

<p>^{RSV} Revelation 6:1 Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!"</p> <p>² And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.</p> <p>³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"</p> <p>⁴ And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword.</p> <p>⁵ When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand;</p> <p>⁶ and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; but do not harm oil and wine!"</p> <p>⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"</p> <p>⁸ And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were</p>	<p>1-8: Here we meet the (in)famous four horsemen of the apocalypse. Much has been made of them in art and fiction, but the key to understanding their significance lies in understanding the structure of the book, and these sections in particular. The opening of the seven seals on the scroll (which represents God's plan) is the first layer of the Divine plan unfolding and being revealed. The revealing of the plan is seen by the world (which does not know God) as judgment and woe, and by the people of God as mercy and justice. The signs that are given are given to lead people to God's mercy, and they increase in power and direness, intended to shock people out of their sinful complacency and turn to God. The horsemen arrive and are sent from God's Throne, with a word that in Greek means both "Come!" and "Go!", telling us in no uncertain terms that all of what proceeds is well within God's control, and those who love him will be spared and saved. This first layer is the layer of signs in the natural and moral order of the world, and the four horsemen are the agents of the natural consequences of disobedience to God. The first horseman is perhaps the most perplexing, although military conquest is explicitly mentioned. The key is to see that the combination of the whiteness of the horse and the bow strongly suggests mounted raiders from the Parthian Empire to the east. The Parthians were the ones who ultimately conquered Babylon in the Old Testament and effectively ended the Babylonian Empire and therefore also the Exile of Israel in Babylon. Now these raiders had been staging attacks on some of the cities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, and would have been familiar to the people of Asia by way of merchants traveling from the East. The suggestion here is that every empire except for God's will ultimately be subject to conquest and destruction. The message is one of hope to the Church and one of warning to earthly powers: Rome will eventually fall, and it will have an effect on the Church like the end of the Captivity in Babylon. Following the surety of conquest and the fall of empires, there is warfare and bloodshed, as symbolized by the second horseman, a natural consequence of the natural decay of earthly power. The third horseman follows after war, and is accompanied by a peculiar quotation from somewhere in heaven. The denarius was a day's wage for a laborer, and would usually buy about sixteen times the amount of grain mentioned here, and even in lean times it would get about eight times as much. So naturally following after war is inflation and famine. The nature of the last horseman is explicitly mentioned again, green being the color of decaying flesh to emphasize the point, the final result of establishing an empire opposed to God is death, decay, and disease. On one level these four horsemen represent a straightforward progression: Opposition to God, and faith in earthly power will lead to conquest, which leads to bloodshed and war, which in turn leads to famine and economic disaster, which in turn leads to pestilence, disease, death, and decay. A gruesome image, yes, but perhaps not an unwelcome one to those who were currently being persecuted by such an earthly empire. On another level, it is an attempt to show what happens to those who oppose God, on every level of human society. God does not approve of all of this, and gives us every warning and opportunity</p>
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<p>given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.</p>	<p>to avoid these disasters, but these are how God's judgment works out against those who cannot live in charity, community, and peace: Conquest and ruin on a political level, bloodshed and warfare on a military level, famine and poverty on an economic level, and death on a personal level.</p>
<p>⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; ¹⁰ they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" ¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. ¹² When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; ¹⁴ the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?"</p>	<p>9-11: These next two seals bring the focus back to the Lamb, who with the fifth seal hears the prayers of those who have been martyred for their belief. The placement of their souls under the altar in heaven is significant, because the bones of all the faithful departed were buried under the altars of Christian Churches even into the fifth century, and occasionally still to this day. They cry out for vengeance and justice, echoing the cries of persecuted Christians on earth; but are instructed to wait until all their number was complete. Here the meaning of the word Martyr is important, it means witness, literally, and the suggestion here is that God will not do anything to execute final judgment and vengeance until all opportunities for witness have been fulfilled. Those who do not believe are to be given every possible chance to be converted, but in the end there will be those who cannot see without divine action. Meanwhile, those who have been martyred can already enjoy their ultimate status of redemption and are given their white robes, and given rest until the fullness of time has come.</p> <p>12-17: With the sixth seal, we have to fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy, as a further prod to get people to turn to God. The entirety of God's prophetic warnings are represented here by a sample of seven: the earthquake from Haggai 2:6, the darkening of the Sun and Moon from Joel 2:31, the stars falling like figs from Isaiah 34:4, the sky rolling up like a scroll from Isaiah 43:4, the mountains being removed from Isaiah 54 (quoted every Advent by John the Baptist), and the Islands sinking from Ezekiel 4: 23, and armies fleeing and hiding from Ezekiel 4:26. Even these foreign armies, who are definitely to be numbered among those who don't put their trust in God recognize who is responsible, and they would rather face their own death and destruction than face God, because they cannot abide the thought of surrendering to God's judgment. These all being quotes from the OT, we can see that John is continuing in the prophet's tradition of using cosmic upheaval to describe social and political catastrophe. Exactly what is meant by each of these signs is difficult to determine, but their placement here on this first level of signs with the opening of the seals suggests that John interpreted these OT prophecies as natural signs: Earthquakes, eclipses, meteorites and comets, volcanic eruptions are certainly possibilities for how these images could be explained naturally, but it is somewhat dangerous to offer a conclusive interpretation here.</p>

^{RSV} **Revelation 7:1** After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ² Then I saw another angel ascend from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, ³ saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads." ⁴ And I heard the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, out of every tribe of the sons of Israel, ⁵ twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand of the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand of the tribe of Gad, ⁶ twelve thousand of the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand of the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand of the tribe of Manasseh, ⁷ twelve thousand of the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand of the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand of the tribe of Issachar, ⁸ twelve thousand of the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand of the tribe of Joseph, twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Benjamin. ⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen." ¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the

With Chapter 7, there is a dramatic pause in the opening of the seals, just before we reach the conclusion, and we have two short visions of God's provision for his people in the midst of all these trials. Just as we expect final destruction, we get instead another instance of God's mercy toward those who love him. The first vision is that of angels holding back the winds of destruction until all of God's chosen people are set aside and protected from harm. The total number being 144,000; that is 12,000 from every tribe of Israel. The language and the numbers are clearly meant to suggest that no one is left out. The entirety of God's people, the Church, is represented.

And then again, we are focused back on the action in heaven, with the next vision. It is very interesting to see that while the number of those set aside by the angels as members of the church in the prior vision is finite, here in heaven there is an uncountable number of people dressed in white and waving palm branches as symbols of victory. In the first vision, the redeemed are drawn only from the tribes of Israel, in this one, they are from every nation, in the first vision, they are being prepared for a period of secular oppression, in this one, they are secure and victorious. Perhaps this suggests that more will be redeemed than those who are set aside and prepared for the trials of earth by the Divine Grace offered to the world through the ministrations of the Church. Perhaps people will see how Christians are saved from these trials by their faith in God and will come to believe and repent. See the Catholic Church's doctrine of "baptism of desire", in which even those who in their dying moments desire to repent and to believe in Christ will be saved according to this doctrine, and it is not necessary for their salvation that the sacraments of the Church be administered; the Orthodox fathers confess a similar belief that even if no one is available to baptize a penitent sinner who confesses the Name of Jesus Christ, angels will do it for us. This vision is a wonderful image of God's mercy and grace. Seeing the infinite mercy and grace of God, the natural reaction is to fall on our faces in worship and thanksgiving for all that God has done for us. This passage is one of the most potent images in the whole Bible of what God has in store for those who repent and believe in Him and allow themselves to receive the gifts of Divine Grace.

<p>throne will shelter them with his presence. ¹⁶They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."</p>	<p>The chapter with the two intervening visions closes with a passage that has brought comfort and joy to millions and millions of bereaved people, and should be familiar to all. Note that the climax of the vision is to show that even in an uncountable multitude, God still has time and the will to pay personal attention to each of his people, giving them their heart's desire and personally drying all of their tears.</p>
<p>^{RSV} Revelation 8:1 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ²Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.</p>	<p>With the completion of these two wonderful visions of God's mercy, we come to the breaking of the last seal, and instead of the conflict or cataclysm that we expect we get...Silence. With the completion of the seven seals, we get whisked back to the beginning of a series of visions, which tell the same story, but from a different perspective. The seven seals revealed signs playing out through history that God has given his people every opportunity in nature to return and repent, and now we are to go through a whole new layer of signs that God has prepared in creation to point his people to him. With the sounding of the seven trumpets from God's throne, we see all of God's judgments working out through supernatural signs. The silence in heaven, then can be one of two things, or something of both: it could be the calm before the storm as heaven prepares to plunge into the more dramatic and more devastating supernatural signs of judgement, or it could be one more opportunity for the prayers of the saints to be heard in heaven. Is it too fanciful to suppose that everything in heaven might stop for a moment so that even the faintest prayers of penitence from earth might be heard?</p>