

REVEALED

Part Four:
Under the Altar or Under a Rock
Revelation 6

The First Seal: *The White Horse*
- *Mark 13:5-7*

The Second Seal: *The Red Horse*

The Third Seal: *The Black Horse*

The Fourth Seal: *The Pale Horse*
- *Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21*

The Fifth Seal: *The Martyrs*
- *Psalms 79*

The Sixth Seal: *The Day of Wrath*
- *Haggai 2:6-7, 21-22; Isaiah 50:3; Joel 2:31; Isaiah 34:4; Hebrews 1:12*

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**Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Four: Revelation 6
Under the Altar or Under a Rock?¹**

Have you ever been in a corn maze? You know that the view from the ground can be pretty confusing and overwhelming. But if you were to go up in the air a couple hundred feet or so, you'd be able to see it all clearly. Then you could go back down into it, and having your perspective, you could navigate your way through it.

Like on many days as we work through the book of Revelation together, it will be tempting today to become overwhelmed by the confusingly large amount of stuff in chapter six – like being in the middle of a corn maze. So imagine we've got a large drone that we can climb on and fly up a couple hundred feet or so. That will give us our perspective before we dive back down into the cornfield and navigate our way through it. It's amazing the difference perspective makes. That's what we are going to do today with chapter six of Revelation. We'll go up high and get a look at it, then dive into it. When we are done, we will take to the air again to get one final overview so that we know how to apply it to our lives.

First of all, I hope you were able to read chapter six before you came in. We ask you to do that because we just don't have time to read the chapter for you on Sunday mornings. So we've given you a reading plan on our website so that you can read the passage in advance, and then we given you three questions to ask yourself in order to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you ahead of time. And don't forget if something goes unanswered, or if you have other questions, there are cards you can fill out and submit and we'll do our best to answer them when we can, or at the Q&A Sunday at the end of the summer. Either way, you'll want to open your Bible to Revelation 6 and follow along.

But if you have already read Revelation 6, you might feel like you are in the thick of the cornfield; it can be overwhelming. Let's get up and get some perspective first.

It will be important to remember where we've been so far in chapters 1-5, because that gives us an important perspective with which to read this confusing and scary chapter. So far, everything we've read in the first five chapters has been about the Lamb's work on behalf of people, who he loves. The Lamb – the Son – is God. He loves us humans infinitely; he gave his life for us, and then, since he is God, he took his life back up for us, opening the way to spiritual, abundant, and eternal life.

¹ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO), Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis), Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views* (2013, Thomas Nelson, Nashville), Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>)

Everything happening in Revelation is filled with vivid descriptions of what God will do to completely finish off evil and death, and shows the lengths God will go to in order to save people – any and all and every human that he can possibly save – whoever responds to the Gospel. The Gospel is the Good News that God loves us and will save us from sin and evil and death. So far chapters 1-5 have all been about the Lamb and what he has done and will do to end evil and rescue people. Well, as frightening as chapter six is, all of the previous themes are still present throughout. We *must* read chapter six with that perspective. Okay?

In chapter five, we left off from Pastor Jason’s moving description of worship in heaven, where we were in the great Throne Room of God. In chapter six, the things that start in Heaven will play out on earth. Then it takes us back to Heaven before ending up back on earth. Pastor Jason left us in the Great Throne Room with the Lamb being the only one worthy to open the scroll that has seven seals on it. This wasn’t one roll with seven seals going up the side of it; it was one large scroll in which you would open one seal, and could go so far until you hit another seal, which would be broken open and you could go farther until you reached another seal, and so on.

There are seven seals, and seven means what? Completeness. There are seven seals of judgment in the scroll, which means what kind of judgment? Complete judgment. We will see six of the seven seals opened today.

Now, when we read this, it’s kind of confusing. That’s partly because John was trying to describe with black ink on papyrus paper what he was seeing in hyper-color super-surround sound in Heaven. That wasn’t easy to do, so John chose an apocalyptic writing style of the first century Jews, which was highly symbolic. But ***when we read Revelation from our 21st century American perspective, we have some subtle influences that make it more difficult.***²

One of those is ***the power problem.*** Revelation was written to people who were *not* in power, people who were being oppressed by those *in* power. Revelation was *not* to warn the Roman government and society about what was going to happen to it, even though it does that. It was written to encourage those who were being oppressed *by* Rome. In America, *we* are the ones in power. So we need to step out of our Americanness and read Revelation from our Christianity.

The next is ***the politics problem.*** In some ways, the whole book of Revelation could be said to be about the politics of the empire versus the politics of the Lamb. This applies to us especially these days in the election season. Dr. Scott Daniels writes about it this way: “Revelation continually critiques the way all human principalities and powers operate. Our problem is that the partisan politics of our own day have so deeply divided us that I fear we will automatically read and hear Revelation through those lenses. That means that people on the right will hear Revelation as a critique of the left, and *visa versa*. But the truth is that Revelation is

² Scott Daniels, *ibid*

inviting us to transcend the politics of right and left and learn to embody the politics of the Lamb. That is very difficult to do, however, because our imaginations are so shaped by right/left politics.”³

That leads us to the third thing that makes it difficult for us to read Revelation, and that’s ***the patriotic problem***. We have a hard time with the difference between being an American and being a part of the Church. John is not writing in order to help Rome be a better place to live, or to tell Caesar how to be a better ruler. John *is* writing to encourage believers to live as reflections of the Lamb *in the midst of Rome*. You see, we can’t read Revelation as American citizens; we must read this as people of the Lamb. And that’s hard for us to do! Our citizenship as Americans is so deeply woven into our identity, (and I’m afraid our understanding of what it means to be the Church isn’t very strong) so we have a hard time reading Revelation. But church – we are not first and foremost Americans; we are first and foremost *Christians who happen to live in America*. Our Christianity should shape how we live in America. I’m not saying we should stop being Americans or reject America. But as God’s people we are to view our country from the lens of our Christianity, not the other way around. We must identify as the people of the Lamb in Revelation! The judgments unleashed with the opening of the seals in chapter six are against Rome and against the people who reject Christ.

Okay, we’ve got some perspective; now let’s dive back into the cornfield.

The first four seals that get opened will unleash four judgments that are popularly known as the four horsemen. These four horses and their riders have wreaked all kinds of havoc in the world. They’ve been interpreted as the evils of war, as symbols of events in Roman history, and even as constellations. So what do they represent? Remember that Revelation speaks *against* the false power and culture of Rome, so these four horsemen are intended to contrast Rome (and its equivalent in our day). *The horsemen will shatter the illusion that people can find true security and safety inside the borders of a nation or empire, in a strong economy, or even in their own health. (repeat)* Do the events described represent real, calendar events that are going to happen? Well, sort of. I think you will see that these four horses have been galloping their way through history already, and much of what they do has already been done many, many times over. So yes, it is very likely they will happen again, and it is likely they will happen in increasingly greater and more terrible ways. And *one* of these times that they ride – the ones described in chapter six – will be the last time.

Now we come to ***the first seal: the white horse***. We need to read what the chapter says about this horse and rider:

“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.” (Revelation 6:1-2, niv)

³ Daniels, *ibid*

As you read that, who usually rides a white horse and wears a crown? Jesus, right? You'd think this is Him, but that would be a mistake, and that is the point. This rider is *not* Jesus; it is *imitating* Jesus. Jesus warned about this in Mark 13 - Jesus said to them:

“Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.” (Mark 13:5-7, niv)

As we get closer to the end, it's going to be more difficult to tell the difference between Christ and the imitations. But this guy is definitely *not* Jesus.

Even though Jesus is described in Revelation as riding a white horse and wearing a crown, there are two problems with the white-horse guy: one is that it is Jesus who opened the scroll for him in the first place. The second problem is the weapon that this rider has. What was it? It was a bow. The Parthians were a warring country and they rode white horses. They were also the only army that used mounted archers. They also were frequently attacking Rome. Do you remember what weapon Jesus has? A sword, which is the Word of God, right? Jesus always has a sword, never a bow. The weapon of Jesus is for instruction; the rider's weapon is for destruction. Jesus' weapon is to bring life, the rider's weapon is to lay waste. The weapon of Christ is constructive; the weapon of the rider is destructive. The weapon of Christ is to revive; the weapon of the rider is to vaporize. The weapon of Christ is to germinate; the weapon of the rider is to exterminate. Get the difference?

Because of this horse and rider's connection to the Parthians, it is a reminder of the “enemy at the gate;” a reminder of the limits of Roman authority and security (or the limits of American authority and security). Caesar (or today's presidential candidates) might try to promise peace and security, but there will always be threats from the outside. We were reminded of this last week with that horrible terrorist attack in Orlando. An attack against human beings – people that Christ loves and died for.

The next seal is broken and we have ***the second seal: the red horse***. The color red in the original language could mean “blood” or “fire” – neither of which sounds very pleasant. This horse and rider were given power to take peace from the earth. It could represent the persecution of Christians. The word “slay” that describes what this rider causes people to do to each other is a very savage word. It is the same word that was used in reference to the death of Jesus and his followers (Revelation 5:6-9, 12; 6:9; 13:8; 18:24). The “large sword” the rider carries is a symbol of Roman emperors. This rider would have been easily recognized by the first century Christians as being the opposite of “***Pax Romana***” – this was a national propagandist slogan of Rome. It was like a national pledge that said, “In a strong Rome we find our prosperity, peace, and flourishing.”⁴ But that “peace” was at a high price – it was a false peace, gained by dominating and suppressing people.

⁴ Daniels, *ibid*.

Despite their slogan of “Pax,” or “Peace,” there was *always* simmering civil disorder. Dr. Daniels writes, “In a single year, AD 68-69, Rome had been ruled by four different emperors. It is reported that in the thirty-year period before the reign of Herod the Great (67-37 BC), more than one hundred thousand insurgents died in revolutions and rebellions in Palestine alone.” That was in only one small part of Rome! There are *always* threats to peace both from inside and outside of our borders.

The next is ***the third seal: the black horse***. The color black, then like now, brought to mind thoughts of something sinister, terrible, unlucky, and was associated with mourning. This rider represents famine. Famine, along with an unstable economy, comes right on the hooves of war and civil unrest. This horse reminds us of how deeply we rely on what the earth produces for us. What happens to an economy when famine hits? Inflation. That is the message in the scales that the rider is carrying. The scales were used to measure the price of food – how much food would be measured out for money. According to the passage in verse 6, “Two pounds of wheat would cost a day’s wages, and so would six pounds of barley.” This amount of food was a day’s food for a soldier and his horse, or five day’s food for a slave. Barley was food for the poor. The price described was 16 times higher than normal. That’s a 1500% inflation rate.

Then the passage says that the oil and wine were not to be damaged, even though there was famine. This is interesting. Oil and wine were luxuries. This points out the privileges of the rich, and that the divide between the rich and poor was going to get wider and wider. That distance is *not* what God wants! God is always on the side of the poor and oppressed. When war and inflation hit, who get hit the hardest? The poor. The rich usually keep doing okay. The point of the black horse is that the economic security of Caesar is *false* security; it is ultimately a myth.

The next is the last of the four horsemen: ***the fourth seal: the pale horse***. The actual description is “pale green,” which is the color of a person who is dead and whose flesh is decaying. If there really were going to be a zombie apocalypse, this would be the guy. This guy kills people, and then the grave coming along right behind, scoops up the dead. The passage tells us it kills a fourth of the earth – of all creation and humans, Christians included. The “fourth” that gets destroyed is not geographical, like a hemisphere – it’s the total. It kills in four ways: sword, famine, disease, and wild animals. These things happen in succession: war brings famine, which brings disease, and then the wild animals come in and clean up the weak and dying.

All of four of these horsemen reveal the false security of Rome. Rome thought it was strong and invincible. Here’s the deal: if we put our hope and faith in anything but the Lamb on the throne, we are in trouble.

What do you think those horsemen might look like today? Starting with the white horse, I imagine it would mean an empire or a nation constantly trying to protect its security. It might have to think about building fences or walls or border patrols to keep people out. It would probably have to spend enormous amounts of its money

on national defense. The white horse could create a lot of chaos in a society, so the nation would have to figure out how to constantly monitor the white horse's activity. They'd probably have to sacrifice some of their own conveniences and maybe even some of their own rights in order to be more secure.

The red-horse nation would have to be afraid of its own people. They might be so busy focusing on the white horse that a lot of terrible red-horse things would happen, like bombings and mass shootings. These would come from their own citizens who feel marginalized or disenfranchised and who sympathize with outside threat-groups. This nation would have to increase surveillance of their own people – listening to their phone calls, reading their emails and letters, even spying on their conversations. Most of their citizens would want to carry their own weapons because they'd be afraid of their own neighbors.

Modern, wealthy nations and empires wouldn't have to worry so much about the black horse though. The black horse would hit the poorer, agrarian countries hardest. Droughts, climate changes, and famines wouldn't hit the rich nations as hard, but the rich would still have to worry about unstable world economies and downturns. The wealthy would probably still be able to enjoy their favorite food and drink. But the rich nation's businesses would have to constantly restructure to protect their assets and take advantage of the poorer countries. The rich nation's government might have to create laws that would safeguard their financial institutions and even bail them out to protect against the black-horse threat.

A modern empire would be obsessed with the pale green horse and rider. They would invest huge dollars into health care, into treatments and surgeries and drugs that would keep the pale horse away. When the diseases of weaker poor countries became a threat to the wealthy empire, they would secure their borders and put out travel alerts in case any of their people were travelling in countries that would expose them to the pale horse. The empire's sense of security would also be rattled with every earthquake, volcano, tornado, tsunami, flood and blizzard.

Of course, these four horsemen were only a concern to *ancient Rome*; thankfully they don't apply to us in America today, do they?

These horsemen are a threat to *anyone* whose hope is in their empire. But on the other hand, these horsemen are also a warning and a reminder that the only real security anyone can have is in the Kingdom of the Lamb. Maybe you will want to think about where you are placing your hope. Maybe you want to take stock and get yourself ready, because these four horses are *always* galloping through. They've been here before, they are here in our day, and they are on their way in our future.

The first four seals show us how desperately we need to be in the Kingdom of the Lamb if we want to know ultimate security. My friend, if you are here and you are not a citizen of the Kingdom of the Lamb, I would strongly advise you to take serious stock of where you are putting your trust and security. Because God promises healing and victory and life to those who trust him and who persevere (**Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21**). God goes to great lengths in Revelation (actually

through the entire Bible), and ultimately in the death and resurrection of his Son, to plainly show his Good News to you, and to the world. He loves you!

Next in chapter six things slow down. We are taken from earth to heaven and then back to earth again. We are now going to see a contrast between two different groups of people: the people we will see with the fifth seal and the people we will see with the sixth seal. The fifth-seal people are people who are fully committed to the Kingdom of the Lamb because, like him, they too have been slaughtered. But in the sixth seal we will see people who are so immersed in their empire that they are afraid of the horses and seals, and they will hide and cry out against what they call the wrath of the Lamb.

Next then is ***the fifth seal: the martyrs***. With this seal we see an interesting scene. We are back in the throne room, and it says that under the altar are the souls of those who have been killed for being faithful witnesses of the Jesus. This is hard for us to visualize but it would've been clear to the first century readers. "Under" does not mean "underneath" but means "at the bottom," or "below." This powerful image is of the altar for blood sacrifice in the Jewish Temple. In the Temple practice, the sacrificial lambs would be killed to atone for people's sins on that altar, and the blood would spill down to the bottom of, or under, the altar. John's vision here is to communicate the deep and profound connection between the death of Jesus the Lamb, and the death of the martyrs. Both Jesus and the martyrs have wholeheartedly obeyed God – the One who sits on the throne.

But who exactly *are* the ones under the altar? John was probably thinking of those who had already been killed: like the prophets, and John the Baptist, and Stephen, and Paul, and other early Christians. But *we* know these also include *all* those who have been martyred, even the Christians in Iraq this year whose heads were savagely severed from their bodies by ISIS soldiers. The fifth seal is a reminder that *anyone* who sacrifices for the Kingdom of the Lamb will be known by and near to the Lamb, and they are in a sacred spot in the Throne Room.

They cry out, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" This is not a cry for revenge – it is a cry for the things that are wrong to be made right. It is their heart's cry and prayer that God's Kingdom would finally come on earth as it is heaven. It is not a cry for punishment, but for justice. "How long, O Lord, until everything that is wrong in this world would be made right, and those who have suffered for your sake would finally see your kingdom come?" The early church was living in Rome, facing persecution and death. John was in exile (which was fortunate, because others had been killed). "How much longer, O Lord?" they cry, like the psalmist in Psalm 79. The answer they get is first a white robe that symbolizes their purity and place of honor. When they ask, "How long?" God answers by basically saying, "Not yet, but in a little while. But until then: You are safe. You can rest. There are more faithful witnesses that will be added to your number before we are through." Listen: this image of the fifth seal is a demonstration of God's love and patience, that even though his people are being slaughtered, he wants all those who are rejecting Christ to *still* have an opportunity to step into the Kingdom of the Lamb. And remember: even though these seals are

all judgments, they are all driven by love: the first four are warnings to people to change their lives and their kingdoms. The fifth seal is a glimpse into how far we as Christians should be willing to go to be witnesses to others for Jesus. The martyrs ask, "Is this finally the end?" Jesus says, "Not yet. There's still more that can be reached; there's more I can save." Maybe that's you.

Then ***the sixth seal*** (is opened): ***the day of wrath***. The focus returns to earth again. There is some cataclysmic stuff going on in this chapter, but it is all pretty common apocalyptic symbology from the Old Testament. There's the earthquake (Haggai 2:6-7, 21-22), the sun turned black and the moon turned to blood (Isaiah 50:3; Joel 2:31), stars falling like figs from a tree (Isaiah 34:4) and the sky rolled back like a scroll (Isaiah 34:4; Hebrews 1:12). These are all associated with God's arrival and with final judgment and destruction of the earth.

The cosmic judgments are listed in verses 12-14: 1) great earthquake, 2) sun darkens, 3) full moon becomes like blood, 4) stars fall from the sky, 5) the sky vanishes, 6) the mountains and islands are removed, and 7) the people of earth are deeply disturbed. How many judgment events? Seven, which means what? Complete. So the cataclysmic judgment is complete – it is as full as God intends it to be.

Then in verses 15-17 we see the other group of people who are affected by the judgments. They are in direct contrast to the martyrs of the fifth seal. It lists the people who have not accepted Christ: 1) Kings, 2) officials, 3) generals, 4) the rich, 5) the powerful, 6) the slaves, 7) the free. How many groups of people? Seven. Which means? Complete. The double-set of seven in these verses means that the destruction of creation and people is total. Nothing remains in place and no one, no matter how important or lowly, can escape God's vindication. Keep in mind that the ancient people put a lot of stock in stars and constellations; they thought the alignment of stars would determine the success of the world. They even consulted the stars and made their decisions by them, just like some people read horoscopes today (by the way, don't say it's different because it's not; it's *exactly* same thing). But the sixth seal tells us that even the stars themselves will fall down from the sky. If anything in the universe, we think the celestial bodies are permanent, right? Scientists tell us they go back billions and billions of years. And yet even the stars will fall like figs from a tree at God's command. People will be so afraid of God that they will try to crawl under rocks – risking being crushed rather than face the wrath of God. God – the very one who can save them, and they hide under rocks from him. But there is nowhere they can hide. For those who embrace the ways of Rome, for those who buy into its systems and economies and securities, those people will see the coming of Christ *as God's anger*, not as they *should* see it – *as God's salvation*. If they see the shaking of things through the four horsemen's actions and they don't wake up, if they see and hear the example and witness of Christ-followers and don't listen (and even kill the witnesses), then the sixth seal will happen to them. The first five seals are all about opportunities to join the Lamb's Kingdom. The sixth seal is an advanced warning of what's waiting for those who don't change kingdoms.

So let's get above the corn maze one last time. The horsemen have always been around. And they have always served as warnings, that we can't put our trust in anything that this world claims is secure. Are the horsemen present today? Yes, this isn't the last time they will ride. But this might be *the next to the last* time. And that means there is *still* time: time for believers to be witnesses. There is still time for people to change allegiances. And there is still a seventh seal in the next chapter.

What does that mean to you and me? Ask yourself this, if you are a Christian: how willing are you to be a witness? Are you too caught up in this empire called America? Will you be a witness for the Lamb no matter what it costs you? If you will, it means that you will bring peace into this world, and bring help into this world, and bring healing into this world, and bring hope into this world. I want you to see the connection: you – with your life in this world – *you are a living contrast of the ongoing horse-riders who run roughshod over people*. The world is filled with people whom God loves and for whom Christ died. Be a peacemaker in the face of the white horse. Help those who are poor and alone in the face of the red horse. Bring comfort and healing to those who are sick in the face of the black horse. And live and speak *life* into those who face the death and hopelessness of the pale horse. Do these things so that people will see Christ in you. *That* is your faithful witness.

But if you are here and you are not a citizen of the Lamb's Kingdom, I hope you've been listening and taking stock of your life and citizenship. Chapter six ends with a question: "Who can withstand it?" You should know the answer by now: the ones who withstand all that we've read about are only those who belong to the Kingdom of the Lamb. Will you step out of the ultimate insecurity of this world? Don't be fooled by it. Will you accept the price that Jesus paid so you could be a citizen of his kingdom? Whose side are you on? Will you identify with those under the altar, or will you crawl under a rock?

Pray