

The Church of the Servant King

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PROPHECY SERIES

(Proph21E_Revelation_chp6_Six Seals of the Scroll)

In Matthew 24:4ff, Jesus answers a question from His disciples expressed in Matthew 24:3 – “Tell us, when will these things be [the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem – 24:2], and what will be the **sign** of Your coming, and of the **end of the age**?” Note Jesus’ response as recorded in verses 4 and following.

And Jesus answered and said to them, “**See to it that no one misleads you. 5 “for many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many 6 “And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars, see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. 7 “For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. 8 “But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. 9 “Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of my name. 10 “And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. 11 “And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. 12 “And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold. 13 “But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved. 14 “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.”** (Matt 24:4-14)¹

There is a close correlation between Jesus’ description of the end of the age (i.e. the Tribulation period) in this passage and John’s vision of the seals of the Scroll in Revelation 6. The six seals described in Revelation 6 provide a preliminary summary of the pressures that will be released upon the earth during the Tribulation period as permitted and even caused by a sovereign God. (The seventh seal is the subject of Revelation 8:1-6).

Some interpret the vision of the “seal judgments” to represent a chronological sequence of the outpouring of God’s “wrath” upon the earth and its inhabitants. Part of the basis for this position is the correlation of this passage with Matthew 24:4ff – especially Matthew 24:8 where we find the phrase – “all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.” Thus, they see the opening of the seals to correspond to the earlier portion of the Tribulation period and prior to the outpouring of God’s judgment contained in the scroll. I understand the description of the “seal openings” (vs. judgments) a bit differently.

First, notice I use the description – “seal openings.” In chapter 6, John only uses the word “judgment” in association with the opening of the sixth seal. The reason is that the sixth seal describes circumstances that are immediate preludes to the 2nd Coming of Christ. The 2nd Coming of Jesus as the Messiah will include a judgment – a separation of the goats (unbelievers) from the sheep (believers). (See Matthew 25:31-34). Rather than judgments of the earth and its inhabitants, the seals represent the various pressures that are allowed to arise during the Tribulation period in order to focus people’s attention on their need for the Deliverer. As Jesus indicates in Matthew 24:11 – “many false prophets will arise” – and in other passages, the desire for a deliverer will be the catalyst for unbelievers to accept the promises of a man, not the Lord.

Second, I believe these “seal openings” are descriptions of the pressures that will be allowed and/or caused by a sovereign God throughout the Tribulation period – perhaps with varying degrees of intensity at any one point during that period. As such, they are not necessarily presented in a chronological order that corresponds to their number, i.e. one through six (and

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Ryrie Study Bible, New American Standard Version* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Bible Institute, 1976, 1978).

even seven) in that order. Rather, they present a summary of the pressures that will exist during the Tribulation period, especially the last three and one-half years. (Note especially the correlation between Jesus' description in Matthew 24:7 and the first four seal openings. This is followed by Jesus' statement in Matthew 24:8 that "all of these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs," thus further associating the seal openings with the Tribulation and 2nd Advent).²

The First Seal – "The False Christ" (Rev 6:1-2)

1 And 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." 2 And I looked, and behold, a white horse and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him and he went out conquering and to conquer.

The "white horse" is the symbol of a commander or military leader. Throughout Scripture, horses are especially associated with war (Job 39:19, 25; Prov 21:31; Psa 76:6; Zech 9:10; 10:3; Jer 6:23; Isa 43:17).

In Jesus' response to the disciples' question in Matthew 24, Jesus mentions that false messiahs will arise during the Tribulation period claiming to be the Christ (Matt 24:5). The rider of the white horse in Revelation 6:2 is an imitation of the true Messiah who is later described as arriving on a white horse (Rev 19:11). The false Christ of the Tribulation at first rises to prominence virtually unnoticed by the people of the earth. His beginning is peace, but his aim is universal dominion which he eventually acquires. In the book of Daniel, the false Christ of the Tribulation is described in a manner that closely parallels John's vision.

38 But instead he will honor a god of fortresses, a god whom his fathers did not know; he will honor him with gold, silver, costly stones, and treasures. 39 And he will take action against the strongest of fortresses with the help of a foreign god; he will give great honor to those who acknowledge him, and he will cause them to rule over the many and will parcel out land for a price. (Dan 8:38-39).

He, the Anti-christ is the "prince that shall come" of Daniel 9:26 who will be the leader of the Revived Roman Empire. He is the counterfeit of all that Christ is or claims to be. He is the same individual that is described as the beast out of the sea in Revelation 13.

It is Satan that gives the Anti-christ his power to accomplish these things (Rev 13:2 cf. 2 Thess 2:8-10).

And he stood on the sand of the seashore, and I saw a beast coming up out of the sea having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns were ten diadems, and on his heads were blasphemous names. 2 And the beast which I saw was like a leopard and his feet were like those of a bear and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. And the dragon gave him his power and his throne and great authority. 3 And I saw one of his heads as if it had been slain, and his fatal wound was healed. And the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast. (Rev 13:1-3)

² The trumpets and the vials (or bowls) that we shall examine in Revelation 8-9; 11:15-19; and 15:1-16:21 seem to be continuous once they begin. The last two trumpets and the first vial or bowl are linked together and described as the "three woes." Thus, they seem to have a chronology associated with them. After the last trumpet, there is no break or silence in heaven as there is with the seal openings. When the last trumpet sounds, the seven vials or bowls are poured out concluding with the final destruction of Babylon which closes the visions of all of the pressures that are poured out on the earth.

And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming. 9 that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, 10 and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. (2 Thess 2:8-10)

Recall that Satan once tempted Jesus with an offer of all of the kingdoms of this world (Lu 4:5-6). Here in Revelation 6:1-2, we find John alluding to the one to whom Satan will give these kingdoms of the world.

The Second Seal – “Wars” (Rev 6:3-4)

And when He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, “Come.” 4 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 men should slay one another; and a great sword was given to him.

The red horse symbolizes bloodshed due to military conflict. There is a close association of the second seal opening and Matthew 24:6-7 – “wars and rumors of war” and “nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom.” These phrases allude to the dissolution of nations as they are absorbed into the kingdom of the Anti-christ and the other power blocs that will emerge during the Tribulation period, i.e. the “kings of the East” (Rev 16:12), the “king of the North” (Ezek 39:2; Dan 11:40-41a; Joel 2:20), and the “king of the South” (Dan 11:40).

And I shall turn you [Gog – 39:1] around, drive you on, take you up from the remotest parts of the north, and bring you against the mountains of Israel. (Ezek 39:2)

And at the end time the **king of the South** will collide with him, and the **king of the North** will storm against him with chariots, with horsemen, and with many ships; and he will enter countries, overflow them, and pass through. He will also enter the Beautiful Land, and many countries will fall. (Dan 11:40-41a)

But I will remove the **northern army** far from you, and I will drive it into a parched and desolate land, and its vanguard into the eastern sea, and its rear guard into the western sea, and its stench will arise and its foul smell will come up, for it has done great things. (Joel 2:20)

Since the red horse is symbolic of warfare during the Tribulation, it also embraces the warfare that will accompany the campaign of Armageddon which leads to and culminates with the return of Christ. (We shall study this campaign in future sessions).

The Third Seal – “Famine” (Rev 6:5-6)

And when He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, “Come.” And I looked, and behold, a black horse; and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. 6 And I heard as it were 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 harm the oil and the wine.”

It is not very difficult to recognize that the black horse and the circumstances surrounding its arrival to represent food shortages. The color black in Scripture is used to denote famine and food shortage (e.g. Lam 5:10). The denarius represented about a day’s wage. A quart of wheat would equate to about one person’s requirement; however, if there are other mouths to feed in the family, a person will be able to buy three times as much barley. Prices such as these are

characteristic of very high inflationary economic conditions – conditions that almost always result in government intervention to address. The Anti-christ will no doubt use these conditions to justify the imposition of strict control over the economy.

The phrase “do not harm the oil and the wine” indicates that after all a person’s wages are used to buy the flour or barley, there is nothing left over to buy the other essential ingredients. (In John’s day, oil and wine were considered staples to any kitchen). Some interpret the oil and the wine to represent luxuries versus part of food staples. Either way, the indication is that the masses will be barely subsisting with maximum effort during the period of the Tribulation.

The Fourth Seal – “Pestilence and Death” (Rev 6:7-8)

And when he broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, “Come.” 8 And I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him. And authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.

The death that results from the general military conflicts and the famine associated with the previously mentioned “seal openings” will account for a quarter of the earth’s population. This doesn’t happen in one day or over an abbreviated period of time; rather, these deaths probably occur over a period of time that spans much of the seven-year Tribulation.

Evidently, “wild beasts” will also be prevalent and consume the wounded and the dying and seize upon those who are left homeless or without adequate shelter. Even today, we find accounts of population centers whose boundaries have merged and overlapped with areas that are the habitat of the animal kingdom with the result that people have been subject to attacks by bears, mountain-lions, and other animals. Evidently, this will be very prevalent during the Tribulation period when circumstances such as described in the seal openings render people more vulnerable. The sword, famine and pestilence are frequently found together in Scripture (e.g. Jer 14:12; 21:7; 24:10; 44:13; Ezek 5:17; 6:11, 12) and they are sometimes joined together with wild beasts (e.g. Ezek 14:21).

The Fifth Seal – “Martyrdom” (Rev 6:9-11)

And when He broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; 10 and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” 11 And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also.

This is obviously a reference to the believers of the Tribulation era (Jew and Gentile) who are killed (murdered) and thus become martyrs on behalf of their faith. The word “souls” here does not mean that John saw the invisible part of man for how can the soul be seen and clothed with a white robe. Rather, this is a figure of speech known as a *synecdoche* in which a part of something is representative of the whole. Like sacrificial animals, they are seen at the foot of the altar of burnt offering. They had been slain for their testimony; however, they were not slain as atonement offerings, but they were slain for their devotion. They are not yet reigning with Christ as portrayed later in Revelation 20:4.

It is interesting that the sacrificial animals would have their throats slashed by the priests of Israel. One is forced to wonder if that is the same means by which many of these Tribulation martyrs are murdered. In recent years, we’ve seen graphic examples of how the anti-Christ,

Muslim radicals deal with those whom they label “unbelievers” and whom they view as aligned with the “great Satan” (the United States) and Israel.

We must take John’s vision for what it is – a vision that contains much symbolism that must be interpreted. I cannot answer the question of how these believers are seen by John to be clothed in white robes at this point given the fact that the period of time at issue is the Tribulation. We know from other passages that believers of the Age of Israel (including the Tribulation era) will evidently receive their resurrection bodies in association with Jesus’ 2nd Advent – an event that occurs at the end of this period. Let’s just take John at his word. In this vision, John sees in heaven martyred believers of the Tribulation period.

These believers are seen by John to be asking for vengeance by God on their behalf and on behalf of those who still dwell upon the earth. This is not the role of the present dispensation of believers, i.e. believers of the Body of Christ. However, in John’s symbolic vision, the mere presence in heaven of believers who have been killed because of their testimony and faithfulness to Jesus is an affront to God’s righteousness. God’s justice will act in response. Those who have murdered God’s own are enemies of God’s sovereign will to regain dominion over this earth and establish His righteous reign through His Son. The murderers, the enemies of God and of Christ, are aligned with Satan’s plan to retain dominion. God’s redemptive plan will not be thwarted. The description of the fifth seal opening corresponds to Jesus’ parable of the widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18:2-8. The imprecatory Psalms allude to the circumstances that attend John’s vision of the fifth seal (e.g. Psa 10; 11; 54:5; 55:9; 79; 94; 143:12).

There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God, and did not respect man. 3 And there was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ 4 And for a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, lest by continually coming she wear me out.” 6 And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said: 7 now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? 8 “I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (Lu 18:2-8)

The Sixth Seal – “Cosmic Signs of Advent” (Rev 6:12-17)

And I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. 14 And the sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. 15 And the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; 16 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; 17 for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?”

The sixth seal appears to take us to the time of the end since it speaks of the signs in the sun, moon and stars which the Lord Jesus Himself associated with His personal appearing (6:12-13 cf. Matt 24:29-30, 35; Isa 2:10-22; 13:6-13; 24:19-23; 34:1-5, 12; Jer 4:29; Ezek 32:7-8; Hag 2:6-7, 21-22; Joel 2:28, 31; 3:15; Zeph 1:14-18; 2 Pet 3:10). We will see the events associated with the Lord’s 2nd Advent described more fully in Revelation 19.

There are many allusions to the circumstances described in association with this sixth seal in the Psalms, e.g. Psalm 2:2; 68:4; 97:5.

E.W. Bullinger provides an interesting and helpful table that demonstrates the correlation between the six seals of Revelation 6 and Jesus' description of this period in Matthew 24.³

Matthew 24	Seal Opening	Description	Revelation 6
4, 5	1 st	The false Christ	1, 2
6, 7	2 nd	Wars	3, 4
7	3 rd	Famines	5, 6
7	4 th	Pestilence	7, 8
8-28	5 th	Martyrdoms	9-11
29-30	6 th	Signs of Advent	12-17

The chapter ends with the question – “who is able to stand?” That question is answered in chapter 7 where we find a description of the 144,000 of the twelve tribes of Israel. We shall examine chapter 7 in our next session.

³ E.W. Bullinger, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1984), 272.