

The Seven Seals

Revelation 5:1-4

Introduction: The Book of Revelation is about the destruction of the Roman Empire. Daniel foretold its destruction using many of the same symbols found in the Book of Revelation (Dan. 7:15-27). Yet, Daniel does not describe how that fourth kingdom would end. That is where the seven seals come into the picture. The seven seals (along with the trumpets and bowls) are descriptions of all the various means that collectively caused the fall of the Roman Empire.

I. The first seal (Rev. 6:1-2).

A. This is not symbolic for Jesus Christ. He was never depicted with a bow, nor did he go out conquering. Rather, He came to seek and save the lost (Lk. 19:10).

B. This is symbolic of the Persians. The Persians were the only military force during the Roman Empire that effectively used bow and arrows from horseback. Their cavalry threatened the eastern provinces in the Roman Empire for decades. They also won many decisive battles against the Romans throughout their reign.

C. Kings have long preferred the use of a white horse. It was considered a symbol of sovereignty. It was a Persian King that conquered the city of Rome when it fell in A.D. 546, who likely rode a white horse.

II. The second seal (Rev. 6:3-4).

A. The fierce and bloodthirsty barbarians to the north of the Roman Empire are symbolized by a fiery red horse whose rider is carrying a great sword. They were composed of unorganized Germanic tribes that were happy to kill their own race as they were in killing Romans. They liked invading into the Roman Empire due to the warmer climate and the plentiful plunder.

B. One reference to these barbarians that likely describes the Huns says, *“They had hair like women’s hair, and their teeth were like lion’s teeth”* (Rev. 9:8). The Hun warrior not only had long hair, but they filed their teeth to sharp points for use in hand-to-hand combat.

C. The barbarians were a variety of uncivilized Goths, Visigoths, Ostrogoths and Huns.

1. “During that calamitous period [248 A.D. to 268 A.D.] every instant of time was marked, every province of the Roman world was afflicted by barbarous invaders and military tyrants, and the ruined empire seemed to approach the last and fatal moment of its dissolution.”¹

2. “These are barbarian peoples, which, as is written, “were stirring from the farthest parts of the earth,” waxed strong and conquered, laid waste, set fire and plundered... They carried off booty from suburban farms and abducted some of its inhabitants, not for one year only but for three, one after another. Because of their power nobody could withstand them.”²

III. The third seal (Rev. 6:5-6).

A. The rider of the black horse has a pair of scales in his hand that denotes a scarcity of food (Lev. 26:26; Ezek. 4:16).

B. According to Jesus in the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, one day’s wage was about one denarius (Matt. 20:2, 9). In this vision, it took one day’s wage to buy enough wheat to make a loaf of bread. At \$10.00 per hour, (our minimum wage) it would cost us \$80 just to purchase enough grain for one loaf of bread!

C. Bread, oil and grape juice were staples for the poor. To take advantage of the poor by exploiting oil and grape juice would create such economic hardship that mass starvation would result. Therefore, the exhortation not to “*harm the oil and the wine.*”

D. The black horse would therefore represent famine. According to Procopius in the waning years of the Roman Empire, “He [the Emperor] put a bitter and perpetual tax on the sale of bread, which the day laborers, the poor and the infirm could not help buying. From this source he demanded three centenaries a year, with the result that the bakers filled their loaves with shells and dust; for the Emperor had no scruples against profiting meanly from even this unholy adulteration. Those in charge of the markets, turning this trick to their private gain, with ease became very wealthy and reduced the poor to an unexpected famine even in prosperous times; since it was not permitted to bring in grain from other places, but all were forced to eat bread purchased in the city.”³

¹ Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) volume 1, p. 96.

² Witold Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre Chronicle Part III* (Liverpool University Press, 1996), p. 82-83.

³ Procopius: *The Secret History*, trans. Richard Atwater, #26.

IV. The fourth seal (Rev. 6:7-8).

A. The rider of the pale horse is called Death (as in a death penalty). The color suggests sickness or injury that changes into the paleness of a corpse. The cause of death is listed as sword, famine, being put to death and wild beasts.

B. God told Ezekiel that His “*four severe judgments*” are sword, famine, wild beasts and pestilence (Ezek. 14:21). Call it divine retribution through various causes of death. The result of which reduced the population of the Roman Empire by a fourth (which doesn’t include the population lost due to the bowls of wrath).

V. The fifth seal (Rev. 6:9-11).

A. Martyrdom is the fifth seal that also led to the destruction of the Roman Empire. The martyrs petition God for justice. However, they are told to wait until all who would die as martyrs would be killed.

B. The first recorded execution of a Christian after John wrote the Book of Revelation was Ireanus in A.D. 107 by Emperor Trajan. However, Emperor Trajan began his reign in A.D. 98! John said “*things which must shortly take place*” (Rev. 1:1).

C. In A.D. 112, “Pliny the Second... seeing the lamentable slaughter of Christians, and moved therewith to pity, wrote to Trajan, certifying him that there were many thousands of them daily put to death, of which none did anything contrary to the Roman laws worthy of persecution.”⁴

D. Emperor Marcus Aurelius was the second notable persecutor of the Christian’s faith. “During the whole course of his reign Marcus despised the Christians as a philosopher, and punished them as a sovereign,”⁵ so wrote historian Edward Gibbons. “The cruelties used in this persecution were such that many of the spectators shuddered with horror at the sight, and were astonished at the intrepidity of the sufferers. Some of the martyrs were obliged to pass, with their already wounded feet, over thorns, nails, sharp shells, etc. upon their points, others were scourged until their sinews and veins lay bare, and after suffering the most excruciating tortures that could be devised, they were destroyed by the most terrible deaths.”⁶

⁴ John Foxe, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, NTS Library, last accessed October 20, 2020, [www.ntslibrary.com/PDF/Books/Foxes Book of Martyrs.pdf](http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF/Books/Foxes%20Book%20of%20Martyrs.pdf), chapter II.

⁵ Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) vol. 1, p. 222.

⁶ John Foxe, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, NTS Library, last accessed October 20, 2020, [www.ntslibrary.com/PDF/Books/Foxes Book of Martyrs.pdf](http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF/Books/Foxes%20Book%20of%20Martyrs.pdf), chapter II.

E. For years, Christians became the object of the most vile and inhumane tortures ever conceived. History reveals “a long series of horrid and disgusting pictures, . . . with racks and scourges, with iron hooks and red-hot beds, and with all the variety of tortures which fire and steel, savage beasts, and more savage executioners, could inflict on the human body.”⁷ For example, some “perished, bound to trees and branches. Drawing the stoutest of the branches together by machines for the purpose and binding the limbs of the martyrs to each of these, they then let loose the boughs to resume their natural positions, designing thus to produce a violent action to tear asunder the limbs of those whom they thus treated.”⁸

F. Eusebius states that Christians “bore fire, sword, crucifixions, savage beasts, the depths of the sea, maiming of limbs, searing with red-hot irons, pricking and digging out the eyes, mutilations of the whole body, hunger, mines and prisons.”⁹

G. Even after the Era of Martyrs ended, when the “heretics” (their word for anyone who did not share the goal of a unified religion) rose in protest to the new Universal or Catholic Church, Constantine decreed their buildings confiscated and their assemblies outlawed even in their private homes. To ensure his orders were followed, he confiscated public and private meeting places that immediately became the property of the Catholic Church. The Roman establishment “eliminated [Christians] like a poison from humanity”¹⁰ expelling “the whole tribe of such person.”¹¹ Those who protested on religious grounds were called false prophets; alluding to them as wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15-16). Christians were “destroyed by the Emperor’s command, and the wild beasts.”¹²

VI. The sixth seal (Rev. 6:12-17).

A. The sixth seal describes various natural disasters that contributed to the fall of the Roman empire. Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions plagued the Roman Empire. Even an occasional meteoroid shower could not be ruled out.

B. “This fever of the earth raged with uncommon violence during the reign of Justinian. Each year is marked by the repetition of earthquakes, of such duration that Constantinople has been shaken above forty days; of such extent that the shock has been communicated to the whole surface of the globe, or at least of the Roman Empire. An impulsive or vibratory motion was felt, enormous chasms were opened, huge and heavy bodies were discharged into the air, the sea alternately advanced and retreated beyond its ordinary bounds, and a mountain was torn from Libanus and cast into the waves.”¹³

⁷ Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) vol. 1, p. 232

⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), p. 288 (EH, 8, 9).

⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, (Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), book VIII, 14, p. 299.

¹⁰ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, ed. Averil Cameron (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999, book III, 63-6, p. 151.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, p. 153.

¹³ Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) vol. 2, p. 69.

C. In the year 531 A.D., “There were earthquakes all these days and nights for one year and a half, constantly, all the time.”¹⁴ John of Ephesus wrote, “The sun darkened and stayed covered with darkness a year and a half, that is eighteen months. Although rays were visible around it for two or three hours (a day) they were as if diseased, with the result that fruits did not reach full ripeness.”¹⁵ Procopius elaborates a little more: “And it came about during this year that a most dread portent took place. For the sun gave forth its light without brightness, like the moon, during this whole year, and it seemed exceedingly like the sun in eclipse, for the beams it shed were not clear nor such as it is accustomed to shed. And from the time when this thing happened men were free neither from war nor pestilence nor any other thing leading to death.”¹⁶

VII. The seventh seal (Rev. 8:1).

A. The seventh seal opens with a half hour of solemn silence. The silence seems to signify a solemn moment before God’s wrath is manifested.

B. What follows is the second series of seven trumpets. That series will also be followed by a series of seven bowls of wrath. What needs to be remembered is all three series of seals, trumpets and bowls are causes for the destruction of the Roman Empire.

C. We will discuss the trumpets and bowls in our next lesson.

Conclusion: Daniel concluded the description of his vision by stated that it greatly troubled him (Dan. 7:28). We can only imagine he struggled to understand what it all meant. Fortunately, we have the benefit of history to help us understand that which was prophesied so many years ago.

¹⁴ Witold Witakowski , *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre Chronicle Part III* (Liverpool University Press, 1996), p. 46.

¹⁵ Ibid, pg. 65.

¹⁶ Procopius, *Procopius: History of the Wars*, books III and IV, *The Vandalic War* (Kindle Locations 2006-2010).