Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 11
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Rev 6: The Scroll Seals

Revelation chapter 6, records the events that take place when the seals are released and opened from the scroll. Chapter 5 reads like this: “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 men slay 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 quarts of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts 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 number of their fellow servants and brothers who were killed, who were to be killed 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, and the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by strong wind. The sky receded 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 every 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 stand?’” One of the questions that most are interested in asking and trying to answer is twofold – number one: What are these seals, especially the ones associated with the four horses? Second, when do these occur? Are these things that have already taken place? Is John depicting a future series of seals or series of events that are going to take place? When do these take place? What exactly are these seals, especially the first four horses? One thing I think we need to start with is to realize that we need to be cautious in trying to identify exactly what these are and exactly then they took place or will take place because two thousand years later, we are reading something that we are foreigners looking back nearly two thousands to something that the first writers probably, the first writer and the first readers probably would have understood to a large degree. Now 2,000 years later, we look at this and try to make sense of it. So I think it requires a fair amount of caution, recognizing the difference in genre and historical distance that we face in trying to overcome.

But I want to suggest to you, right out front what I think chapter 6 of Revelation is doing. My thesis is that God’s judgment is being poured out on Rome’s idolatrous, godless, oppressive empire and its economy and any other nation or any other people that participates in Rome’s mistake. As we’ve seen, the series of seals leads up to the second coming of Christ. Seal number 6 brings us to the great day of God’s wrath at the end of history. Because of that, I would suggest therefore, that although Rome is the center of attention, and the author takes this situation and places it against the back-drop of the final judgment, of the Day of the Lord, of the great day of God’s wrath. Therefore any other people or any other nation that participated in and repeats Rome’s mistake at any point in history also it could be referred to, not that John was seeing different successive empires, but that he uses images that reach all the way to the second coming of Christ. So anyone as Richard Bauckham says, “Anyone for whom the prophetic cap fits must wear
it.” As we’ve already said, the first four seals go together, and the reason is we’ve said logically, we’re going to see all these events kind of relate to each other and result from one another. And second, they’re all united with the image of a horse that rides out upon the earth.

Horse Imagery in Zechariah

The background, one of the primary backgrounds for the horse imagery again is the Old Testament, if you go back to Zechariah chapter 6, and as we’ve seen John – I’m convinced John actually had a vision of these horses. But he interprets them clearly in light of other prophetic visions, his prophetic predecessors make clear and interpret and describe for his readers exactly what it was he saw. In Zechariah chapter 6, which also as a prophet also much like Ezekiel much of it is in the form of a vision. It is kind of a pre-cursor to later apocalyptic works, such as Daniel and Revelation, 1 Enoch that we read from a little bit earlier.

Here’s what Zechariah says, chapter 6 and I’ll read the first eight verses, “I looked up again, and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains –mountains of bronze. The first chariots had red horses, the second black [horses], the third a white, and the fourth dappled—all of them powerful. I asked the angel who was speaking to me, ‘What are these, my lord?’ The angel answered me, ‘These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord and the whole world. The one with the black horses going toward the north country, the one with the white horse going towards the west, the one with the dappled towards the south.’ When the powerful horses went out, they were straining to go throughout the entire earth. And he said, ‘Go throughout the earth!’ So that they went throughout the earth. Then he called to me, ‘Look, those going toward the north country have given my Spirit rest in the land of the north.’”

And the my point of reading that is simply to demonstrate although John appears to do something a little bit different from them, John draws his imagery and his description of his vision from texts, especially one like Zechariah chapter 6.

But I think John might also have another text in mind, and that is another place
where we find a more specific account of the types of plagues and things that John identifies the horses with. It is found in Jesus’s eschatological discourse in Matthew 24. At the very beginning of Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 24, he begins to recount things that must take place before the end. These are not signs just of tribulation that guarantees that we’re in the end, in fact Jesus says the opposite. It’s interesting, he says, “These things have to take place, but the end is not yet. So don’t be deceived when you see these things.” Usually the opposite of what we do today – we see earthquakes and wars and famines, and we’re convinced that this must be the end. But Jesus warned against that and said, “Don’t be deceived. These things must happen. Yes, they’re signs that the end is coming, but they have to happen and they are not to be confused with the end itself.”

So here are the signs that Jesus says will happen, and I think Jesus is suggesting these are the kinds of things that will characterize church history – the history of God’s people until the coming of Christ when he does come back to bring history to its consummation. So starting at verse 4 of chapter 24, “Watch out then, that no one deceives you; for many will come in my name claiming, ‘I am the Christ’ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, [keep that in mind – wars and rumors of wars]. But see to it that you are not alarmed, such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places, all these things are the beginning of the birth pangs. Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and be put to death. You will be hated by the nations because of me, at that time many will turn away, betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of many will grow cold.”

I’ll stop right there, but I want to draw your attention to some of the things that Jesus mentions that we just read about in the four horses, the seal plagues that are connected with the four horses. Note, Jesus’s emphasis on war and rumors of war and nation rising up against nation, kingdom against kingdom. Notice the mention of death and notice the mention of famine as well. All of those emerge in Revelation chapter 6 so that most likely along with texts like Zechariah 6, John is probably aware of Jesus’s own
eschatological discourse and the sorts of things that would happen, they would function as preludes to the coming of Christ, to the second coming or to the day of the Lord that would come in the future.

The Four Horses

Now, what I want to do is think about and look at each of the four horses especially and the other two seals as well and to ask the question about what these seals might signify and look at possible background information that might help us figure out exactly what’s going on. How are these judgments upon the world, in what way is the Lamb now pouring out its judgment on humanity. As I said, I am convinced that primarily chapter 6 is meant to be a judgment on Rome’s way of doing things. This is God’s judgment on an empire that is idolatrous, wicked and oppressive, violent, by demonstrating and by judging its economy, by judging its entire empire and the way it’s doing things.

Seal #1: White Horse

So starting with horse number one, or seal number one, and that is the white horse. Now the white horse is described as one who goes out and conquers and who is bent on conquering, who wears a crown and has a bow. Interestingly, there have been a couple of ways to understand this. Whether negatively or positively, some have actually taken this positively and said this first horse actually refers to the person of Jesus Christ who also wears a white robe and rides out on a horse and conquers in Revelation chapter 19 and verses 11 and following. Some are convinced that this is a picture of Jesus Christ who comes out and conquers. And there have been other positive suggestions as to how we understand this. Some have suggested this is a picture of the triumph of the gospel, or something like that.

However, what is intriguing is the other three horses as we’ll see and as you picked up on when you read it, seem clearly to be negative, and seem clearly to be images of judgment. So there’s a good reason then, to take this first horse also as an image of judgment, especially if we’re to correlate this with Zechariah 6 and also with Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 24. I think there’s good reason to take this not as a positive
image of Christ or the gospel conquering, but instead taking it as an image of judgment.

I see what that might be a second view and another common view is that some take this as a reference to a future Antichrist; that is this person riding out on the horse, this rider and the horse is an actual person – it would be the end-time Antichrist. In those approaches of Revelation that see chapter 4-22 as solely future, they often see this as the end-time Antichrist. After the church has been removed, now the Antichrist emerges on the scene to cause problems, so some would see this as a solely future event and person. I’m going to argue that though in just a moment, and try to demonstrate that probably we should not limit this to just a future person or event.

Which brings me to a third approach – I think that is a preferred view that this rider, is simply a symbol of conquest and military power. It would correspond to Jesus’s statement, “You will hear of war and rumors of war, nation will rise up against nation, kingdom against kingdom.” And so here we find a symbol of military power and conquest in the context of warfare, and in my opinion, this image fits Rome perfectly. That is, Rome established its peace through military conquest and military power. In fact, perhaps the way to connect this was through chapter 19 with Jesus Christ coming out on a horse and wearing a robe, and coming out on a white horse, is to see this is a parody of Christ. And again, this is to be seen as a poor reflection of the conquest and the perversion of the conquest and the victory that Jesus Christ himself will eventually win. But this probably reflects the military expansion and the conquest and the violent fighting that characterized the Roman Empire. Perhaps it also reflects the fact that Rome tries to conquer the saints. Later on in chapter 12, especially chapter 13 for example, we see that Rome comes to defeat and it comes out and does war with, it does battle with the saints. So horse number one probably refers to Rome, as a mighty military and refers to it as bent on conquest. It achieves peace at the expense of fighting and conquest. It conquers through warfare, it expands its boundaries only through its military might. In a sense, this might be a critique of the Roman myth of Pax Romana, that Rome provides peace. Rome actually brings peace at a price. I think this will be true of the second horse as well, Rome brings peace at a price – that is through violence and through warfare, which brings us
then to horse number 2.

Seal #2: Red Horse

Horse number one then symbolizes the fact that Rome is bent on conquering and conquest and warfare, and that’s how it establishes peace. Horse number 2 then, seal number 2 is a red horse which indicates and symbolizes bloodshed and slaughter. Notice the rider on this horse is also given a sword. Again the picture here, in my opinion is that John is dismantling a view of Rome, that holds the myth of Pax Romana—that Rome benefits all its people, that Rome is here to establish peace. Rome has brought blessing and prosperity and peace to the entire empire. But again, John reminds us it has done so with at a price. Rome’s promise of peace comes at a price and that is warfare, bloodshed and violence. The sword here again may contrast with the sword that comes out of the mouth of Christ. Yes, Rome does violence and conquers and accomplishes victory, but Christ ultimately with his sword will do so, we see that image in chapter one. You see that again in chapter 19. So the sword is probably meant to contrast with that. The sword but does so with violence and bloodshed, it conquers and establishes peace at a cost. So Rome is portrayed here as a violent and bloodthirsty empire.

This becomes clear when you begin to study the history of Rome. You find that it is one of conflict, both externally and internally. Yes, Rome again conquers nations by bloodshed, and it would subdue nations. It brought peace to the empire, it expanded its empire through violence and bloodshed. But even internally, Roman emperors would slaughter each other or others who they saw was a threat to the throne.

The vying for control and the vying for the throne resulted in an interesting series of acts of bloodshed and acts of violence. For example, even right at the beginning in 44BC – Julius Caesar is assassinated. After that follows an interesting series of events of rivalry in an attempt to succeed him. We find story after story of rivals being executed. In AD 68 and 69, there were actually a series of 3 emperors during that very short period of time who came to power but were soon killed. So Roman history is one of bloodshed and slaughter to gain power and to control the world and to spread its rule.

So already we see then, in contrast to the way Christ conquers back in chapter 5 –
as a slain slaughtered Lamb through a suffering sacrifice by contrast, Rome conquers through its military might through violence and through bloodshed and through unending strife and conflict.

Seal #3: Black Horse

Horse number 3 then, equivalent to seal number 3 is described as a black horse. The rider on this horse comes carrying a scale. Immediately a first century reader would read this and recognize a scale symbolized imbalance, especially in commerce. You can go back to a couple of the Proverbs in the Old Testament and elsewhere to understand this language of an unjust scale. Justice was perverted when the scale was not balanced appropriately in situations of commerce and trade, and so by carrying a scale, this this suggests and symbolizes that this seal and this horse is going to have something to do with an imbalance in commerce, or in my opinion – an imbalance and a perversion of justice in the Roman economy and Roman system of commerce. This horse then, clearly suggests suffering and famine.

As a result of that, one can see the progression from war and desire to conquer and desire to spread ones rule through military might and bloodshed and internal conflict. The result often of such a situation would be famine and suffering for many of the people involved, and so there’s a sort of progression here.

Voice Announcing Famine

The interesting feature about this seal is the statement that comes from an anonymous voice in verse 6 where a voice among the four living creatures – it’s not clear if this is one of the four living creatures, more likely an anonymous voice among them. Is it God himself speaking? Is it the Lamb? It’s not red letters in my Bible, so it can’t be the Lamb, it can’t be Jesus. No, we simply don’t know who this voice exactly is and we find a number of anonymous voices in Revelation where it’s not clear, is this God or the Lamb or some angelic being? But what is important is what this voice says, “A quart of wheat for a days wages, and three quarts of barley for a days wages, and do not harm or do not damage the oil and the wine.” Now what is going on here is simply this – what is portrayed here does seem to be a famine, a situation of famine where wheat costs an
entire day’s wage. That is enough wheat, just a daily amount of wheat; in other words, when it says in verse 6, “A quart of wheat” in the NIV translation translates it “a quart of wheat” – A quart of wheat would have been enough to feed one person. Now the author says, “A quart of wheat for a day’s wages.” In other words, some of your translations might say a denarius. It was well-known that a denarius was roughly a day’s wage. But to feed one person with wheat, wheat would have been a necessary staple – that was a common and desirable to eat, to sustain someone for only one person, let alone an entire family; for one person, the daily ration of wheat would cost an entire day’s wage. Then he says after that, “Three quarts of barley for a day’s wage”. Three quarts of barley was about enough to feed a family, but it also cost an entire day’s wage. Furthermore, barley was not as desirable as wheat, it was not as beneficial and perhaps nutritious as wheat. So three quarts of a less important grain, which would be barley – enough roughly to feed a small family, would also be a day’s wage.

So you have this situation where wheat and barley are scarce, and again the image may be as a result of warfare et cetera. You now have a situation of famine, and now because of the famine, the staples – the most important staple, wheat, enough to feed one person, costs an entire day’s wage. So there’s not enough left for your family. And three quarts of barley which is less desirable, but still a staple of sustenance – enough to feed a small family was still an entire day’s wage. So these are exorbitant prices for these staples. This is not food for the wealthy, this was just common food that would sustain someone for a day is scarce and the price is exorbitant because of inflation.

But there’s also another interesting part of this the wheat and barley were not for the rich just food of the rich, it was a common staple for rich and poor alike. But in this case, only the rich could afford enough to feed their family. So you begin to see that the situation is an economy that is out of balance, it’s perverted, and it’s oppressive.

But there’s something else that’s interesting, the voice also ends by saying, “And do not damage the oil and the wine”. Now what is going on here? To feed a growing population; as Rome begins to grow and expand the city itself, it required importing grain, such as wheat and barley and corn and things like that – so for Rome to sustain its
ever burgeoning city and empire, required importing grain. But often this took place at the expense of the rest of the empire, at the expense of some of the provinces, where they would often exploit the provinces, they would import grain from the provinces to feed an ever-growing population in Rome. This meant the provinces are then going to have less.

On top of that, where does the oil and wine come in? When the author says, “Don’t touch the oil and the wine,” the oil and the wine, although some suggest this would be food for the rich; oil and wine probably were not limited to the rich. Again, this was just a staple, and would have been there for common consumption – olive oil and wine. But the point is that oil and wine are not staples like wheat and barley. So what you have again is something out of balance, while the staples and necessities of life – wheat and barley are scarce and exorbitantly priced, so only the rich could afford it, and put most people in a situation of famine. Ironically, the very things that are not necessary – oil and wine, are now in abundance.

Reflected in this language, “Do not damage the oil and the wine,” and what might lie behind that is this: What often happen is, because trading and exporting oil and wine to Rome was more lucrative, many wealthy land owners, instead of growing wheat and corn and staples and things like that, would grow vineyards and olive trees for oil because those were more beneficial for trade. So again you have this economy out of whack or upside-down, especially in the provinces where the necessities of life, the staples of life like wheat and even lesser things like barley were scarce, and so exorbitantly priced most people couldn’t afford them, while things that were not staples such as oil and wine, things that were not necessary for life are now in abundance. Perhaps again because wealthy land owners would find it more lucrative to grow those things and to export them for their own commerce, so you have an economy or a commerce that is sort of upside-down. Now you have wealthy land owners benefitting from wine and oil and all the staples are scarce and can’t be afforded by many, only the wealthy could possibly afford them, although John doesn’t emphasize that.

So you have things upside-down, Rome’s economy is exploitative of the provinces around it, and in my opinion then, what John is doing is attacking Rome’s economy, to
demonstrate what happens when you have an oppressive, godless, idolatrous, violent empire that is bent on conquest, bent on establishing its own rule. Then what happens is not only violence and bloodshed, but famine results in an economy that is perverted and is upside-down and is all out of whack and all out of balance. In other words, the city of Rome survived at the expense of other nations and at the expense of the rest of the empire. In fact, we do know that there were numerous famines that took place in Rome. I doubt that John is referring to one specific famine. There’s some who have even suggested that this language, “Do not damage the oil and the wine,” some have suggested that this may have reflected an edict from Domitian, that all the vineyards be cut down because of shortage in grain. That is, vineyards that would have been used for growing things for wine were to be cut down and instead replaced by growing corn and other grain because of the shortage. The empire rebelled against that, and again because wealthy land owners would want to grow those things that would be most lucrative and beneficial, such as things for oil and wine. I’m not certain at all that that is reflected here. I’m not quite convinced that this reflects the verdict, or I’m sorry the edict of Domitian. Instead, I think again that it’s just the voice is a way of demonstrating and pointing out the inequity and imbalance of the Roman economy as part of God’s judgment on the Roman empire due to their violence and their arrogance, their godlessness or idolatry, and their being bent on conquest and conquering. Now this is part of the judgment on the nation through an economy that is upside-down. In fact it appears, if you read it carefully, Domitian’s edict is just the opposite of what the voice here is saying in chapter 6 and the third seal.

So the first seal judgment was on Rome’s desire for conquest and spreading its kingdom perhaps an attack on Pax Romana. Seal number 2 as a result of its desire for conquest means that it accomplished peace at a price, that is bloodshed and violence, both externally and perhaps internally. Then finally the result of that was often famine and an economy that was upside-down, and an economy that was out of balance and lack equity and was oppressive and unjust.

Seal #4: The Pale Horse

Finally, horse number 4 or seal number 4, which is a pale horse, and as you
hopefully can see the colors in a sense are representative of what happens as each of the horses ride out. Horse number 4 then is a pale horse that is the climax of the first 3, and again the pale horse when he comes out is described as death, the rider is named Death, and Hades follows close behind. They were given power over fourth of the earth to kill by sword, which sort of summarizes the first two seals, and then famine and plague and wild beasts which would then summarize seal number 3, especially famine. The injustice and plagues the unjust economy and the famine were results from warfare. So seal number 4, horse number 4 sort of stands at the climax and summary of the first four. So seal number 4 signifies death and Hades being the place of the death, the place of death. This is a term that will crop up later on in Revelation again resulting from warfare, resulting from conquering, resulting from bloodshed and famine in an upside-down economy. The death on many of the earth, and especially within the Roman empire is the result.

**Summary of Seals 1-4**

So putting all these together, in my opinion the first four seals are exposing Rome’s military expansion, its economic practices, its claim to provide peace and benefits and prosperity for the entire empire. These seals then, as God’s judgment, and as the Lamb’s judgment, on Rome reminds us then that Rome’s promise of peace and prosperity comes at a price – it comes at the price of unsettlement and conflict and constant strife. It comes at the cost of bloodshed and violence and death, it comes at the cost of famine and an economy that is out of balance and upside-down. Then the result of that is death of those within the Roman Empire. So you have a picture of an empire that is being turned upside-down. In true apocalyptic fashion, John is exposing Rome for what it really is. It is really a bloodthirsty, violent, oppressive empire that exploits others within its empire and exploits other nations. Its promise of the peace and the prosperity is really a mirage, because in the midst of that is famine and there’s death and there’s bloodshed in order to maintain its empire and to try to maintain its rule over all things. So you find an empire that is full of conflict and warfare and bloodshed and strife and violence and economic disparity and collapse. These are seen as judgments of God upon
Rome. I want to talk about that in just a moment. But again it’s important to see, I think one of the things John’s doing is attacking Rome’s own clients of Pax Romana bringing peace and security.

So back to chapters 2 and 3, how does this relate back to chapters 2 and 3? For those churches that want to compromise with the Roman Empire, for those churches that are dependent on Rome for their wealth and prosperity, for those who think it’s okay to participate in Rome’s commerce and Rome’s religion, and to buy into Rome’s promises of peace and prosperity, chapter 6 then demonstrates that actually if you want to do so, you must also participate in Rome’s judgments in chapter 6. It reminds us that Rome does not deliver what it promises. For the faithful, it’s a reminder that God is already judging the wicked Roman empire, God is already in the process of establishing his own kingdom, by beginning to undo the kingdom of Rome and the empire of Rome. So, therefore, resist and do not compromise, instead maintain your faithful witness in Jesus Christ because Rome is already under God’s judgment.

Three Further Issues

Now, three further issues to talk about before we move onto the last two seals: first of all, one might ask, How are these God’s act of judgments? And I would suggest that they are. Notice how many times with each of the four seals, it begins with the horse being called to “come” by one of the four living creatures and begins in chapter 6, verse 1, “I watched as the Lamb opened the six seals.” So these judgments cannot take place until the Lamb opens the seals and until the horses are summoned to “come” by the four living creatures. The notice in a couple places, we find the passive form of a verb for example, in verse 4, “to him was given.” A couple times we find the passive form “was given” suggesting that these things can only happen by permission, so you have this picture where the Lamb, and this would also include chapter 4 and 5 from which all these judgment scenes in chapter 6 and beyond in subsequent chapters issue from and come from the throne. So what you have here is a scene where the Lamb and where God are sovereign over these events. The question is, “How are these judgments?” The fact that they go out and conquer and there’s internal conflict and fighting and warfare and
dissention, where there’s bloodshed and violence to sustain and maintain the rule and the empire, and even internally for the emperor to remain on the throne where there is famine, where there is an economy that is actually out of balance and out of whack that results in famine and death of many people, how is that God’s judgment on the Roman empire? Don’t those sound more like natural consequences that happen with the empire doing this. First of all, I would say in a sense these do look like natural consequences that occur, but at the same time Revelation 6 makes it clear this is still God’s active judgment on Rome.

This is not just God simply turning his back and then Rome kind of does its thing and all these bad kind of consequences happen. Instead I think, we should see this as perhaps in light of the way we should read Romans chapter 1, where Romans chapter 1 verse 18 begins by God indicting humanity, especially Gentiles for their refusal to acknowledge God and for their refusal to give God glory. Instead, what they do is they rather worship the creation, rather worship idols than worship God. And verse 18 begins in Romans chapter 1 by saying, “The wrath of God is already being poured out,” the active wrath of God, God’s judgment on sin and sinful humanity is already being poured out. But when you read the rest of Romans you find this interesting phrase, that God hands them over, three times it says, “Then God handed them over to their sins,” and “God handed them over to their sins,” and “God handed them over to their sins.” So what we find going on here is something similar: God’s judgment on Rome is by handing them over to their sin, by handing them over to their desire to conquer, to the fact that they’re bent on warfare, to their violence, to their economic practices, God now will hand them over to that and they will indeed reap the consequences of their evil godless idolatrous practices, but that is part of God’s judgment on the Roman empire. That is God’s judgment on any other nation or empire that absolutetizes its power and sets itself up as God, that rules and spreads its rule and maintains its kingdom through violence and warfare and bloodshed, this then is God’s judgment by handing them over to those sins, and the disastrous effects of those sins.

A second issue is: Are not Christians also affected by this? I mean if anyone living
in the Roman Empire, even Christians could not help but be affected by warfare and bloodshed. If you’re a Christian living in Rome or any of the Roman provinces of the seven cities from chapters 2 and 3, “You could not help but be affected by famine and plague” and some of the things listed here. So, are not Christians affected as well? How can these be God’s judgment if Christians are also affected? A suggestion by Greg Beale again in his commentary I think is helpful, he suggests that yes, Christians would have been subject to these things, but for them these were not judgments but serve to be refine them, serve to test them and produce endurance and faithfulness. Only for unbelievers would these result in judgment. In fact we already saw in chapters 2 and 3, some of the churches were already suffering because of what Rome was doing, and because of what was going on in the empire. So Christians would not necessarily be physically protected from these things, but for them it would not function as a judgment, but function as a means of strengthening and refining and bringing about perseverance and faithfulness in the people of God and endurance in God’s people.

Finally, number three, the same is true with the seals as I think is the case of the trumpets and the bowls later on is: what is going on? One of the themes that is taking place here is in the context of God’s judgment on Rome and on wicked humanity, and again in the other empire that chooses to follow Rome’s footsteps is God is now seen as judging and dismantling this present creation in sort of a de-creative act in preparation for a new creation that will emerge in chapters 21 and 22. So by judging Rome and its empire and its economy, God is in a sense judging and dismantling or de-creating this present world in order to bring about the emergence of a new creation in Revelation chapter 21 and 22.

Seal #5

Now, that brings us to seal number 5. Seal number 5 is of a very different character in the first four seals, which were four plagues that revolved around four horses. Seal number 5 is not a plague necessarily, there’s a message of judgment inherent in seal number 5, but seal number 5 itself is not a record of a judgment or an event in the same manner as the first four seals which were identified as the four horses. Instead, in seal
number 5 in chapter 6: 9-11, I think we might find the description of what happens to those faithful followers of Jesus Christ that are affected by the first four seals – that is those who primarily are slaughtered or put to death by the Roman empire. In John it might be a people like Antipas and others that were put to death at the hands of the officials in the provinces of Rome. But what happens to those affected faithful followers of Jesus Christ who are affected by the first four seals, those who have been put to death because of their faithful witness for the person of Jesus Christ.

Now the scene shifts again from earth back to heaven, with seal number 5, again and answering the question, What about God’s people in the context of these judgments in chapter 6? What this seal does is raise an important issue for the rest of the book of Revelation, that is the vindication of God’s people. God’s people who suffer at the hands of Rome for their faithful witness are now in chapter 6, the fifth seal anticipates an important theme, that is, their vindication. Their suffering, and even to the point of death, their faithful witness that led to their suffering and even to death must be shown not to be in vain. God will vindicate his faithful people who suffered and even died for their faith.

Notice in this seal, in seal number 5, again the temple imagery. It begins by the souls of those who have been put to death because of their faith, now under the altar in the seal the altar also is probably the same altar that will pop up again in chapter 8:3-5. The fact that the souls are under the altar, the altar probably reflects the altar of burnt offering in the temple. It may also be a combination of the altar of incense and the altar of burnt offering, but the fact that the souls are found under the heavenly altar, heaven is being portrayed as a temple. This is God’s dwelling place and you find the heavenly counterpart in the form of the altar to the physical temple and the physical features of the temple. But the fact that the souls are under the altar probably suggest their protection and what they do, those who have been put to death, the souls of those who have been put to death, the souls here probably suggesting the life that continues even after physical death.

So, these are the souls of those who have been put to death because of their witness for Christ, those who have been slaughtered. Notice the language here, it says in
seal number 5, “Those who are under the altar have been slain.” That is the same word used as the Lamb who was slain or slaughtered back in chapter 5. They have been slain for the same reason Jesus was, because of the word of God and because of their faithful witness or their testimony. These are terms that we were introduced to all the way back in chapter 1. Now because of their faithful testimony, they have suffered the same fate as Jesus Christ. Now their souls are protected in heaven under the altar. What they do then is they cry out for their enemies to be punished and for their blood to be avenged.

Now, a couple things about this: number one, the fact that they around found in association with the altar probably also views their death as a sacrifice, the language of their blood in association with the altar probably portrays their deaths in sacrificial terms, as a sacrifice.

The other thing to say about this before we look at the cry that they make and God’s response to it is: this is where we begin to see the language of those who have been put to death because of their faithful witness; whereas we’ve only seen so far that John is aware of one person named Antipas who has given his life, who has died because of his faithful witness. But an image like this probably suggests that there is a lot more to come, this is where we often get the idea that the Revelation is primarily meant to be an encouragement to those who are suffering persecution for their faith, and that is indeed true. But we’ve seen, at least at this point, there is no empire-wide persecution, there is no officially sanctioned persecution by the empire going out and dragging Christians out into the streets and into the amphitheaters and putting them to death. That came later in the second, third, beginning of the fourth century. At this point I think John is aware that the clash between the Roman empire and the church is only going to get worse and there will be many, many more who in fact, because of their faithful witness, it will result in their death and experiencing the same fate as their master Jesus Christ.

Now their cry for vengeance then in verse 10 needs to be understood more accurately I think in light of Old Testament imagery, this cry when the saints say, “How long, O Lord before you judge the inhabitants of the earth.” “Inhabitants” is an important term, those who dwell in the earth, that occurs throughout Revelation in negative terms as
those who side with the beast, those who are under the authority in the kingdom of Satan, those who persecute and who resist and oppose God’s people. “How long before you judge them and avenge our blood?” I think it’s important to see that this is not so much a cry for personal revenge on one’s enemies as much as this is a cry in Old Testament terms again for their blood to be vindicated, for their death to be shown and not in vain. In other words, they have suffered death. Rome and the world’s evaluation of Christians has been: they’re worthless and we can put them to death, they’re witness was in vain, they sacrificed their lives for nothing, they died needlessly and senselessly for nothing, they died for what is a lie.

So what needs to take place is they need to be vindicated, they need to show that their suffering and death was not in vain, they need to be vindicated or awarded which actually will happen then in chapter 20 and following. They have suffered at the hands of the evil empire and that means justice in terms of judgment on those who have put to death and killed God’s people and oppose God and his kingdom, but also vindication and reward showing that their death and their suffering and death because of their faithful witness was not in vain. In fact, one finds a similar cry in Psalm chapter 79 for vengeance, or “How long, O Lord, until you act on our behalf.” Hosea chapter 1 and verse 4, God promises to avenge the blood of his people, so again John is picking up Old Testament language where God promises that his people’s suffering will not be in vain, he will judge those who have put them to death and He will reward them and vindicate them showing that their suffering was not in vain.