

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

Chapter Six

INTRODUCTION:

Early on in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he speaks of the spiritual blessings afforded to Christians and explains that every one of those blessings comes from God the Father, through His Son, Jesus. Paul goes on to say that it is not by happenstance that Christians are blessed, but that it is part of a plan formed by an omniscient God before the foundation of the world. Beginning with the opening of the first seal in Revelation 6, we will see that plan carried out to its very end, triumphant in spite of Satan's efforts to foil it. We will see emphasis placed on Jesus' role in this plan because, as we know, the background for what is about to happen has been established: the long anticipated Messiah has come and has completed His personal ministry. He voluntarily offered himself as the "sacrificial lamb" by dying on the cross. But more importantly, on the third day after His death (also the first day of the week) the tomb was found empty. He rose from the dead, thereby demonstrating his power over death.

Fifty days later, on the first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection (another first day of the week) the kingdom of Christ – the church – was established, thus fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies of a new kingdom that would endure forever. Obviously, this greatly upset the Jewish hierarchy because Jesus was not the Messiah they were looking for and the kingdom He established was not what they had in mind. They wanted a physical king that would restore things back to the way they were in David's time. In fact, the Jewish High Priest, along with many of the other priests, elders, scribes, and Pharisees, were the very ones responsible for plotting the death of Jesus in order to put a stop to this new kingdom. But that plan failed, and the church established to worship the Messiah they had rejected began to grow by leaps and bounds. This same group sprang into action again. They set about trying to stop the teaching of the Apostles, hoping to thwart their work until the church weakened and died. Also during that time, some Roman dictators decided they themselves should be an object of worship. Christians, of course, refused to bow to them and the battle that ensued was lengthy and vicious.

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

In part 4 of our study, we saw the Lamb take from God's hand a scroll sealed with seven seals. We are about to witness the opening of the first four. The content will be revealed as if this scroll were being unrolled for us little by little. We won't actually be "reading" the scroll; we will be witnessing symbolic events as the seals are opened. These four seals represent the ongoing battle the church has fought throughout its history – it started around 34 AD when the church was established and continues today even until the end of the world.

God, through the pen of John, will reveal each event in vivid and moving scenes of symbolism. The “four horsemen of the apocalypse” will suddenly appear, then ride off and vanish without ever uttering a single word. Also, a great upheaval will flash before our eyes, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. As we see each scene unfold, we should notice that no individual in the vision is identified as a specific living character. Nor is any specific historical event mentioned. No definite point in time is ever recorded as the scenes take shape. Because of this, we cannot build our interpretation around any specific person or event in history, but we must rely on John's assurance, received from the God of Heaven, that he is recording things which will shortly begin to take place and continue throughout time for as long as the world exists.

It is with chapter 6 that we see the actual beginning of the “revelation” proper. What went on in the first five chapters was all introductory material meant to first prepare us then lead us to this point. To help us recognize and understand the overall picture of the suffering the inhabitants of the earth must endure, God is going to show it to us THREE times, each time from a different perspective. I don't need to explain the significance of that number to you, but – each of the three times we are shown the events, we need to remind ourselves they are all speaking of things that can and will happen from 34 AD until the end of the world. We're not just talking about the persecution first century Christians would have to endure, but about pain and suffering in general – from the time these words were penned until the end of time. A pain and suffering that has been inevitable since the sin in the Garden. The church will always face persecution and people will always endure hardship, suffer, and die. The message here is for Christians in the Apostle

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

John's time and in our own. Stay the course. Do not give up. You are guaranteed victory over pain and death.

Even a casual student of history would have no trouble listing examples of when the world has endured bleak periods. There were two world wars during the 20th Century that killed an estimated 80 million people. In the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, some 500 million people became deathly ill and it is estimated that about 5% of the world's population died. Of course, at the time of this writing, we are just beginning to recover from a global pandemic and continue to deal with all sorts of civil unrest. The point is this: The scenes we will be viewing are foretelling events like the ones I have just mentioned. We can rest assured there will be more in whatever time the world has left.

I mentioned we are going to be shown the suffering three times. The first is the view shown to us in chapter 6 with the opening of the SEVEN SEALS. The second begins in chapter 8, with seven angels blowing SEVEN TRUMPETS, and the third isn't shown to us until chapter 16 when we see the SEVEN BOWLS OF WRATH being poured out onto the earth. As each scene unfolds and strange and unusual things are happening, we must constantly be aware that we are trying to interpret visions, which is no easy task. There will be things that are hard to understand. I refer you to one of Ezekiel's visions from the Old Testament. He describes a chariot that has a "*wheel within a wheel*," which allowed the chariot to quickly move in any direction without ever having to turn. I certainly don't know how to explain how that is done.

But like that "wheel within a wheel", understanding an apocalyptic vision is not easy, either. We may not always agree on the interpretation, but neither should we be dogmatic in regard to our own views. I will attempt to explain each vision as best I can, and quote references where necessary. But even still, we may not all agree, and you may be left with questions. We must, however, try to get the most accurate view that human wisdom can provide and, remember above all that *each vision is only a part of the whole*. Therefore, any interpretation must always fit into the whole. Each piece of the vision must harmonize, never refuting any part of it.

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

Even though the opening of six of the seals occurs in chapter 6, my plan is to focus only on the first four in this particular section, along with the sending out of the four horsemen. The last three seals will be dealt with in our next segment.

THE FIRST FOUR SEALS

“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 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.”

John says, *“And I saw...”* We have seen this phrase before, meaning he is describing the vision that God put into his mind. John “saw” the Lamb open *“one of the seals.”* We actually don’t know which specific seal was opened, because we are not told the order in which they were put on the scroll. It could have been the one nearest to either end of the scroll, or he could have opened the center seal first. There are those who are convinced that the seals were arranged in such a way that when the first one was opened, it allowed the scroll to be unrolled a sufficient amount to read the first section of it. Then, when the second seal was opened the scroll was

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

further unrolled, and so on. I am convinced that cannot be the case. How would you seal a scroll in such a manner that would allow it to be unrolled gradually? I understand this is a Heavenly scroll and God can do anything, but we never see in the text any reference to any part of the scroll actually being read. Instead, we are treated to what happens when John sees the seals opened. All we really know is that the Lamb opens one of the seven seals on the scroll. But once the seals begin to be opened we are going to see “Four Horsemen” sent out. When we first saw the throne scene, we saw “Four Living Creatures,” and between the covers of the bible there are many other “fours” mentioned, and each time it carries the same meaning. This might be a good time to see why there are four instead of some other number.

The reason is once again, symbolic. The number “four” symbolically represents the “*whole of earth.*” I’m sure you have heard the phrase “The four corners of the earth,” and may have even used the phrase yourself. That phrase is the basis for the earthly directions: North, South, East and West, and typically means “world wide” or “fully encompasses the entire earth.” What you may not know is the bible is the source of that phrase! The meaning may also be applied to the “*inhabitants of the earth,*” and when used that way carries the meaning: all of them. For example, if one of the horsemen sent out carries the message of war, it means a world wide war involving all inhabitants of the earth! If he carries a message of peace, it means the entire world is at peace.

Another example would be: If we consider that each of the 4 horsemen offers a different perspective of what is happening on the earth, then once all four of them have provided their messages, symbolically we have the “whole” (complete) perception of what will happen. And one last example of how the number four is used in the bible: Since the horsemen are sent out into the world, the biblical meaning is simple – once all four have accomplished their mission, the entire world has been covered. Each time the symbolism of a number is given, add it to the others. They all are important!

The Opening of the First Seal – Chapter 6:1-2

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

As the first of the seven seals is opened, John says he heard *“as it were, the noise of thunder.”* He is describing the voice of one of the *“four living creatures”* saying *“Come.”* We are not told which of the four creatures spoke, but some commentators believe it was the one with the face of the lion. They base that assumption on the living being with the face of a lion was the first mentioned in chapter four, and the lion is associated with victory that would coincide with the prophecy contained in the events of the first seal. It certainly could be true, but still must be viewed as an assumption. Frankly, I can’t see that it matters which living creature spoke in this instance, because all four of them are going to speak to introduce a part of the vision, and each will speak the same word: *“Come.”*

As a matter of fact, different Bible versions vary in their translation of what is actually spoken by the living creatures as each horse is sent out. The more common examples are "Come and see", "Come out", "Come" and even "Go". According to Spence, only one ancient manuscript, the “Textus Receptus”, contains the Greek phrase *“Epxou kai Baette”* which translates “Come and see.” The remainder of the 62 various manuscripts contain only the Greek word *“Epxou”* (“come”), omitting the words “and see.” No known ancient manuscript includes the Greek word *“aye,”* meaning “Go.” Therefore, the conclusion reached by the majority of authorities is that the living beings are speaking to the horse and rider, and not to John. There is one authority (Alford) who believes they are speaking to Jesus, asking Him to speedily bring these things to pass. Regardless of which is correct, we know for certain that immediately John sees a *“white horse, and he that sat thereon had a bow; and he was given a crown: and he came forth conquering, and to conquer.”*

“A white horse” – In the New Testament the color white almost always represents heavenly things. The only two exceptions I found are Matt. 5:36 and John 4:35 where it simply means the color “white.” It is possible the meaning is quite literally nothing more than a “horse that happens to be white”, but since this is a vision viewed in heaven, I believe it carries the symbolic meaning of “heavenly.” Looking into the Old Testament, we find a horse used as the symbol of battle or war. I find it very interesting that the Romans at that time viewed a *white*

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

horse as a symbol of victory. Many paintings and images from that era have their important leaders positioned on a white horse.

“A bow” – Bows, as well as arrows are symbols of power by Old Testament writers. But there is no mention of this rider having arrows, just a bow. This symbolism then suggests that this particular rider is in command, with authority and power, but is taking NO active part in the battle. He would be compared to a very high ranking general in an army.

“A crown” – The rider was given a crown. The Greek word used is **“stephanos”** which was previously used to refer to the crowns each of the 24 elders was wearing. It is the crown given to the victor at sporting events. As mentioned above, the white horse is a symbol of victory, and now we add the “stephanos” which to the Romans was a crown of victory.

“...he that sat thereon” – And now we come to the rider himself. I suspect most readers at this point believe the rider on the white horse to be Jesus Christ. A few even believe him to be *“a false Christ.”* There are others, though, who understand the rider to be an angel, even Michael, the Archangel.

But I cannot accept any of those views. Certainly, in order for the church to be victorious, I believe the head of the church must first be victorious, but still, I can't accept the rider on this horse as Jesus. Remember who is opening the seals: **“The Lamb standing as though it had been slain,”** the only being found worthy to open them. That Lamb was described to John as **“the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David...”** whom we all know is Jesus Christ. If Jesus is the one opening the seals, I don't see Him as the rider on this horse as well. In chapter 19 we will see another white horse and there we are specifically told the rider is Jesus. I prefer to believe this rider the one, on the white horse here in chapter 6, is a representation of **the church** itself. Many trials and much suffering will plague the members of the church, but the key is to remember that this vision both opens and closes with the symbol of victory! God WILL bring the church triumphantly through it all! Understanding that would have provided assurance and comfort to those early Christians regardless of the persecution they

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

were suffering. It should do the same for us. We may not at this point fully understand what purpose was served by the suffering and persecution of those early Christians (or what we may have to endure at some point), but we will a bit later in our reading. What we must constantly keep in the forefront of our minds is the assurance that victory only comes to those who endure!

From the symbolism found in verses 1 and 2 (the horses, the bow, and the crown), we should get the picture that, from its very outset, the church was and still is caught up in a “war”. Jesus is leading His kingdom throughout the battle, but His soldiers do NOT use physical or military strength to win the war. Don’t forget the bow given to the rider, without arrows. Instead, Christians use the gospel to arm ourselves for the battle. In Ephesians 6, Paul describes our armament: our loins are girded with truth; we wear the breastplate of righteousness; our shoes are shod with the preparation of the gospel; we carry the shield of faith; we wear the helmet of salvation, and we carry the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. And above everything else, we are assured of victory if we remain faithful and endure to the end! Therefore, I believe the rider of the white horse signifies the church and her victory over Satan and his horde.

The Opening of the Second Seal – chapter 6:3-4

Verse 3 shows us the opening of the second seal and, with that, the second living creature says “***Come.***” Immediately John sees a red horse appear, and “***power to take peace from the earth***” was given to the rider. It is generally agreed that the color “red” is the symbol of war and bloodshed. Jesus did tell His disciples that they would be persecuted (even put to death) for His sake. Sadly, for some Christians, that means members of their own family might be a part of that opposition. Jesus said in the gospel of Matthew 10:21: “***...and the brother shall deliver up the brother to death; and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death.***” A bit further down in that same chapter, Jesus said, “***For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, the daughter against her mother, and a daughter in law against her mother in law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross***

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.”

In those verses Jesus is NOT saying His purpose was to cause division in families, but He is telling us that the gospel could turn members of a household against each other because there will be some who readily accept the gospel, and others who violently reject it. I believe the proper view in regard to the rider of the red horse is this: a symbol of the persecution which, for some, can follow the preaching of the gospel and the conversion to Christianity. Certainly, we will see strong persecution from the Romans, but it goes much deeper than that. Let me back that up with some history:

The Jews instigated the crucifixion of Jesus to stop Him from “stirring up” the people with His preaching. After Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, the same group attempted to stop the preaching of the Apostles. When that didn’t work, they began to persecute both those preaching Christ and His followers. Soon after, the Roman governors got involved. In the middle of the first century, Nero became the Roman ruler (54 to 68 AD). At first he had no ill feelings toward Christians. Later on, during the last four years of his rule, he practically bathed Rome with the blood of those who professed Christ. The vast majority of the persecution from Nero was concentrated in that city, though, not throughout the entire empire. And, after his death, the next five rulers almost eliminated Christian persecution.

But in 81 AD Titus’ successor, Flavius Domitianus (more commonly called Domitian) took the throne and ruled for 15 years. During those 15 years the persecution against Christians reached its peak, and expanded to include the entire Roman Empire. Some historians say Domitian’s reign was steeped in the blood of Christians. Though the persecution began to ebb after his death, it would be 200 years before it finally came to an end. Even so, history has borne out that in some form or fashion, persecution has been the lot of the faithful Christian throughout the centuries. Now, since I said I believed the rider of the white horse symbolizes the church, it naturally follows that the rider of the red horse symbolizes the persecution of the church. The church had to come first... then the persecution.

The Opening of the Third Seal – Chapter 6:5-6

This time, after the third seal is opened, John sees a black horse, the rider carrying a pair of “balances” in his hand. The color black symbolizes grief, woe and mourning. Back in Isaiah’s day, when God stretched out His hand in rebuke of His people, Isaiah describes it as “blackness in the sky.” Isaiah 50:3 quotes God as saying, “*I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make*



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sackcloth (the symbol of mourning) their covering.” Later in Jeremiah 4:28, when the land lies in desolation, Jeremiah says “...*the earth mourns and the heavens are made black*”.

We can discern the cause of the grief and mourning in verse 6 because the rider of this horse is holding “*a pair of balances*” in his hand. Today we might call them “*a pair of scales*,” as shown in this image. We normally associate this image with “Justice,” but in this instance the scales do not refer to that. Because of what is said in verse 6, we should understand that the meaning is literal: an accurate “weighing device.”

You might ask, “What is the rider supposed to weigh?” and the answer would be “food.” Under normal circumstances back in those days, if a person were to go down to the Agora (open market area) to buy wheat or barley, it would be sold to them by “*measure*” which then meant “*the amount required to fill a certain sized container.*” For example, a person might ask for a “bushel of wheat or barley.” The seller would take out his “bushel” measure (container) and fill it up. Normally, a person would always receive slightly more than a bushel because the vendor, to ensure honesty, would purposely “heap up” the grain to overfill the measure, before pouring it into the buyer’s container. It was a fair system that suited them well.

But when famine struck, food was so scarce that it began to be sold by weight rather than volume. They even created a new standard (a certain weight) they called the “measure.” This new “measure” was the same for all grains. According to W. E. Vine, the “measure” equaled the amount of grain normally needed to feed one person of moderate appetite for one day. Balance

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

scales were used to insure exact measurements. The vendor would place a “measure” (that standard predetermined weight) on one side of the “balance,” then pour grain on the other side until the two sides equaled. (Some vendors may have still added a little more, but not as much as previously.)

The “penny” mentioned in verse 6 is thought to be a “shilling,” (usually called a “denarius” in the Gospels) and is generally understood to be a day's wages for a common laborer. Most commentators estimate the value of the “penny” to be worth somewhere between 17 and 20 cents. So how does that apply to what we just read? This way: Under ordinary circumstances (before a famine) a “shilling” might buy about 8 measures of wheat or 24 measures of barley. But during a famine, verse 6 states “a measure of wheat for a penny.” That is eight times the normal, ordinary price! The famine was extreme. No wonder the “earth mourns and the heavens have turned black”! But, *“the oil and the wine were not hurt.”* There seems to have been a restraint, or limit, placed on the rider in regard to the price of oil and wine. It could be that olive gardens and vineyards continued to produce as before the famine, which may suggest the lack of food was not so much drought related, as political. This may or may not have been referring to an actual specific famine, but remember the point of this scene: To show that there will be times of scarcity and periods of inequality in our lives.

The Opening of the Fourth Seal – Chapter 6, verses 7 & 8...

This time, when the Lamb opens the fourth seal, John sees a “pale” horse and we are specifically told the rider is Death, with Hades following behind. I suspect most of us imagine the color of the horse to be “light grey” or maybe a “pale yellow,” if we see a color for the horse at all. The Greek word used is *“chloros,”* and it means “green.” Some view it as being “livid” or a “greenish white.” Either way, it is defined as *“the color of one stricken with disease, or near death.”* Coincidentally, it is the same Greek word used later referring to the grass or vegetation that is near death. When that term is applied to man, though, it is generally connected to terror, disease, or being close to death. We don't have to wonder about the symbolism of the rider of the “pale horse” because it is given to us: he represents **Death**. The Greek word used is “Thanatos” (the second death) that we saw in Chapter 1, but Hades (which includes ordinary

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

death of any kind) is accompanying Thanatos, so together, ALL types of death are being spoken of.

In the book of Revelation, almost every time we see “Death” mentioned, Hades is right there alongside. Back in chapter 1 we discussed the best translation of “Hades” in its usual usage (especially in Revelation) as simply “the grave.” Remember, it is the equivalent of the Hebrew word “*Sheol*” which means “the grave,” and is the ordinary destination of most mortals who die. While some may be cremated or “buried at sea” etc., the vast majority are put into a grave. For that reason, it is indicative of our physical death. Because the rider of this horse is both Death and Hades, we are not only speaking of what we usually term as “death by natural causes,” but verse 8 appears to include unnatural causes as well: Execution, starvation, persecution, and beasts. And then, we must consider the “second death.”

First though, I want to call your attention to an interesting note in regard to this rider. At the opening of each of the first three seals, the Greek word used to indicate where the rider sat was “**epi**.” Epi is a preposition meaning “on, upon, or against,” and it is only natural for us to think of a rider as being on the horse. But when we see the fourth seal opened, and we are told that the rider is “Death, with Hades following,” the Greek word in the original manuscripts used to tell us the rider’s position is not “Epi!” Instead, the Greek word “*epano*” is used. The meaning of “*epano*” is “over” or “above.” The conclusion can only be that the rider of this pale horse is not “on” or “upon” the horse, but is “over” or “above” the horse! By the way, in the KJV it is still rendered “on” and I don’t know why. But the picture we should form in our minds is that of a rider suspended above or over the horse. Perhaps if the rider representing death and Hades actually sat on the horse, the animal would die... I don’t know, but I find this very interesting.

Looking a little closer at the rider over the pale horse, we read that he has been given “**authority over the fourth part of the earth:**” The generally accepted view is that the phrase means “*the fourth part of mankind,*” and a few commentators accept the term literally, meaning

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Seven

that one-fourth of the world's population would die when this horseman is sent out. When we consider the time frame is "until the end of the world," I have trouble understanding their meaning. Are they saying that literally one-fourth of the population is dying all the time? We know that can't be true because statistics do not bear that out and we are living in the affected time period! I prefer to believe this is not literal, but symbolic, in keeping with the nature of this apocalyptic book. Keep in mind that we are talking about death with this rider, and that there is a never-ending battle raging between the church and Satan. So when verse 8 tells us that the rider had the power ***"to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth,"*** – four different methods, all unnatural – we are talking about Christian deaths! Christians need to be aware that they are going to face periods in which an unnatural number of them will be sacrificed for what they believe. Does this mean physical death? It certainly could, but it could also mean rejection, loss of livelihood or other sorts of discomfort and suffering.

This concludes the discussion of the opening of the first four seals and the sending out of the four horsemen. We covered them rather quickly, but this discussion only accounts for the first eight verses of chapter 6. I look at what we have been shown so far as the "the low points" of the world's existence. One commentator sums up the results of the opening of the first four seals by saying the events we have seen, *"...typify various phases of the trials which are permitted by God to afflict Christians on earth in common with all mankind."* I think I understand that statement and mostly agree with it, but I view the afflictions God allowed as trials of our faith. I remember hearing someone say, *"A faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted."* The scriptures tell us that God "refines" us like silver or gold to strengthen our faith, and He does that by allowing us to be tested. God, of course, knows the extent of our faith, so when He allows us to be tested, His purpose is to allow us to see whether or not we "pass" the test or "measure up." We need to constantly try to strengthen our faith, never tiring of the effort. If Revelation teaches us only one thing, it is this: "We must NEVER give up! The consequences are far worse than we can imagine. But the reward for a strong faith is, in a word, Heaven!