasts of the earth. So, out from the forest and swamps, they will emerge in search of food, including unwary people. This fourth seal, think about it. We've already had worldwide war. We've already had famine that has caused people to work solely to provide food for their families and nothing else. Some have undoubtedly died through that and now, on top of that, a fourth of those who survived will die. Amazingly, think about this, this fourth seal brings us only near the end of the first half of the tribulation.

There are three more seals and there are the seven trumpets and the seven bowls. None of that has come yet. This is unbelievable. Folks, this is real. This is what God has told us, through our Lord Jesus Christ, will happen in the future. There is a real seven-year period coming when these things will transpire.

So, what are the lessons for us? Let me give you three of them, briefly. From these first four seals three lessons.

Number one: you will personally have to face the Lamb, heaven's Lord. Don't think about the person sitting next to you. Don't think about this theoretically. Think about this personally. You will have to face the Lamb, heaven's Lord. And you have to face Him one of two ways.

Revelation's, clear. You will either fall before the Lamb in worship because of His redemption or you will flee from the Lamb in terror because of His wrath. Those are the only two options.

Let's look at these texts together. First of all, if you have believed in Him, then you will face the Lamb, but you will face Him in worship because He has redeemed you. Look at chapter 5 verse 8. When the Lamb took the book out of the right hand of the Father, the four living creatures, and the twenty-four elders - representing us, the church – “fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” And together, the saints sing this new song saying:

“Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and you purchased for God with your blood men from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation. You made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, this is how you will face the Lamb. Yes, on your face, but on your face in incredible gratitude, and worship, and adoration for the One who has redeemed, you who set His love on you, and with Whom you will be forever. Look at 7:14. This is specifically of those who are martyred during the tribulation but notice how the saints are described and we're the same, Verse 14, “‘my Lord, You know.’ He said to me, ‘these are the ones who came out of the great tribulation’” - this is what is true of all saints, here – “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Therefore, notice verse 16:

they will hunger no longer nor thirst anymore, nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their Shepherd and will guide them to the springs of water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, this is your future. This is what it will be like when you face the Lamb.

On the other hand, if you have not believed in Christ, if you continue to rebel against His goodness and grace, and His offer of salvation, against His law, then you will flee from the Lamb in terror because of His wrath. Look at chapter 6. I read it a moment ago but look at it again. Chapter 6, verse 15. When the sixth seal happens all the people on this planet, from every socio-economic background, from every level, they will hide themselves and they will say, “fall on us,” to the mountains, “and hide us from the presence 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 is able to stand?” You know, Jesus Christ, the One you meet in the gospels, is a person of great love and great mercy and great grace. And that is freely offered to you, friend. If you don't know Him, He says, “come to Me. Come to Me and you'll find rest, you'll find forgiveness. I will forgive your sins and make you right with God. I'll give you eternal life.” And He accomplished that by the sacrifice of Himself. That's what He offers you. But make no mistake. That is not how you will meet Jesus Christ if you leave this life without believing in Him, He will not present Himself to you like the person you read on the pages of the New Testament. He will present Himself to you like the person we just read about in Revelation. You will face the wrath of the Lamb.

So, face Him, you will. You can either fall before Him in worship because you've accepted His gracious offer of salvation and redemption, you've received Him as Lord, or you will run from Him in terror because of His just anger against your rebellion.

A second lesson is: God is patient and delays His wrath, but He's also just and His wrath is coming. It's interesting. Two verses in the New Testament bring this home to me in a special way. One of them is Ephesians 5:6, "let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience." It's coming. It's coming. It's like a little cloud on the horizon. Right now, everybody can live their lives and ignore it, but it's coming. And you know what these things are, in this passage, things that most human beings on this planet discount as completely unimportant - things like sexual innuendo in your speech, things like lust, things like sexual sins. That's the context of that statement. Of course, those aren't the only reasons that the wrath of God is coming. Those aren't the only sins that invite God's wrath, all sin does, but that's the context. "Let no one deceive you," because of these things, "the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience. Colossians 3:6, "it is because of these things" – again, a context similar, human sin – "that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience." It's coming. It's coming.

Thirdly, and I love this. Christian, you don't need to fear because Jesus, our Lord has promised to rescue us from the wrath to come. I love these verses. I love them so much that I sort of wrap them into one of the songs we wrote to remind us that He saves us from the wrath to come. This is what he says in Romans. 5:9, "much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we will be saved from the wrath of God through Him." Rescued! We're not going to experience it. We're not going to face it. No wrath for us because He absorbed the wrath of God in our place on the cross. 1 Thessalonians. 1:10 says we, "wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead" - that is Jesus – "who rescues us from the wrath to come." It's coming. It'll happen just like we saw it unfold tonight in the first four seals. But for us, Christian, there is no wrath because Jesus drained the cup that you deserved of the wrath of God at the cross. And therefore, for us, meeting Christ is, as we sang earlier, it's being home, to be home with the Lord. That is much better. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for these great truths. Lord, we are sobered by what we have studied. We are sobered by the judgment that is coming on this world. Lord, we know You are just, and so, we

know these judgments, these punishments that will come upon this planet, will be fully and completely just. They will be totally deserved. And yet, Father, our hearts grieve that men would rebel against You and refuse the offer of Your grace. Thank you, Father, that in Your sovereign grace, You've saved some of us in spite of ourselves. You've redeemed us. You've made us Your own. We pray that You'd make us vessels, bringing the gospel to others. May we be clay pots in which the brilliant light of the gospel shines, and may we bring that gospel into the lives of others, so that they will, like us, fall down before the Lamb in worship because of His redemption rather than flee from Him in terror because of His coming wrath. Father, we thank You that, for us who know Jesus Christ, He is the shelter from the storm, that we will one day be at home with Him. Help us to look forward to that day. Help us to hold the things of earth lightly, knowing that someday all of these things will be destroyed. Help us to live for eternity, to live for the kingdom we already belong to spiritually and will one day live in physically - on this planet and then the new heaven and a new earth forever. Lord, help us to live for the future. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.