

## Revelation week #14

### Revelation 6:1-8

#### I. Introduction

- a. The Bible teaches that the world is headed inevitably not toward peace and unity, but toward a final, cataclysmic war, the battle of Armageddon (16:14–16).
- b. Until that climactic holocaust, things will continue to deteriorate as the world falls deeper and deeper into chaos, confusion, and sin.
- c. As the end approaches, wars will increase, crime will escalate, there will be economic upheavals, and unprecedented natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, famines, and diseases (cf. Matt. 24:6–8).
- d. All those calamities will mark the outpouring of God's wrath on the fallen, rebellious world.
- e. The Old Testament prophets spoke of this terrifying time of future judgment.
- f. Describing Israel's sufferings during that time, Jeremiah wrote, "Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it; and it is the time of Jacob's distress" (Jer. 30:7).
- g. Describing the coming judgment of the Gentile nations, Isaiah wrote,
  - i. Draw near, O nations, to hear; and listen, O peoples! Let the earth and all it contains hear, and the world and all that springs from it. For the Lord's indignation is against all the nations, and His wrath against all their armies; He has utterly destroyed them, He has given them over to

slaughter. So their slain will be thrown out, and their corpses will give off their stench, and the mountains will be drenched with their blood. And all the host of heaven will wear away, and the sky will be rolled up like a scroll; all their hosts will also wither away as a leaf withers from the vine, or as one withers from the fig tree. (Isa. 34:1–4)

- h. In Revelation 5:1–7, Christ received from God the Father a scroll sealed with seven seals until opened by the One with authority to do so.
  - i. The scroll contained the title deed to the earth. Unlike normal title deeds, it did not contain a description of Christ's inheritance, but rather details how He will execute His reclaiming of what is rightfully His. Beginning in chapter 6, that scroll is unrolled and its seals broken.
  - ii. The unrolling of the scroll marks the beginning of God's wrath and judgment on sinful mankind as the Lord takes back creation from the usurper, Satan.
- i. Each of the scroll's seven seals (cf. 5:1) represents a specific divine judgment that will be poured out sequentially on the earth.
  - i. The seals encompass the entire period of the Tribulation (3:10), culminating with the return of Christ.
  - ii. It seems best to understand the first four seals as taking place during the first half of the Tribulation, the fifth stretching from the first into the second half, (called the "great tribulation" in 7:14 and lasting three and one-half years; 11:2;

12:6; 13:5) and the sixth and seventh taking place during that “great tribulation.”

- iii. Apparently the seventh seal contains the seven trumpet judgments (8:1–11:19) and the seventh trumpet (11:15) contains the seven bowl judgments (16:1–21).
- iv. The seven seals thus contain all the judgments to the end when Jesus Christ returns.
- j. The unfolding of the seven seals parallels our Lord’s chronology of Tribulation events found in Jesus’ own message describing the end times and His return, recorded in Matthew 24.
- k. The first seal describes a brief, false peace that will precede the final holocaust.
- l. In Matthew 24:4–5, Jesus also spoke of that peace, warning of the deceiving, false christs who will promote it.
- m. The second seal depicts worldwide war, which Jesus also predicted (Matt. 24:6–7).
- n. The third seal, famine, finds a parallel in Matthew 24:7. In that same verse Jesus predicted earthquakes, representative of natural disasters; the fourth seal represents death by such natural disasters, including earthquakes and plagues.
- o. The fifth seal, revealing the martyrs under the altar, finds a parallel in Jesus’ warning that believers will be martyred during the Tribulation (Matt. 24:9).
- p. During the unfolding of the sixth seal, the sky goes black—just as Jesus predicted it would (Matt. 24:29). The seventh seal reveals the final cataclysmic judgments, including all the devastation from the

trumpet and bowl judgments, leading up to His second coming (Matt. 24:37ff.).

- q. Just as a mother's birth pains increase in frequency and intensity as the time to give birth approaches, so the judgments depicted by the seals will intensify throughout the Tribulation until they culminate in the arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ in blazing judgment glory.
- r. The first four seals cover the period Jesus described as "the beginning of birth pangs" (Matt. 24:8).
- s. As terrible as those four judgments are, they are but the preliminary outpouring of God's final wrath in the last three seals.

## II. **The First Seal: False Peace.**

- a. 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. 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.(6:1–2)
- b. Chapters 4 and 5 described the praise offered in heaven to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Chapter 4 extols God as creator (cf. 4:11) while chapter 5 extols Jesus Christ as redeemer (cf. 5:9–10).
- c. Suddenly, as the seals begin to be opened in chapter 6, the praise ceases in anticipation of the coming judgment.
  - i. The scene now shifts from heaven to earth, which will be the focus of events through the return of

Christ in chapter 19 and the establishment of His earthly kingdom in chapter 20.

- d. Having received from His Father the title deed to the earth (5:7), the **Lamb** (the Lord Jesus Christ) **broke** the first **of the seven seals**.
  - i. As each seal is broken in the vision, what is written on the scroll is not read, but acted out.
  - ii. Immediately, John **heard one of the four living creatures** (cherubim; an exalted order of angels—cf. Ezek. 10:15) **saying with** a powerful, shattering **voice of thunder, “Come.”**
- e. In response to the angelic summons, **a white horse** came forth bearing its rider.
  - i. The first four seals involve horses and riders (the so-called four horsemen of the Apocalypse).
  - ii. Horses in Scripture are associated with triumph, majesty, power, and conquest (e.g., 19:11, 14; Job 39:19–25; Prov. 21:31; Isa. 43:17; Jer. 6:23; Zech. 9:10; 10:3).
    1. Some, seeing a parallel with 19:11, identify the one **who sat on** the white horse as Christ.
    2. But since Christ opens the sealed scroll, He cannot be the rider.
    3. Further, this rider wears a *stephanos*, a crown won as a prize; in 19:12 Christ wears many *diadēmas*, royal crowns.
    4. Unlike this rider, who carries a bow, Christ carries a sword (19:15).
    5. Finally, Christ returns at the end of the Tribulation, not at its beginning.

- iii. Others identify the rider as Antichrist.
  - 1. But since the other three riders represent not individual persons but impersonal forces (war, famine, and death), it is best to view the first one as a force as well.
  - 2. That force is best defined as a worldwide peace, shattered during the second seal by the second rider; 6:4).
  - 3. However Antichrist, as will be seen, will play a leading role in promoting this worldwide obsession with seeking peace.
- f. So before the terrors of the Tribulation break loose and lead to the battle of Armageddon there will come a period of world peace.
  - i. But it will be a deceptive peace, as the world is lulled into a false sense of security followed by war, famine, and death.
  - ii. The world's desperate desire for international peace will serve as the bait for the satanic trap.
  - iii. That longing for security and safety will play into the hands of Antichrist, Satan's ruler, who will convince the world that he can provide them.
  - iv. He will particularly deceive Israel, whose people have for so long desired peace, and he "will make a firm covenant with the many [Israel] for one week" (Dan. 9:27).
  - v. Antichrist's peace pact and protection of Israel will not last, however: "in the middle of the week [the Seventieth Week of Daniel's prophecy; the Tribulation] he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations

will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate” (Dan. 9:27).

- vi. The false peace that Antichrist brings will come to an abrupt halt at the midpoint of the Tribulation when he desecrates the temple in Jerusalem, betrays the Jewish people, and launches deadly attacks on them (cf. Matt. 24:4–10).
- vii. There can and will be no peace until the Prince of Peace sets up His earthly kingdom (20:1–6).
- g. The Bible repeatedly warns of the deadly lure of false peace.
  - i. Jeremiah described those in his day who pronounced “ ‘Peace, peace,’ but there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14; 8:11).
  - ii. He cried out to the Lord, “ ‘Ah, Lord God!’ I said, ‘Look, the prophets are telling them, “You will not see the sword nor will you have famine, but I will give you lasting peace in this place” ’ ” (Jer. 14:13).
  - iii. Writing of the deceitfulness of this future false peace Paul said, “While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape” (1 Thess. 5:3).
  - iv. It may seem incredible that the world, hovering on the brink of final disaster, could be so totally deceived.

- v. Yet that is precisely what happened on a smaller scale before the outbreak of the most devastating war to date, World War II.
  - 1. Adolf Hitler spelled out in detail his plans for conquest in his book *Mein Kampf*, published more than a decade before World War II began.
  - 2. Yet, incredibly, the Western allies (particularly Britain and France) persisted in believing Hitler's false claim to be a man of peace.
  - 3. They stood idly by as he reoccupied the Rhineland (demilitarized after World War I), thus revoking the Versailles Treaty, then annexed Austria, the Sudetenland, and Czechoslovakia.
  - 4. Desperate to appease Hitler and avoid war, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met with the Nazi dictator at Munich in 1938.
  - 5. Upon his return to England, Chamberlain triumphantly waved a piece of paper (containing a worthless pledge of peace from Hitler) which he claimed guaranteed "peace with honor ... peace for our time."
  - 6. When Winston Churchill (one of the few never taken in by Hitler) rose in the House of Commons to declare that England had suffered a total, unmitigated defeat he was shouted down by angry members of Parliament.



7. The deception was nearly universal; almost everyone misread Hitler's intentions.
  8. Only after he invaded Poland in September 1939 did the allies finally acknowledge the truth. By then it was too late to avoid the catastrophe of the Second World War.
- h. That the rider **had a bow** but no arrows, and that he was honored with **a crown** that **was freely given to him**, reveals that his **conquering** will involve bloodless victories. His crown (*stephanos*) is a winner's crown.
- i. He is no real king and has no real monarch's crown (*diadēma*), but has won a crown from the world for his triumphant achievements leading to world peace.
  - ii. He will not **conquer** by military force, but by cunning and deceit (cf. 2 Thess. 2:9–11).
  - iii. His conquest will be a “cold war” victory, a peace won by agreement, not conflict (Dan. 9:24–27).
  - iv. Even as the final doom of the world approaches, Antichrist will promise a golden age of peace and prosperity.
  - v. In gratitude, the world will honor him and elevate him to the position of supreme leadership.
  - vi. But both the accolades and the peace will be short-lived.
- III. **The Second Seal: War.**
- a. 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 (6:3–4)

- b. The world's euphoric mood of peace and harmony will be rudely shattered as the second horse and rider appear on the scene.
  - i. Just as World War II followed the deceptive peace promoted by Hitler, so devastating wars will spread throughout the world following the collapse of Antichrist's false peace.
  - ii. Here the story turns ugly and remains that way until the true King returns to establish His kingdom.
- c. As the Lamb **broke the second seal** John **heard the second living creature** summoning the second horseman, **saying, "Come."** Immediately **a red horse went out.**
  - i. **Red**, the color of fire and blood, depicts war. God's judgment descends and the short-lived, false peace led by Antichrist dissolves in a bloody holocaust.
  - ii. John first notes, concerning the rider, that **to him ... it was granted to take peace from the earth.**
  - iii. All that happens will be under God's sovereign control.
  - iv. He allows the false peace, and He ends it and brings war on the earth.
  - v. Contrary to the teaching of some, the judgments of the Tribulation do not reflect the wrath of men or the wrath of Satan; they can only express God's wrath poured out on the world.

- vi. It is He who holds the seven-sealed scroll and the Lamb who unrolls it.
- vii. Sometime early in the first half of the Tribulation, during the beginning of the birth pains (cf. Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:7–8; Luke 21:9), world peace turns to worldwide conflict as **peace** vanishes from **the earth**.
- viii. Describing this time Jesus said, “You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. . . . Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (Matt. 24:6–7).
- ix. **Men will slay one another** on an unprecedented scale. Violent slaughter will become commonplace.
- x. While Scripture does not give the details, the advances in modern weaponry suggest a terrible, unimaginable holocaust.
- d. John also noted that **a great sword was given to the rider**.
  - i. *Machaira* (**sword**) refers to the short, stabbing sword a Roman soldier carried into battle. It was also a weapon used by assassins.
  - ii. The vision depicts a **great** sword to describe the extent of the war.
  - iii. Antichrist’s false peace, then, will dissolve in a maelstrom of battle, assassination, rebellion, revolt, and massacre.
- e. As he was prominent in promoting the false peace, the final Antichrist will play a major role in the wars that follow it.

- i. Though the chief architect of the false peace, when wars break out all over the world he will have no choice but to resort to war himself in order to preserve his authority and power.
  - ii. Antichrist will be as skillful at war as he was at promoting the false peace.
  - iii. Daniel 8:24 describes his career as a warrior: “He will destroy to an extraordinary degree and prosper and perform his will; he will destroy mighty men and the holy people.”
  - iv. Among his victims will be many of God’s people (cf. 6:9; Matt. 24:9).
- f. Antichrist’s setting up of the abomination of desolation (Dan. 11:31; 12:11; Matt. 24:15) will touch off a massive conflict, described in detail in Daniel 11:36–45: Turn to and read
- g. As the head of a Western confederacy, the Antichrist, will initially portray himself as a champion of peace.
  - i. He will even appear to do what no one has been able to do, bring peace to the troubled Middle East.
  - ii. He will make a treaty with Israel, posing as their protector and defender.
  - iii. But all too soon his true colors will show, and his desire for dominance will provoke rebellion. Antichrist’s attempts to crush his enemies and rule them with an iron hand will touch off wars that will last throughout the remainder of the Tribulation.

- iv. Finally, when earth's true King, the Lord Jesus Christ, returns, Antichrist will be cast into the lake of fire forever (20:10).
  - h. The wars that begin with the opening of the second seal will last for the brief remaining time before the coming of the millennial kingdom.
- IV. **The Third Seal: Famine.**
- a. 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. 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. (6:5–6)
  - b. As the Lamb **broke the third seal**, the mighty voice of the **third living creature** heralded the coming of the third horse and rider.
  - c. John's use of the word **behold** reveals how startled and shocked he was by the rider's ominous appearance.
    - i. The color **black** is associated with famine in Lamentations 5:10 (KJV).
    - ii. Famine is a logical consequence of worldwide war as food supplies are destroyed and those involved in food production are killed.
    - iii. Jesus also predicted this future famine in Matthew 24:7: "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes."

- iv. God has used famine as a means of judgment in the past (e.g., Lev. 26:26; Deut. 32:24; 2 Kings 8:1; Ps. 105:16; Isa. 3:1; Jer. 16:4; Ezek. 4:16–17; 5:16; 14:13; Hag. 1:11), but this will be the most devastating famine in all of human history.
- d. The **pair of scales** the rider carried **in his hand** pictures the rationing that will result from the famine.
  - i. As in the United States during the Depression, in Europe in the aftermath of World War II, and today in many war-torn third-world nations, there will be starving people standing in food lines.
  - ii. But they will not find enough food to live on, as the fourth seal in John's vision reveals.
  - iii. Following the appearance of the black horse and its rider, John **heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures**.
  - iv. Since the **four living creatures** were stationed around the throne (4:6), this is likely the voice of God, the One sitting on the throne (4:2–3).
  - v. God also speaks in connection with the fifth seal (6:11).
  - vi. He speaks here as a reminder that the famine is a direct judgment from Him.
- e. God's pronouncements reveal how devastating the famine conditions will be.
  - i. **A quart of wheat** is barely enough to sustain one person for one day, while a denarius represents one day's wages for an average worker.
  - ii. People's labor will barely provide enough food for themselves and not enough to feed their families.

- iii. Those with families will be able to purchase **three quarts of barley for a denarius**.
- iv. That will provide food for their families, but barley was low in nutritional value and commonly fed to livestock.
- v. Thus, a person's wages will barely feed three people with low quality food.
- vi. Both of those scenarios represent starvation wages, and signify severe famine conditions.
- f. In light of those extreme conditions, God cautions people **not to damage (waste) the oil and the wine**.
  - i. Basic food staples will become priceless luxuries. Olive **oil** and **wine**, used in the preparation and cooking of food, as well as the purification of water, will need to be carefully protected.
  - ii. A deceptive peace followed by worldwide wars and a resultant devastating global famine will combine to escalate the universal chaos.
  - iii. All this will take place during the first half of the Tribulation, while the worst will be yet to come.
- V. **The Fourth Seal: Death.**
  - a. And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. 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.(6:7–8)
  - b. The fourth seal in the vision follows the pattern of the first three.

- c. The Lamb broke the seal and the fourth **living creature** summoned the fourth horse and its rider.
- d. John described the final horse as **an ashen horse**. *Chlōros* (**ashen**), from which the English words “chlorophyll” and “chlorine” derive, refers to a sickly, pale, yellow-green color.
- e. It describes green vegetation in its only other New Testament uses (8:7; 9:4; Mark 6:39).
- f. The horse’s color vividly portrays the pale-green pallor of death characteristic of the decomposition of a corpse.
- g. Fittingly, the rider **who sat on it had the** ominous **name Death**.
  - i. Death on a massive scale is the inevitable consequence of widespread war and famine. In this macabre and terrifying scene, John saw **Hades ... following with Death**.
  - ii. **Hades** (here representing the grave) becomes, as it were, the grave digger, burying the remains of Death’s victims.
  - iii. Death and Hades are also paired in 1:18 and 20:13, 14.
- h. The extent of the death and destruction wrought by war and famine is then quantified; **authority was given to** Death and Hades to destroy **a fourth of the** population of the **earth**.
- i. At the world’s current population of nearly 6 billion, that would amount to the staggering total of almost 1.5 billion deaths.
  - i. In an age of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, such a total is terrifyingly plausible.



- ii. Death will use four tools in his grim task.
  - iii. The first three elements, the **sword**, **famine**, and **pestilence**, are often linked together in Scripture (e.g., 1 Chron. 21:12; **2 Chron. 20:9**; **Jer. 14:12**; **24:10**; **44:13**; **Ezek. 6:11**), and all four elements appear in **Ezekiel 14:12–21**.
- j. The **sword** (war) and **famine** have already been discussed in connection with the second and third seals; the fourth seal exacerbates these conditions.
- k. **Pestilence** translates *thanatos*, the same word translated “Death” earlier in verse 8.
  - i. Here it may primarily refer to disease as the cause of death (cf. 2:23; 18:8) but is broad enough to encompass natural disasters such as the earthquakes predicted by Jesus (Matt. 24:7), floods, and volcanic eruptions.
  - ii. It could also refer to the effects of biological and chemical weapons.
- l. Throughout human history, disease has killed people on a far more massive scale than war.
  - i. More Union and Confederate soldiers died from disease during the Civil War than were killed in battle. ( 600,000 total deaths, battle deaths 150,000)
  - ii. An estimated 30 million people died during the great influenza epidemic of 1918–19 —more than three times as many as the estimated 8.5 million soldiers who died in battle during World War I.
  - iii. In addition, several million more died at about that same time in an outbreak of typhus in Russia, Poland, and Romania. In a world ravaged by war

and famine, it is inevitable that such disease will be widespread.

- m. At first glance, the inclusion of **wild beasts** with war, famine, and disease seems puzzling, since most creatures dangerous to man are either extinct or isolated in unpopulated regions.
  - i. But one explanation may be that the most deadly creature of all, the rat, thrives in all populated areas.
  - ii. Rats have been responsible for uncounted millions of deaths through out history, both by eating food supplies, and especially by spreading disease.
  - iii. The most infamous and devastating occurrence of rat-borne disease was the Black Death, a fourteenth-century outbreak of bubonic plague that wiped out one-fourth to one-third of Europe's population.
  - iv. In a world ravaged by war, famine, and disease, the rat population may run wild.
- n. The first four seals clearly describe awe-inspiring, frightening judgments without parallel in human history.
- o. There is nothing that has happened since John had this vision that could be the fulfillment of these judgments.
  - i. These doomsday prophecies cannot be applied to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (which was before John had these visions, since he wrote Revelation about A.D. 96) or any other event since that one.

- ii. Nothing this devastating has happened, yet these first four seal judgments are just the beginning of the horrific, worldwide woes that the sinful, rebellious world will experience.
- iii. Far worse is still to come in the remainder of the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls.
- iv. At that time the world of sinners will realize that “it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).
- p. There will be no escape for impenitent unbelievers from the terrors of the Tribulation, or from the infinitely worse terrors of hell.
- q. In the words of the writer of Hebrews, “How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Heb. 2:3).

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<sup>1</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 176–187.