

THE HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Revelation 6

Introduction:

The study of the book of Revelation is a fascinating one. It is also a challenging study. One of the important elements in any study of the Scriptures is taking into account the entire context of the Scriptures. Many times, when you run into a difficult passage of Scripture, you will find that other passages in the Bible will shed light on it and clarify the situation significantly.

With that in mind, before we begin our look at Revelation 6 this morning, I want to take you to the Old Testament, to Daniel chapter 9. The book of Daniel is filled with prophetic visions and descriptions. It is a wonderful complement to the book of Revelation. We've already mentioned Daniel 7:9-10, the description of the Ancient of Days, strikingly similar to the description of the one John saw on the throne in heaven. There is no doubt that it is the same person—the Lord God Almighty. We will certainly be referring to the book of Daniel occasionally as we go through the book of Revelation.

However, in Daniel 9 there is a passage that is critical to the understanding of the chronology or timeline of end-time events.

Daniel's 70 Weeks

Read Daniel 9:24-27. Something that is significant here is to realize that the book of Daniel, as part of the OT was translated into Greek prior to 270 BC, almost three centuries before Christ was born. So the accuracy of this prophecy cannot be explained by suggesting that it was actually written after the fact.

I want to briefly walk you through this prophecy to show you the precision with which the Messiah's coming was predicted. Key points:

- **Scope of the prophecy – Seventy weeks (sevens)** – readily understood in Jewish culture to refer to weeks of years. To the Jewish people a week of years was the seven year cycle they followed in

their fields. Every seventh year the land was to lie fallow—to rest, just as God rested the seventh day after the creation of the universe. Seventy weeks of years would be $70 \times 7 = 490$ years

- **Focus of the prophecy – Israel** – "...for (about) your people and your holy city." The focus of this prophecy was the Daniel's people, the Jews and their holy city, Jerusalem. The contents of this prophecy are about Israel, and have nothing to do with the church.
- **Purpose contained in this prophecy** – there is a six-fold purpose or plan revealed in this prophecy regarding the coming Messiah. He will come: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. A careful study of this passage shows that this is a dual prophecy. The first three were fulfilled in his first coming, the last three will be fulfilled at his second coming.
- **The Precision of the prophecy** – *Go through the sevens of years: 7 plus 62 equals 69 sevens which makes a total of 483 years.* When does the 483 years start? It is from the command to rebuild Jerusalem. There are several orders in history, but the best reference is the command of Artaxerxes when he gave letters to Nehemiah authorizing him to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city – see Neh. 2. This command was given in the month of Nisan, in the 20th year of Artaxerxes. Scholars tell us that this would coincide with March 14, 445 BC on our calendar.
Now, the Jews used a calendar of 12 months of 30 days or 360 days per year. Every few years they would add an extra month in order to keep the seasons right. So, 483 years x 360 would be 173,880 days. Without getting into all the details, men far smarter than me have calculated this out. Taking into account leap years and our 365 day years, 173,880 days from the command by Artaxerxes to restore Jerusalem brings you to April 6, 32 AD. Again according to those who have studied this, that is the precise day that Jesus rode the donkey into Jerusalem announcing to the Jews that He was the Messiah.
- **The Extent of the Prophecy** – This prophecy does not end there. It says, in v. 26 – *read it.* That is the crucifixion of the Messiah and the destruction of the city and the temple in Jerusalem which followed.

But that is still not the end of the prophecy. Verse 27 tells us about another week—another “seven.” This is the 70th time of seven years, which is required to complete the prophecy. After a gap—an undefined time period God will take up his dealings with His people once again for a period of seven years—the time we call the Great Tribulation.

But prior to that time, the church of Jesus Christ, the bride of Christ will be removed from the earth. Then the time of tribulation and the outpouring of God’s wrath on the earth will begin. That is the time period that we are seeing in Revelation 4-19. Let’s go back to the book of Revelation. Turn to Rev. 6 – *read it*.

The Seven Seals

One of the important aspects of this book of Revelation that we have to understand is that the book is not always chronological in its presentation. Events are grouped together in nature, not always by time. The six seals that are presented in this chapter actually cover the first half—three and a half years—of the tribulation period. In future chapters more information is given that fills in additional events in the same 3½ years.

But here we are given, in rapid succession, the first six seals, which tell us something about what life will be like on earth after the Rapture when church, with all the believers, is removed. David Levy points out that these seals and the events they reveal parallel very closely the events and conflicts Jesus predicted in Matthew 24 — false christs, war, famine, death, martyrdom, and earthquakes. They are called by Jesus, “the beginning of sorrows [birth pangs].”

We are going to go through these quickly and very briefly. The first four seals are revealed as horsemen.

1. A Rider on a White Horse – the scene begins with Jesus Christ opening the first seal and one of the four living creatures crying out, “Come,” as he calls out the four horsemen that appear in the next few verses. John watched as a rider appears on a white horse. *Read v. 2*. Who is this rider? David Levy says,

Most scholars believe the rider is either Christ or the Antichrist. But the rider cannot be Christ, according to other Scriptures. This rider is given a temporary victor’s “crown [stephanos]” (v. 2), whereas Christ is wearing “many crowns [diadems]” (19:12) as King at His Second Coming. Christ will carry a sword, not a bow. Christ will not initiate war but will end war at His coming. Lastly, Christ will appear at the end, not the beginning, of the Tribulation. This rider has the markings of a counterfeit (Antichrist) who arrives on the world stage at the beginning of the Tribulation. Carrying a bow (v. 2) without arrows suggests that he has already conquered (v. 2) by powerful means in the beginning of his rise to power. The Antichrist will be given a victor’s crown as world leader, but for only “forty and two months” (13:5).

2. A Rider on a Red Horse – when the second seal is opened, a red horse appears. *Read vv. 3-4*. The color red is symbolic of war and bloodshed. In Matthew 24 Jesus also predicted international conflict and internal civil wars. He says, “*And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom...*” (Matthew 24:6-7 ESV) Again, Levy points out that although war will be waged worldwide during the first half of the Tribulation, Israel will not be involved because of protection provided by the Antichrist.
3. A Rider on a Black Horse – when the third seal is opened, a black horse appears with its rider carrying “a pair of scales.” *Read vv. 5-6*. The scales represent famine, which usually follows war. The scales were used to weigh out the cost of food: “A quart of wheat for a denarius [a day’s wage], and three quarts of barley for a denarius.” The cost of food for one day will be a day’s wage. The rider was instructed to “hurt not the [olive] oil and the wine” (v. 6), suggesting that luxury items will not be touched. It would appear that the famine will affect the lower and middle classes, but the rich will continue to enjoy their luxurious lifestyle.
4. A Rider on a Pale Horse – the fourth seal. *Read vv. 7-8*. There will be an awful destruction of life in the first half of the Tribulation, when

this rider is given power to kill a fourth part of the earth with "sword [war], famine, death [pestilence, plague] and with the beasts of the earth" (v. 8). Levy - The mention of "Hades following with him" (v. 8) leaves no doubt that those who are slain will be un-saved people, who will be cast into hell until they stand before the Great White Throne Judgment (20:11-15). This is only the beginning of the Tribulation that is to come upon the earth.

At this point the direction changes somewhat. The fifth and sixth seals no longer introduce a rider on a horse. When the fifth seal is opened John sees and hears the cries of the Tribulation martyrs.

Read vv. 9 – These are believers who received the Lord during the first half of the Tribulation but were martyred for their confession and commitment to Christ (see 7:13-14). They are pictured "under the altar" in God's heavenly Temple without their resurrected bodies. It is not clear just what this altar is.

In v. 10 we hear them crying out. *Read it.* These martyred saints recognize that it is God who will punish the wicked but they want to know when. No answer is given but... *read v. 11.*

If I may again refer to Levy's book, he makes a good observation at this point. He says, this verse sheds light on the state of believers after death. Those in heaven are conscious, at rest, and aware of a future judgment upon their slayers. The white robes provided for these saints indicate that they will possess some type of intermediate bodies before they receive their resurrected bodies. There is a set number of believers appointed for martyrdom during the Tribulation. God has determined the time and manner of death for believers.

While all of these events indicate God's judgment on the earth, the sixth seal really begins to unleash the wrath of God against the wickedness of men. As the Lamb opens the sixth seal, heaven and earth will begin to convulse. Several results are listed:

- A great earthquake will be felt worldwide as volcanic eruptions cause a shift in the earth's crust. This is only the first of several earthquakes experienced throughout the Tribulation. It will be so

powerful that "...every mountain and island were moved out of their places" (v. 14).

- The sun became black as sackcloth (v. 12), producing a terrifying darkness worldwide.
- The cosmic disturbances taking place in heaven and on earth will cause the moon to appear red "like blood" (v. 12).
- Meteors will shower the earth like a fig tree dropping its fruit prematurely in a windstorm, when "the stars of heaven [fall] unto the earth" (v. 13).
- The heavens (sky) will be split and rolled up like a scroll in opposite directions. The word vanished or receded literally means to separate, to sever, to part asunder.

Before we wrap this up by looking at the last two verses, let me just say this: If you are wondering what happened to the seventh seal, you will find it in chapter 8. We will get to it in a while. Next time we will talk a bit about the structure of the book of Revelation.

Conclusion

But, back to the conclusion of this chapter. What a time of disaster and catastrophe that is going to be—earthquakes, cosmic disturbances in the heavens, the stars falling to the earth... It will be horrific. So much so that the people enduring it will be crying out for death. *Read vv. 15-16.*

Everyone, from the least to the greatest will become desperate to escape the terrible events. There will be a recognition that these terrible happenings are a judgment from God. The closing question is one to which there appears to be no answer. "...the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?" The obvious answer is that only God knows that. We will see something of his answer as we continue through this book.

But in closing, there are a couple of thoughts we need to consider:

1. Are we prepared so we do not have to go through these events?
2. Are we doing all we can to warn others so they can be prepared? For those who remain behind it will be a time of great trial.