
Revelation 6 The seven seals Zechariah 6:1-6

Revelation has several introductions: 1:1-3; 1:4-8; 1:9-20; chapters 2–3; chapters 4–5. After looking at some of these in the past few weeks, today we come to chapter 6 and we are right in the middle of the action! Revelation 6 (+ 8:1-2) gives us a picture of history as a whole; not just of ‘the end times’. John also clearly speaks about his own time, the period of the Roman Empire.

In the language of the New Testament, we already live ‘in the last days’ (Hebrews 1:2). All of world history since Pentecost is ‘the last days’.

Chapter 7 is a positive contrast to the gloomy chapter 6.

In the **first four seals**, the riders are not literal riders and horses: they are symbols of **powers** which are at work in history. Jesus, showing John the vision, borrows the idea of coloured horses from Zachariah 6.

The four riders go out together; numbers 2-4 are very negative: war, famine / hunger, diseases etc. Verse 6 suggests that the luxury goods oil and wine will be spared, so the rich will not suffer as much as the poor.

But the **first** rider is different: he is all in white and nothing negative is said about him. He represents the preaching of the Gospel and the spread of the Kingdom of God throughout history. This means that world history is a mixed bag. The first four seals show that there is the Gospel as a phenomenal power, and there is the decay, civil wars, the pest, Covid-19, Afghanistan, ...

The fifth and sixth seals form a pair of contrasts. The **fifth seal** shows the Christian martyrs under the altar. Christians will be killed for their faith, John sees. (And it has been happening throughout history.) They are asking God: how long? This can’t go on! And they even call for vengeance, like the people in the Psalms. They are, after all, human!

But God tells them to wait a little longer. He does not yet prevent the killing of believers. Things happen at God’s time. So we might have to wait as well.

The **sixth seal** shows us the final judgement, the outpouring of God’s wrath, in words derived from the Old Testament and from Matthew 24. It can’t get worse than verses 12-14; this is the end of the world! But the leaders of the world do not repent, they merely flee from God.

At that moment in the book there is an intermezzo (chapter 7). It seems that there is still time for conversion!

So seals 5 and 6 are in sharp contrast: Church and world. Where do you stand?

The **seventh seal** (Revelation 8:1-2) is a bit of an anti-climax! It does not bring the expected return of Jesus Christ, but merely silence. This is hard to understand. Is God listening to the prayers of the saints? Or is the church listening to the contents of the once-sealed book, which is now open?

Revelation prepares the readers for suffering. John does not promise believers an easy escape, but he calls us to perseverance. God decides the course; He places us in the world, in the chaos. His Kingdom has come and is already working powerfully (white first horse), but so far it is still incomplete. He is testing our faithfulness.

In the meantime, the Gospel must be preached. And at the end the wicked will not escape!
