

## Approaching Hoofbeats

Revelation 6:1-17

Rev. Brian Bill

April 18-19, 2026

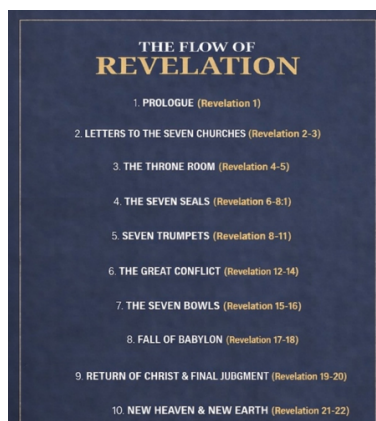
Few images in the Bible have captured people's imagination like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse who unleash deception, destruction, deprivation, and death upon the earth. Their hoofbeats echo through art, literature, and film because they represent humanity's deepest fears about the future.

More than forty years ago, Billy Graham wrote a book titled *Approaching Hoofbeats*, in which he warned, "*The shadows of all four horsemen can already be seen galloping throughout the world at this moment.*" When you look at wars raging and violence escalating in our world today, it feels like we can already hear the approaching hoofbeats.

That is exactly where we arrive when we turn to Revelation 6. Up to this point, chapters 4 and 5 have lifted our eyes to Heaven. We have seen breathtaking scenes of worship, songs of redemption, and the triumphant praise of the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the scroll. But when the Lamb begins to break the seals in chapter 6, the scene shifts dramatically.

What unfolds in this chapter is not symbolic drama meant to satisfy our curiosity. Rather, it's a sobering glimpse into God's righteous judgment on a rebellious world. Because these events are terrifyingly real, they should cause unbelievers to shudder at the seriousness of rejecting Christ, and they should awaken believers to share the gospel with greater urgency before those hoofbeats arrive in full force.

Before we walk through these six seals, we need to get our bearings in the book of Revelation.



Because there are different ways to outline and interpret Revelation, it's good to remember that sincere believers disagree about some of the details. But we must not miss the main point. Ultimately, this book is about the supremacy, the sovereignty, and the saving power of Jesus and the urgency for every person to be ready to stand before Him on Judgment Day.

While the unfolding end-time events we're about to study are apocalyptic, they are not accidental because every seal is opened by Jesus Himself. These judgments unfold by the Lamb's permission and under His direction. The Lamb who redeemed the world is also the Lord who rules the world.

For many people, like the guy I met at a coffeeshop this week, chapters 6-18 are the "scary parts" of the Bible. But let's remember to bow before Almighty God, who is loving and holy, merciful and righteous, compassionate and just. Let's continue to worship the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the sacrificial Lamb who alone is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll as He unveils His plan and unleashes His holy justice. Revelation 16:7 says, ***"Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!"***

One pastor writes: *"We often live as if this world will continue forever, but Revelation 6 breaks that illusion...this chapter shows us that the world is not headed for utopian peace, but rather a final, necessary judgment before Christ reigns."*

Please close your eyes as I read Revelation 6:1-17.

You might want to buckle up because we're about to encounter deception, destruction, deprivation, death, declaration, and dread that can hardly be comprehended by our mortal minds. It's my understanding that these verses describe events that will take place on earth after the church has been removed in the Rapture.

1 Thessalonians 5:9 reminds us: ***"For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."*** While the Day of the Lord will bring judgment upon the earth, those who belong to Christ are rescued from that coming wrath through His saving work.

Interestingly, the seventh seal launches the seven trumpets, and the seventh trumpet initiates the seven bowls. Each of these seven judgments utilizes a format of four judgments on the earth, followed by three cosmic events. Revelation 7

records an interlude of worship after the sixth seal, which leads to 30 minutes of silence in Heaven when the seventh seal is opened. BTW, Pastor Ray Pritchard will be preaching in person for our Revelation Unveiled series May 16-17! You can save up all your hard questions for him. He'll also be speaking at SecondWinders on Thursday, May 14 and at Celebrate Recovery on Friday, May 15.

The seals, the trumpets, and the bowls are interrelated and they escalate as God pours out His righteous and holy wrath upon unbelievers: the seven seals affect one-fourth of the earth, the seven trumpets target one-third of what remains, and the bowl judgments will be rapidly poured out upon the entire earth. My mind goes to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:21: ***“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.”***

Here's the main truth of Revelation 6: *As the hoofbeats of judgment approach, only those saved by the Lamb will stand.*

Another guy in the coffee shop knows I'm preaching through Revelation and on Wednesday he asked me if we will hear the trumpet blasts. Here's what I told him, *“You definitely don't want to be around to hear the seven loud trumpets of judgment. But if you put your faith in Christ, you will hear another trumpet, the trumpet call of God, and you'll be caught up to meet the Lord in the air.”*

**Seal #1: Deception.** We see the first seal in verses 1-2: ***“Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’ And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.”***

The word **“now”** describes what comes next as the Lamb opens the seals one by one. The four living creatures, who are some sort of angelic beings according to Ezekiel, announce these seal judgments with voices as loud as tumultuous thunder. The word **“come”** can also be translated as, *“go forth”* and is used as an imperative exclamation. The image of four horsemen is likely drawn from Zechariah 1:7-11. In Zechariah, they are sent out to patrol the earth, while in Revelation their release brings disasters to the earth. The word **“behold”** can be translated as *“lo and behold”* and is used to mark something significant. This first horse is **“white,”** which can be translated as *“bright, glittering, and shiny.”*

Some believe this is a reference to Christ, since the rider is on a white horse. But a closer look suggests this more likely refers to a false christ, perhaps even the Antichrist, who will come promising peace.

Listen to how the true Christ is depicted in Revelation 19:11–12: ***“Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself.”***

Notice the contrasts:

- When Jesus returns in Revelation 19, a sharp sword comes from His mouth, while the rider in Revelation 6:2 carries a bow with no arrows.
- When Christ returns, He will wear many royal crowns (diadems), symbols of ultimate authority, while the first rider on a white horse wears a single victor’s wreath, which was a temporary crown given to an athlete.
- Christ will come as Faithful and True, openly judging and making war in righteousness, while the first rider shows up like a deceptive conqueror, imitating the real King.

Jesus warned about counterfeits in Matthew 24:24: ***“For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.”***

**Seal #2: Destruction.** The second horseman is bent on destruction according to verses 3-4: ***“When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, ‘Come!’ And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.”*** The phrase, ***“bright red”*** means, *“flame-colored, or fiery red,”* reminding us of bloodshed. Speaking of red, we’ll come across the red dragon in 12:3 and the scarlet beast in 17:3. This rider is ***“permitted to take peace,”*** which shows again how the devil is under the ultimate control of Christ.

After promising peace, he will usher in destruction like we read in 1 Thessalonians 5:3: ***“While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.”***

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**Seal #3: Deprivation.** All this destruction leads to famine in verses 5-6: *“When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, ‘Come!’ And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. 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, and do not harm the oil and wine!’”*

The *“pair of scales”* are used to measure, or ration food because of scarcity and unbridled inflation, leading to prices that are up to ten times normal. A quart of wheat is barely enough to sustain one person for one day. A denarius was a day’s wage, so people will work all day just to have enough wheat to eat. Barley was low in nutritional value and often fed to livestock. As one commentator says, *“Basic food staples will become priceless luxuries.”*

**Seal #4: Death.** The fourth horseman comes on a pale horse bringing death in verses 7-8: *“When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, ‘Come!’ And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.”* The word *“pale”* refers to the yellowish, green color of a corpse.

With the worldwide population of 8 billion today, a fourth means approximately 2 billion will be killed from war, famine, pestilence and by out-of-control beasts. History reminds us how quickly disease can spread as evidenced by the Bubonic Plague, carried largely by rats, which killed tens of millions across Europe, Asia, and North Africa.

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**Seal #5: Declaration.** After the devastation on earth, the scene shifts from earth to Heaven where we hear the voice of the martyrs in verses 9-11: *“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. They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”* The word *“slain”* means, *“to butcher or slaughter.”*

The these souls ***“under the altar”*** emphasizes that their life blood was poured out as an offering to God and is drawn from Leviticus 4:7: ***“...all the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering...”***

The ESV Study Bible is helpful here: *“Under the altar in Heaven, where sacrificial blood would pool (Exodus 29:12), John sees the souls of believers who were slain for bearing witness about Jesus (Revelation 20:4). Their lament, ‘How long?’ echoes that of the psalmists. The surprising answer is that the Lamb will restrain His wrath...until the last martyr has been slain...the rest of the book progressively shows how the Lord answers their prayers to avenge their deaths...”*

One of our Go Team Partners is Voice of the Martyrs, a ministry dedicated to serving persecuted Christians in the world’s most hostile places. VOM’s work directly echoes this passage as they amplify the voices (and stories) of modern-day martyrs, provide practical help, and encourage the global church to stand with those paying a high price for their faith. I think of what is happening in Nigeria right now, where churches have been attacked, pastors kidnapped, and entire villages wiped out simply because they claim the name of Christ. The suffering of believers is not just a story from the past; it is a present reality that reminds us that following Jesus has always required courage, faith, and unwavering allegiance to Him.

One commentator suggests a couple application points.

- **Pour out your heart in prayer.** We see in verse 10 that it’s OK to cry out in a loud voice for God to vindicate His name. In fact, the word ***“cried”*** means, *“to scream.”* Notice these martyrs do not cry out for personal revenge or vengeance but for divine justice.
- **Rest in the providence of His plan.** Even though we may not understand, verse 11 tells us to ***“rest a little longer”*** by trusting His plan and His timing. God has determined sovereignly by His own will the exact number of martyrs. While it’s difficult for us to reconcile this, God does call some to die for Him (Stephen, James, Paul, Peter, Polycarp, Jim Elliot, and millions whose names we do not know). God’s delay does not mean He does not know and He does not care. These martyrs have been given the white robe of Christ’s righteousness and will soon see His victory. Psalm 79:10 says, ***“Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’ Make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.”***

**Seal #6: Dread.** In verses 12-14, the sixth seal reveals cosmic signs: ***“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, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”***

This is one of three earthquakes in Revelation. The word **“great”** means, *“huge, enormous, and intense.”* One afternoon, when we served as missionaries in Mexico City, I was at a McDonald’s studying Spanish. As I was eating my hamburger with jalapeños (that’s how they do it in Mexico), I suddenly became very dizzy and disoriented. I wasn’t too concerned at first because this was a common occurrence whenever I worked on my Spanish.

When I looked up from my verb chart however, I noticed that the other tables around me were swaying back and forth. I quickly realized that I was in the middle of an earthquake! The other customers didn’t seem too bothered by it; in fact, some were even laughing.

I was totally freaked out, felt sick to my stomach, and suddenly became very concerned for Beth and the girls who were at home, about 20 minutes away. I ran out of Ronald’s place and jumped on a bus. When the bus dropped me off, I sprinted up our street to make sure my family was OK. I opened the front door and screamed for everyone. Beth wondered why I was wiggling out because they hadn’t felt a thing.

I was greatly relieved, but still a bit queasy and worried about aftershocks. I had heard about the devastating 1985 Mexico City earthquake that killed 30,000 people, and I was afraid another big one might be on the way.

Actually, there is another BIG one on the way. When the sixth seal is opened, everything in the sky and on the earth will be shaken as there will be a total cosmic meltdown. The falling of stars upon the earth was a sign to the ancient people that the end was near. According to what Jesus said in Mark 13:25-26 it is one of the signs that immediately precede His coming: ***“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.”***

This is a fulfilment of multiple prophecies like the one found in Joel 2:10-11: ***“The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. The Lord utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the Lord is great and very awesome; who can endure it?”*** Every aspect of life will be affected when the normal cycle of daylight and darkness is disrupted.

When I hear the ***“sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up,”*** I think of the fourth verse of ***“It is Well with My Soul.”***

*O Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,  
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;  
the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend;  
even so, it is well with my soul.*

When the day of judgment arrives, no one will be excused because of social status or privilege. The wrath of the Lamb will be comprehensive according to verses 15-17: ***“Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 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, ‘for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’”***

Revelation 6:15 meticulously lists seven categories of people to represent the totality of humanity:

- Kings (Political leaders)
- Great ones (Nobles/High-ranking officials)
- Generals (Military power)
- The rich (Economic power)
- The powerful (Physical or social influence)
- Slaves (The marginalized)
- Free (The common citizen)

There will be a complete societal collapse under divine judgment. In case we missed a category, the word ***“everyone”*** is used in the middle of verse 15.

The plea to have creation fall on people comes from Hosea 10:8: “...**and they shall say to the mountains, ‘Cover us,’ and to the hills, ‘Fall on us.’**” This is also quoted in Luke 23:30: “**Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’**”

Sadly, there is no evidence of repentance, even in the face of God’s fury. Instead of calling out to the Creator, they will cry out to creation, thinking that they’ll be able to hide from the horrors of judgment. One commentator put it like this: “*From the day when Adam and Eve hid themselves from the presence of God, the guilty conscience has made people fugitives from God. But now there is no longer a place to hide.*” Instead of praying, they will plead for the mountains and rocks to crush them. They won’t confess the Rock of Ages but will cry out to the rocks of the earth to save them.

Last week, when we were in Austin visiting family, Beth went to a park one morning and saw a guy facing and fixating on the sun as he did some slow motion movements. When he finished, he walked backwards toward the park entrance with his face toward the sun and hands lifted in the air.

While she didn’t know for sure, it looked like he was worshipping the created rather than the Creator, refusing even to turn his back on the sun. This reminds us of Romans 1:25: “**They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.**” This misplaced worship reaches its horrifying climax in Revelation 6 where people would rather be crushed by the very creation they worshiped than bow before the Creator of all things.

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Warren Wiersbe writes, “*If men and women will not yield to the love of God, and be changed by the grace of God, then there is no way for them to escape the wrath of God.*” Hebrews 10:31 says, “**It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**”

The chapter ends with a haunting question in 6:17: “**For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?**” This is ultimately answered in the next chapter, which describes a multitude that *can* stand (7:9), not because of their status, but because they have been made “**white in the blood of the Lamb**” (7:14).

It's a sobering reflection on how the human heart can remain remarkably resistant to God, even when the rocks and mountains are shaking. Many would rather run than repent.

Are you running today? Are you trying to hide from the Holy One?

Revelation 6 leaves us with one unavoidable question: *Who can stand before a holy God?*

The answer is no one can stand on their own.

But the good news of the gospel is this: Jesus stood in our place! At the cross, the Lamb of God took the judgment of God that we deserve. He bore the wrath so that we could receive mercy.

The invitation is open today, but one day it will be too late.

Billy Graham loved to quote Joel 3:14-16: ***“Multitudes, multitudes in the Valley of Decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will grow dark...”*** He would often end his messages this way: *“You are in the valley of decision tonight. What you decide about Jesus Christ will determine your eternal destiny.”*

When the hoofbeats of judgment thunder across the earth, when the sky rolls back, when the mountains crumble, and the earth shakes beneath, only those who take refuge in the Lamb will be able to stand.

Run to the Lamb today because one day there will be nowhere left to hide.

## **Gospel Invitation**

### **Phil and Pattie Eager Interview**

1. Phil and Pattie, please share a little about yourselves and your ministry.
2. What do you see God doing in your ministry and how is He at work?
3. Could you share a story or two about God's faithfulness in your ministry?
4. How can we as your church pray for you?