

[Revelation 6:1–17](#)

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

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Setting Up the Section

Beginning in chapter [6](#), and continuing into chapters [7](#) and [8](#), the scroll is unrolled and its seals are broken. Rather than reading the scroll, John experiences it in visions.

The unrolling of the scroll marks the judgment of God upon the earth—justice brought to the world. The first four seals on the scroll reveal the sin of humanity unleashed on the earth.

[6:1–2](#)

The White Horse

Jesus, the Lamb, breaks the first seal on the scroll, at which point one of the four creatures shouts an invitation to come ([6:1](#)). This invitation is not directed to John, but to the white horse and the first horseman. This horseman holds a bow and is given a crown. As in [Revelation 2:10](#), this is a crown of victory rather than royalty. The implication, of course, is that this horseman will find victory in his efforts.

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This horse and rider serve the purpose of conquering. The idea here is simple: The first judgment that must come to humanity before the final consummation of the ages is that of military conquering. There are three popular views as to who will conquer or be conquered:

1. This horse represents Christ and the gospel in the world.
2. This horse represents the Antichrist.
3. This horse represents the spirit of conquest, or military figures.

We cannot know for certain, but we can note that the bow seems a significant part of the vision, and that a bow is not a typical Roman weapon. So this vision has implications beyond a political statement regarding the Roman Empire. This is a vision of a conqueror and destruction.

Critical Observation

Some associate this first vision with one group of warriors in John's day who were known for using bows—the Parthians. They were a feared group of warriors who tormented much of the East and Middle East for hundreds of years. The Parthians were noted for two things: their horsemanship and their skilled archery. They would ride into a city, shoot their arrows with deadly accuracy, and then ride out so fast they could not be killed. They rode white horses that they trained to jump and maneuver in incredible ways.

While John's vision is probably not intended to be this specific (one army or one country), the Parthians may have been the closest comparable image for John's original readers.

[6:3-4](#)

The Red Horse

As with the first seal, the Lamb opens the second seal, and the second creature offers the same invitation to the next horseman to come ([6:3](#)).

The power to remove the peace that is on the earth is granted to this horseman on a red horse. Since God is sovereign over all things, it is He who grants the permission. The imagery here is not that this horseman does the butchering, but that he removes peace, and without that peace, humans butcher one another. The great sword is the image of the machines of war being unleashed on the earth, acted out by people left to their own devices without any divine intervention.

[6:5-6](#)

The Black Horse

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With the next seal broken by the Lamb and the next invitation from the third creature, a horseman rides in on a black horse with a scale in his hand. Since verse [6](#) reveals the exorbitant prices of wheat and barley, this horseman symbolizes famine. The scale is for measuring out food.

The announcement in verse [6](#) is not ascribed to any one of the four creatures. In fact, the announcement itself is only said to have been like a voice from among the creatures. A quart of wheat was what one person needed in a day. According to the prices called out in verse [6](#), a person would work all day to simply get the grain that he or she needed. If there was one income for a family, the problem was obvious. In addition, barley was used by the poor to mix with their wheat to make it go further. According to the information given in verse [6](#), the market prices were well beyond what anyone could afford.

The oil and the wine were protected. These are basic ingredients for cooking and for purification. We see that they have been left out of the judgment, but no reason is offered for this. Because the olive trees and grape vines are still producing, this famine will affect the poor, but some will survive.

[6:7-8](#)

The Pale Horse

The fourth horse and rider, also summoned by the Lamb breaking the seal and the voice of a creature, is described as pale, or ashen. This signifies a pale green color, the color of a corpse.

This horseman is not holding a weapon of any kind, but his name is Death, and he is followed by Hades, the place of departed spirits. As with the third horseman, permission is given for the destruction to take place involving 25 percent of the earth. This destruction will come by a variety of means.

[6:9-11](#)

Prayer in Persecution

The next seal marks a change. The first four reflect the coming of a particular kind of destruction. The fifth involves the prayers of a particular group of people—the persecuted ([6:9](#)).

The first evidence of the difference between this seal and the four preceding is that no one summoned the vision. In the first four seals, one of the living creatures called “Come,” and the horsemen came. For the fifth seal, John simply notices the souls who have been violently killed for their faith.

These souls are under an altar—they are already dead. They have been persecuted to death. John gives two reasons why these souls have been killed: (1) because of the Word of God and (2) because of the testimony they had been given by Jesus.

The Word of God refers to the message of the scriptures ([6:9](#)). The central message is the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The testimony that these souls maintained refers to the active and verbal faith that they lived out in the world. These people were distinctively Christian, and they were killed because of it. The lives of these people became offerings of worship; thus they are under the altar.

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While their persecution is a reality, the focus is on their prayers for justice ([6:10](#)). Sin is running rampant, and many people are being killed for their faith in Jesus Christ. Those who have been killed want justice. In light of the teachings throughout the scriptures about vengeance and its place in God's hands (not humanity's), it would be a mistake to understand the prayers of these souls as merely a cry for revenge. It is, rather, a cry for God to rule. This is a prayer that longs to see the power in the hands of the One who rightfully controls the universe. The souls even address God as *sovereign*, a term often used for the master of slaves. They recognize His power and authority.

The answer to their prayers comes in two parts. The first part is in God rewarding them for their sacrifices. Their reward is rest. Once dead they are allowed to enjoy the peace of heaven. The other part of their reward includes a long white robe, which probably represents victory as it does in the vision of the white horse of the first seal ([6:1-2](#)).

They are told to rest until the "full number" (NET) of martyrs was reached. This does not imply that God has a certain quota of martyrs that have to die before He will enact His justice, but it does reveal the reality that more people will be sacrificing their lives for Him ([6:11](#)).

[6:12-17](#)

The Cosmic Disturbance

There are two parts to the disturbance of the sixth seal: first, the cosmic light show and, second, the response of the people.

The reason the sun and moon are both a part of this vision is that God is going to move at the same time all over the world; in some places it will be night and in other places it will be day. Notice the sun will be black as sackcloth. This is a reference to the black sackcloth worn by mourners. The garments were made out of the hair of black goats, so they were naturally very dark. If the sun ever became that dark, there would be no light. Without light, the entire world will be disoriented.

Critical Observation

Keep in mind that John's visions are not the first his readers have heard of the apocalypse. Jesus Himself spoke of terrible events at the end of the world ([Matthew 24](#); [Mark 13](#); [Luke 12](#)). The Old Testament prophets offered their own apocalyptic visions as well ([Joel 2:11, 31](#); [Zephaniah 1:14, 18](#); [2:2](#)). It is quite likely that John's readers made a connection between his visions recorded here and the teachings of Jesus and the prophets. Rather than new and disturbing images, John is likely describing a confirmation of God's sovereignty from the ancient days to the ultimate future.

If the sun goes away, the natural fallout will be that the light given from the moon will also cease to exist, since it merely reflects the sun's light. John records that the moon looks like blood ([6:12](#)). The idea is that there is a covering of the moon to such a degree that it will give no light. Instead, there will be

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darkness and the moon will look as if it has been covered in blood. Remember that blood is maroon in color when in large quantities, so this describes a darkening of the moon more than a reddening of it.

The two images of sackcloth and blood are meant to convey the destruction that is coming. Blood symbolizes death, and sackcloth represents the mourning that comes along with it.

There are two ways in which the word *stars* can be translated in verse [13](#). It could mean the actual stars in the sky falling, but it more likely refers to meteors falling from the sky to the earth. While some have interpreted the result of the falling stars as a violent effect, like an earthquake, the illustration John actually gives is of ripe figs that easily fall when the wind shakes their limbs.

Verse [14](#) paints the picture of the sky opening up so that the atmosphere, the blue canopy that is over the earth, will split open and form a hole. Then verse [15](#) indicates that these events will affect everyone on earth and cause widespread panic. Verse [16](#) reveals the hopelessness of the situation. It is clear that no person has control of his or her own fate. Each is at the mercy of the powerful sovereignty of heaven and earth ([6:17](#)).

[Revelation 7:1-17](#)