

THE SEVEN SEALS

Why should you be interested in Christ's opening the seven seals of the covenant book? First, because your name and eternal destiny are written in that book. Second, because we are living in the days of the sixth seal. Third, because we need to understand the signs of the times in which we live. Fourth, when the seals are all opened Christ will come again.

The opening of the seven seals begins with the inauguration and enthronement of Christ. Yet the opening of the sixth seal describes the second coming and the events that accompany it. The opening of the seven seals covers the historical era from the ascension of Christ and his elevation to the throne of the universe to the second coming.

The events of Revelation 6 do not describe the contents of the seals themselves. They are the consequences of Christ's breaking the seals in heaven. The book was not opened and its contents disclosed until all seven seals were broken.

"And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see." Revelation 6:1.

The scene of the opening of the seven seals has to do with the new covenant which Christ has established by His shed blood. As the gospel goes forth to all the world Christ breaks the seals in sequence from His ascension to the second coming and the consequences for rejecting His covenant are described as war, famine, pestilence/disease, wild beasts. "For thus saith the Lord God; How much more when I send my four sore judgments upon Jerusalem, the sword, and the famine, and the noisome beast, and the pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast?" Ezekiel 14:21.

When God gave His covenant to ancient Israel at Mount Sinai it was to be nothing but blessings to them. Should they refuse His covenant the inevitable result would be curses for rejection of God's blessings by sinful behavior which brings its own wages and reward—the covenant curses. "And if ye walk contrary unto me, and will not hearken unto me; I will bring *seven times* more plagues upon you according to your sins. I will also send *wild beasts* among you. . . I also walk contrary unto you, and will punish you yet *seven times* for your sins. And I will bring a *sword* upon you, that shall avenge the quarrel of my covenant: and when ye are gathered together within

your cities, I will send the *pestilence* among you; and ye shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy. And when I have broken the staff of your *bread*, ten women shall bake your bread in one oven, and they shall deliver you your bread again by weight: and ye shall eat, and not be satisfied.” Leviticus 26:21-26. The sevenfold plague—sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts are all the consequences of disobedience to the everlasting covenant.

When Israel became unfaithful to the covenant, God would remove His protective power, and the enemy nations would come and afflict the people of Israel as a result. They would bring the sword against them. Wild beasts (the nations such as Assyria, Babylon, etc.) would rob them of their children and destroy their livestock. Pestilence and famine would complete the desolation of the land. If God’s people persisted in their sins, the final consequence would take place: exile from the promised land. These preliminary judgments from God on His people were intended to wake them from their apostate condition and lead them to repentance.

The seven seals are very similar in nature as Jesus’ description of the era between His first coming and His second coming in the Apocalypse according to Jesus (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21).

In Revelation 4-5 we observed how Jesus overcame and subsequently sat with the Father on His throne. Of this we read in Revelation 3:21: “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.” How God’s people overcome and sit with Him is described in the seven seals. Revelation 6 describes the ongoing process through which God leads His people to become overcomers and have a share with Jesus on His throne. The seven seals are instruments that Christ uses for the sanctification of His church and the extension of His kingdom.

When in the full capacity of King, Christ breaks one by one the scroll’s seven seals, a series of events occurs on the earth. As Christ opens the first four seals, John observes four horses and their riders stepping onto the scene. The four horsemen are concerned with Christians and their response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel of the kingdom is being preached to all nations of the earth. When, after experiencing the gospel, people reject it, consequences are described.

“And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.” Revelation 6:2.

One of the living beings who looked like a lion summoned “a white horse.” The exalted Christ is portrayed in Revelation as having “white hair white as wool” (1:14); the Son of Man is seen on a white cloud (14:14); He returns on a white horse accompanied by the armies of heaven who are clad in white and ride white horses (19:11, 14). He wears a *stephanos* crown which is not the royal crown but the crown of victory—a garland given to winners in the Olympic games. This is the crown worn by Christ at His enthronement with the Father (Rev. 5-6) in light of His overcoming on the cross.

Christ is not yet an undisputed ruler of the world. Some people still do not accept His lordship and rulership in their lives. He “must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet” (1 Cor. 15:25). When He “delivers up the kingdom to the God and the Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24), then He will wear the royal crown as the King of kings and the Lord of lords (Rev. 19:12).

It was at Pentecost that Christ was enthroned on the throne of the universe (Rev. 5) and all authority was placed in His hands. What was ratified in heaven at the enthronement of the Lamb is now actuated in the experience of His people in the course of human history. Christ’s victorious death on the cross and his triumphal exaltation on the heavenly throne made the coming of the Holy Spirit possible (John 7:39). With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the proclamation of the gospel was propelled into motion. It was then that Christ “when forth overcoming and that he might overcome.” Through the Holy Spirit and through the preaching of the gospel by His faithful people, Christ has begun the expansion of His kingdom by conquering and winning human hearts for himself and bringing the gospel into their lives. Christ will continue the triumphant expansion of His kingdom until the total conquest is achieved. “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14, RSV).

“And when He had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.” Revelation 6:3, 4.

This second living being having the appearance of a calf for sacrifice, calls forth, Come! A fiery-red horse and its rider remove peace from the earth.

As the conquest of the gospel of Christ spreads throughout the world, those who accept the gospel receive great blessing and peace. However, resistance to the gospel results in a loss of peace. Of this consequence Jesus warned in His Apocalypse on the Mount of Olives. "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. And at that time many will fall away, and will deliver up one another and hate one another" (Matt. 24:9, 10).

The preaching of the gospel always divides people. Jesus warned the disciples when He commissioned them to preach the gospel: "Do not think that I came to set a bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household" (Matt. 10:34-36). The sword represents opposition and division. Resistance to the gospel causes them to persecute one another and "hate one another" (Matt. 24:10).

"And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand." Revelation 6:5.

The living being with a face like a man calls of a third black horse whose rider holds a balance indicating famine conditions. This black horse is the opposite of the white horse. Darkness indicates the absence of the pure gospel. There is a shortage of food.

"And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine." Revelation 6:6.

The wheat and barley symbolize God's word, Jesus Christ. Amos 8:11-13. The church of the Christian era has now retrograded to such an extent that it little understands God's gift of salvation in Christ. The scarcity of true faith is apparent. Salvation by works prevails. Old covenant religion of legalism predominates. The motivations of fear and hope of reward have obscured the love of God.

Nevertheless, the wine of Christ's blood is still available to save. The oil of His Holy Spirit still draws precious souls.

"And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see." Revelation 6:7.

The fourth living being like an eagle bids a fourth pale, ashen-grey horse that resembles a corpse in the advanced state of corruption.

“And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.” Revelation 6:8.

When the gospel of Jesus Christ is rejected the wages of sin is death. Death and the grave are given power over the fourth part of the earth. This horseman has limited power over the earth. The four horses parallel the four winds (Rev. 7:1). This horse has authority over one quarter of the earth.

Ezekiel announced that God would send His “four severe judgments against Jerusalem: sword, famine, wild beasts, plague” (Eze. 14:21). This is a most serious situation. It is an intensification of the three earlier horsemen. It is meant to lead God’s people to awaken and repent. As bad as this is it is but a foretaste of the final judgments that are to be unleashed upon the earth because of its sins. Then it will be too late and no repentance will be found.

The riders on the four horses depict the experience of the church during the first thousand years of the Christian era. In the initial stage of the Christian church, which was characterized by general faithfulness, through the preaching of Paul and the apostles, the spreading of the gospel was victorious and triumphant. This period was followed by a progressive spiritual decline leading to the period of the famine for God’s word and resulting in spiritual death that characterized the Christian church throughout the Medieval period. It was the period of spiritual decline and persecution when genuine faith was lost and the loving gospel message was resisted, forgotten, and gradually replaced by tradition.

This fourth beast, which represented the true church under the fourth seal, was like a flying eagle.

“And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.” Rev. 12.

Here “a time, times, and half a time” is explained to be 1260 days. These days used in symbolic prophecy are years, and refer to the

1260 years of Papal supremacy. The fourth beast represents the true church during that period.

“And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” Revelation 6:9, 10.

The scene depicts God’s faithful people who died because of their faith and their faithful bearing of their testimony to the gospel. Their souls are seen as being beneath the altar. This imagery is drawn directly from the Old Testament sacrificial ritual and must be understood symbolically.

The altar of burnt offering was situated in the outer courtyard of the temple. It represented the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross on this earth.

The most sacred part of the sacrifice was blood which symbolized life. When the blood was poured out, a person or animal died. Because life belong to God, the blood of the slain animals was drained and poured out beneath the altar. Thus, the faithful martyrs were beneath the altar because their life-blood had been poured out as an offering to God. “For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy. And I heard another out of the altar say, Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Thy judgments” (Rev. 16:6, 7).

“Those who dwell on the earth” are ones hostile to the gospel who viciously persecute God’s faithful people. This plea, “How long?” is not only for the vindication of those who are oppressed and slaughtered, but it is also a plea for the vindication of God in the eyes of those who have placed their trust in God.

“And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.” Revelation 6:11.

The blood of the faithful martyrs cries out to God who grants white garments of victory, triumph, and faithfulness. They are told to “rest yet for a little season.” The slain martyrs do not come to life until the return of Christ. Because they are dead does not mean that God has forgotten about them. They will return in the day of the resurrection.

They have to rest until their fellowservants, that is their brothers overcome even as Christ overcame. They are the ones who “have

washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14).

“And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.” Revelation 6:12, 13.

The opening of the sixth seal unleashes a series of phenomena which are cosmic in scope and describe the visitation of God’s final judgment to the earth, called the day of the Lord. It is the occasion when God will finally visit the earth as a result of the unfaithfulness of people to God.

One might observe the language John used is reminiscent of Isaiah’s prophecy with regard to the day of the Lord. “For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shed its light. . . . Therefore, I shall make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken from its place at the fury of the Lord of hosts in the day of His burning anger” (Isa. 13:10, 13).

The great earthquake occurred just about at the close of the 1260 years of dreadful persecution of the true church in 1798. The entire civilized world was startled by the greatest earthquake on record on the morning of All Souls’ Day, November 1, 1755. It centered at Lisbon, Portugal, and extended over almost all Europe and North Africa. Nearly 30,000 people were killed in six minutes.

Many people at once understood this event as the fulfillment of this prophecy. Recent scientific writers say: “The destruction of Lisbon in A. D. 1755 was a disaster which had a profound effect on European thought in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Voltaire was . . . reeling from the mental shock of the news from Lisbon. . . . Goethe, who was six years old at the time, remembered later how the ‘demon of fright’ spread across the world. Everyone was shocked. . . . Wesley [said], that the warning from God had been directed ‘not to the small vulgar, but to the great and learned, the rich, and honorable heathen commonly called Christians. . . .’ It would appear that the disaster of Lisbon had as profound effect on the minds and morals of men in the mid and late 1700’s as the atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan in 1945 have had on the twentieth century.”¹

¹ Basil Booth and Frank Fitch, *Earthshock*, pp. 95, 96.

Jesus spoke of these events in His sermon on the Mount of Olives. "In those days after that tribulation the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light." Mark 13:24. This testimony shows very clearly that this sign should appear within the 1260 years. Now as the 1260 years ran out in A. D. 1798, this sign must appear prior to that date.

The next great event followed on May 19, 1780, the Great Dark Day. Many people recognized this immediately as the specific fulfillment of this prophecy.

"The dark day in North America was one of those wonderful phenomena of nature which philosophy is at a loss to explain."

"The extent of the darkness was also very remarkable. It was observed at the most easterly regions of New England; westward, to the farthest part of Connecticut, and at Albany, N. Y.; to the southward, it was observed all along the sea coast; and to the north, as far as the American settlements extended. It probably far exceeded those boundaries, but the exact limits were never positively known. With regard to its duration, it continued in the neighborhood of Boston for at least fourteen or fifteen hours."

"The morning was clear and pleasant, but about eight o'clock there was observed an uncommon appearance in the sun. There were no clouds, but the air was thick, having a smoky appearance, and the sun shone with a pale, yellowish hue, but kept growing darker and darker, until it was hid from sight." There was "midnight darkness at noonday." GC 306, 307.

This strange darkness was not caused by an eclipse because the moon was full that night. About noon of that day, the people had to bring in candles. The cows came home from the pasture, the chickens went to roost, the birds fell silent. This terrible omen continued until about one o'clock next morning, when the moon appeared red as blood. Multitudes of Christians immediately saw these events as the fulfillment of the sixth seal.

This prophecy received a striking and impressive fulfillment in the great meteoric shower of November 13, 1833. "That was the most extensive and wonderful display of falling stars which has ever been recorded; 'the whole firmament, over all the United States, being then, for hours, in fiery commotion. No celestial phenomenon has ever occurred in this country, since its first settlement, which was viewed with such intense admiration by one class in the community, or such dread and alarm by another.' 'Its sublimity and awful beauty

still linger in many minds. . . . Never did rain fall much thicker than the meteors fell toward the earth; east, west, north, and south, it was the same. In a word, the whole heavens seemed in motion. . . . From two o'clock until broad daylight, the sky being perfectly serene and cloudless, an incessant play of dazzlingly brilliant luminosities was kept up in the whole heavens.” GC 332.

So it was that these three remarkable signs in the heavens followed each other, all within one person's lifetime. The minds of millions of people were directed to the fulfillment of Bible prophecy. Never had world events so electrified students of Bible prophecy as these three events.

The next great event is yet future—the heavens departing as a scroll when it is rolled together.

“And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.” Revelation 6:14.

This refers to the final earthquake mentioned again in Rev. 16:18 with the seventh plague, which is distinct and greater than the first one mentioned here. This will take place at the second coming of the Lord Jesus. “The mountains shake like a reed in the wind, and ragged rocks are scattered on every side. There is a roar as of a coming tempest. The sea is lashed into fury. There is heard the shriek of a hurricane like the voice of demons upon a mission of destruction. The whole earth heaves and swells like the waves of the sea. Its surface is breaking up. Its very foundations seem to be giving way. Mountain chains are sinking. Inhabited islands disappear. The seaports that have become like Sodom for wickedness are swallowed up by the angry waters.”²

“And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?” Revelation 6:15-17.

This language depicts the second coming. God will intervene to punish sin and defend His faith people. The martyrs underneath the altar are crying for God's intervention. Their persecutors must

² Ellen White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 637.

confront the holy God. God is about to judge the sinners and the enemies of His people. Jesus spoke of the appearance of the Son of Man. "And then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30).

All levels of human society are mentioned. Nobody is able to escape the judgment of God. Said Isaiah with reference to the day of the Lord: "And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of His majesty, when He ariseth to shake terribly the earth. In the day a man shall cast his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which they made each one for himself to worship, to the moles and to the bats; to go into the clefts of the ragged rocks, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of His majesty, when He ariseth to shake the terrible the earth." Isaiah 2:19-21.

"Who is able to stand?" While the second coming and the events accompanying it terrify the wicked, God's faithful people may hold on to the promise: "For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My loving-kindness will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken" (Isa. 54:10).

"And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour." Revelation 8:1.

"Silence in heaven." How stupendous the thought. Never since "the morning stars sang together: and all the sons of God shouted for joy" [Job 38:17] have the holy angels who cry day and night, Holy! holy! holy! making all heaven's arches resound with the high praises of God, permitted silence in heaven. But our Saviour has pointed us to a time when we may reasonably conclude that there will be silence in heaven; for he says, "When the Son of man shall come in His glory: and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory; and before Him shall be gathered all nations." Matt. 25:31, 32.

When this emptying heaven of all the holy angels takes place, will not there be "silence in heaven?" About half an hour. Will it not be some seven days? for a prophetic hour is fifteen days.

My dear brethren, will not the high praises of God from the redeemed break the silence of that half hour? When they sing the songs of redeeming love, and raise such shouts of victory, as heaven never before witnessed; from saints of all ages: from righteous Abel to the last sealed saint, from the sea, from the land, shall be gathered

by the great Jubilee trump, ascend with Jesus and the bright retinue that escorted the King of glory upon the white cloud, join in the greeting of patriarchs, prophets: holy apostles, and near and dear friends; will they not together break that silence that paved the way for an abundant entrance through the pearly gates to approach the tree of life? Amen.