

THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE Revelation 6:1-8

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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 (Rev. 6:2).

Francis Ford Coppola directed one of the most disturbing movies about the Viet Nam war, with a title straight out of the book of Revelation. *Apocalypse Now* described war as a crazed mayhem in which objectives are confused and morality is impossible. In one scene, an American officer arrives in the midst of a firefight. Shells are exploding everywhere, machine gun tracers fill the air, and soldiers look wide-eyed and desperate. “Who’s in charge here?” the officer asks. Nobody answers, which is Coppola’s point in the film. It is a scene out of hell, with no direction, purpose, or solution.¹

The book of Revelation presents exactly the opposite understanding of the barbarism of human history. As John’s vision continues in chapter 6, the opening of the seals on God’s scroll unleashes great tribulations upon the earth. Yet far from being without purpose, John’s vision shows them as reflecting the divine will under the lordship of Jesus Christ. G. K. Beale comments: “Revelation 6:1-8 is intended to show that Christ rules over such an apparently chaotic world and that suffering does not occur indiscriminately or by chance.”² While the four horsemen bring woe and death, they do not bring dismay to those who are trusting in Christ.

¹ Adapted from James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 17:1-2.

² G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 370.

The visions of God's throne and of the glorified Lamb in chapters 4 and 5 occupy the very heart of the book of Revelation, depicting God as sovereign over history. In chapter 6, Jesus begins opening the seals of the scroll he has been found worthy to open. Four riders go forth at his command, showing that Christ reigns not only over the hearts of those who love him but also over the dangerous forces unleashed in the world. Jesus truly is, as John has said, "the ruler of kings on earth" (Rev. 1:5), and therefore his followers can face tribulation with hope.

UNDERSTANDING THE FOUR HORSEMEN

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse have become a potent metaphor in popular culture. The 1924 Notre Dame football team under legendary coach Knute Rockne featured an all-star backfield known as the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame. The Old Testament background shows, however, a less benign significance for these images. Zechariah 1 featured horsemen who patrolled the earth for God. He later wrote of four chariots, whose horses mirror the colors of those in Revelation 6, who went out into the four corners of the earth to impose God's will on his enemies (Zech. 6:1-8).

The connection with Zechariah's horsemen suggests that these in Revelation go forth to inflict punishment on a world in rebellion to God. The church, however, is in the world and is thus equally subject to these woes. The second horseman, for instance, will cause people to "slay one another," and the word for "slay" is used elsewhere for the slaughter of Christ and of believers (see 1 Jn. 3:12; Rev. 5:6, 9). The judgments depicted in this vision also follow the pattern laid down in Ezekiel 14:12-23, the point of which was not only to punish idolaters but also to purify the faith of God's people. Alan F. Johnson writes, "Each of the first four seals, then, represents conflict directed at Christians to test them and to sift out false disciples."³ Jesus said he came not "to bring peace" to the world, "but a sword" (Mt. 10:34), promising that those who lose their life for him will gain it (Mt. 10:39). Therefore, while the persecution of the church may not be in the foreground of these woes, it is certainly bound up with them.

³ Alan F. Johnson, *Revelation*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 473.

Moreover, there seems to be at least a general correspondence with the calamities foretold by Jesus in his Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24; Mk. 13; Lk. 21). Christ spoke of deception, war, strife, famine, and persecution, concluding that “the end is not yet... these are but the beginning of the birth pains” (Mt. 24:6-8). This helps us to locate the timing of the calamities depicted in Revelation 6:1-8. Some scholars understand Jesus to be inaugurating the final days when he opens the seals of God’s scroll. To the contrary, these woes occur throughout the current age of the world. Chapter 5 showed Christ approaching God’s throne to take the scroll. This corresponds to his ascension into heaven at the conclusion of his first coming. This accords with the Great Commission, when Jesus declared, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt. 28:18). Revelation thus depicts Jesus opening the seals so as to bring about God’s plan for our current age. Vern Poythress writes: “Such things occurred during the tumults of the Roman Empire, are occurring now, and may be expected to occur just before the Second Coming.”⁴

The most important point made by the vision of the four horsemen is the sovereignty of Christ over the tribulations on earth. Each horseman is summoned by a cherub when Jesus breaks the seal. Notice throughout the passage that the horsemen are equipped with what is “given” to them. The white horseman is given a crown, the red horseman is “permitted” to remove peace and is “given a great sword,” and the pale horseman is “given authority” to slay a quarter of the earth. In each case, the evil proceeds of its own volition, so that Christ is not directly causing the calamities on earth. Yet the horsemen do only what they are assigned and permitted to do according to the plan of God and the sovereign rule of Christ.

The woes unfolded in this vision are, in fact, the record of history as Christ judges the rebel world. Psalm 2 thus warns the ungodly: “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way” (Ps. 2:12). At the same time, the sovereignty of Christ provides the greatest comfort to his suffering people in the world. However hellish the affairs of earth may seem, when the Christian asks, “Who’s in charge here?” the Bible points to the Lamb who was slain for our sins, who is sovereignly resolved to bring all his people to salvation in the end.

⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 114.

THE FIRST RIDER: CONQUERING AND TO CONQUER

Chapters 4 and 5 depict God's actions in heaven, and in chapter 6 John sees the resulting events on earth. "Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals," John wrote, "and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, 'Come!'" John then saw the first horseman: "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" (Rev. 6:1-2).

Before understanding the mission of this horseman, we must first determine his identity. The three main candidates are that he is Christ going forth with his gospel in the world, the Antichrist going forth with violence, or simply the various conquerors who periodically arise in history.

Those who believe the rider is Christ point to the appearance of Jesus in chapter 19 as a white rider who leads the armies of heaven. White is the color of righteousness and in both John's Gospel and Revelation Jesus is frequently said to conquer (Jn. 16:33; Rev. 5:5).⁵ There are, however, reasons to doubt this view. The primary objection is that, like the celebrated Notre Dame football players, these four horsemen are all on the same team. Their purpose is tribulation not salvation. Moreover, this rider wears the laurel crown of a conqueror rather than the "many diadems" that Jesus wears in Revelation 19:12. While the color white often speaks of righteousness, it can also represent the victorious warrior, such as the Roman conquerors who rode white horses in their triumphal parades. For these reasons, many scholars see the first rider not as Christ but his Satanic counterfeit the Antichrist, especially since he also is said to conquer (Rev. 11:7; 13:7). It is probably best, however, to see the first rider as neither Christ nor the Antichrist, but as the calamitous woe of military conquest. The bow was a weapon of violent warfare and was the preferred weapon of Rome's chief menace, the Parthians. Philip Hughes summarizes: "The *bow*... is a symbol of violence, the *crown* he is given signifies despotic rule, and the *white* colour of his horse

⁵ For a thorough presentation of this view, see William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940, 1967), 93-6.

betokens conquest, while his going forth *conquering and to conquer* expresses his lust for power and world domination.”⁶

Understood this way, the first seal unleashed warlords into history, who are granted authority to achieve conquest on the earth. The Roman emperors claimed a *Pax Romana* in which peace had been secured by the Roman sword. However, the Parthians who defeated their legions in AD 62 showed the frailty of this claim. Throughout history Christ has sovereignly unleashed men like Attila, Ghengis Khan, Napoleon and Hitler to overthrow human claims to peace on earth while mankind was all the while at war with God. Vern Poythress writes: “Roman peace promised prosperity, but the reality was different. Conquest, bloodshed, famine, and death have stalked the human race throughout the church age.”⁷

THE RED, BLACK, AND PALE RIDERS

The second, third, and fourth riders depict the ravages that accompany warfare in human history. John continues with the red horse, who brings slaughter: “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” (Rev. 6:3-4).

The bright red color of this second horse fits the theme of violent bloodshed. John says that he “was given a great sword,” and with it he was “permitted to take peace from the earth.” If the first rider brings military conquest, this second rider brings civil war and bloodshed within a society. Notice that Christ does not have to cause violence, but only to remove his restraint and permit it. The reason for this is the hatred within sinful mankind. James explained: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel” (Ja. 4:1-2). It is tragically ironic that a society that has turned from God is surprised by the violence of its people, since the grace of Christ is the only true restraint on sin. Our own society has unleashed the most deadly influences, from violence-glorifying entertainment to

⁶ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), Pg.

⁷ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 115.

sexual “liberties” that destroy the family. Then, when these sinful forces wreak mayhem and bloodshed in our streets, schools, and homes, secular leaders express dismay. Revelation 6:3-4 informs us that the red horseman of slaughter brings judgment by permitting the expression of violent passion within unbelieving mankind.

The sword of slaughter may refer to both civil strife and persecution against Christians. The latter is particularly likely since the fifth seal uses the same word for slaughter when it reveals “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God” (Rev. 6:9). This sword of slaughter against Christ’s people is quite active today, as news regularly comes of wrongful arrests and beatings of Christians in China, savage slaughter of believers in Nigeria, and the repression of ancient Christian communities in Egypt.

The third rider comes forth on a black horse, bringing famine to the earth: “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!’” These words depict economic collapse, so that people can barely afford the necessities of life. The province of Asia was self-sufficient in olive oil and wine, but had to import grain from Egypt and other sources. Beale reports that these prices reflect an inflation rate between 800 and 1600%.⁸ A quart of wheat was enough to feed one person for a day, and since it now cost an entire day’s wages many workers would be unable to feed their families. The only recourse was to eat barley, a less-nutritious grain usually reserved for livestock, so that families were existing at the margin of survival.

This third rider brings deprivation but not total starvation. Thus one cries, “do not harm the oil and wine!” (Rev. 6:6). The preservation of olives and vineyards may indicate that only the poor are afflicted by the famine, with the more wealthy able to preserve their luxuries. The cry may also reflect a famine that struck Asia in 92 AD, during which the emperor Domitian ordered that olive groves and vineyards be torn down to provide more land for grain. When landowners banded together to protest, the emperor revoked his order. This is at least the kind of situation that John’s vision presents, with dire economic hardship producing civil strife and class conflict. Douglas Kelly reminds us of Christ’s sovereignty over this woe, commenting that “a

⁸ Beale, *Revelation* 381.

disobedient culture that rejects God's truth ultimately loses its economy."⁹

Christians often suffer during economic crises, particularly when their loyalty to Christ creates trouble with employers and government powers. In his letter to Pergamum, Jesus admonished the church not to "eat food sacrificed to idols" or "practice sexual immorality" (Rev. 2:14). This probably referred to the idolatry necessary for membership in a trade guild, so that Christians who refused these sins could not hold down well-paying jobs. Revelation will later refer to the "mark of the beast," which signified the worship of idols, without which "no one can buy or sell" (Rev. 13:17). This shows that faithful Christians are sometimes forbidden to participate in economic life.

This issue is especially relevant in America today, as our federal government is requiring Christian business owners to purchase health-care plans for their employees that provide for abortion-causing contraceptives. Failure to do this leads to crippling government fines. In a nation created to protect the religious freedoms of its people, Christians are increasingly permitted to obey Christ only in our private lives. To operate even a privately-owned business, one must betray his conscience before God. Christians should be praying for law suits that seek to overturn this unjust tyranny. Yet we should not be surprised, since Revelation predicts this very kind of persecution.

When the fourth seal is broken, its rider comes forth on a horse that most translations describe as "pale." More accurately, this is a sickly green horse, the Greek term *chloros* providing the English words chlorophyll and chlorine. The color befits its purpose: "And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him" (Rev. 6:7). This fourth horseman is usually thought to depict disease and pestilence, which is why its victims are swift to enter the grave.

It is unclear whether the final statement of verse 8 refers only to the fourth horseman or to all four. But it is clearly a summary statement of all that John has seen: "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." This list of deadly woes comes from Ezekiel 14:11-23, which lists these same judgments on the idolatrous people of Israel. Ezekiel spoke of wild beasts roaming the land as a

⁹ Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 123.

sign that human society had completely broken down; this reference probably accounts for the addition of wild beasts in Revelation 6:8. The allusion to Ezekiel also shows that Christ's judgments are in response to idol-worship and unbelief, and indicates that godly people will suffer together with the wicked.

As the fourth rider flies out from the scroll, we are reminded of the sovereignty of Christ who has broken the seals. Terrible as they are, these woes occur for the praise of his glory. There are four living creatures who sang praise to him (Rev. 5:9), and these same four cherubim summon the four riders of doom. Their woes will continue on earth throughout the present age until Christ returns so that his purposes may be achieved. G. K. Beale writes: "Christ has made the world forces of evil his agents to execute his purposes of sanctification and judgment for the furtherance of his kingdom."¹⁰ This is most clearly seen in the calling of the fourth rider, who is named Death and is followed by Hades. Jesus earlier declared, "I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18). Therefore this rider, like the others, goes forth only at his command and is so restricted by Christ only to bring those woes that will thwart the opponents of his gospel reign.

SOVEREIGN FOR JUDGMENT AND SALVATION

It is frequently asserted by atheists that the "problem of evil" is a potent challenge to the Bible. "How can there be a good God," they demand, "when evils such as these occur so frequently?" This problem exists only for the unbeliever, however. Far from being embarrassed about the existence of a holy and loving God in the presence of terrible human suffering, Revelation boldly proclaims Christ's utter sovereignty over these four horsemen. What meaning are we to take from this shocking state of affairs?

The first message we should take from the four horsemen is the resolute anger of heaven towards the sin and rebellion of earth. James Boice writes: "The pictures painted by John in this last book of the Bible are not for our amusement or puzzles merely to exercise our minds. They are warnings of how seriously God takes sin and of how he is going to judge it fully in time."¹¹ Some may have concluded that

¹⁰ Beale, *Revelation*, 385.

¹¹ Boice, *Revelation*, 17:12.

Jesus is no longer concerned with sin since he has died on the cross to make atonement. Leon Morris reminds us, however, that “Christ’s death was not only salvation from sin, but condemnation of sin.”¹² By pouring out his wrath on his sin-bearing Son, God showed how resolute is his hatred towards all evil. Therefore a world that rejects Jesus and scorns his atoning death should expect nothing less than judgment from heaven. Friedrich von Schiller was thus correct when he stated, “The history of the world is the judgment of the world.”¹³

It does not occur to people today that God is actively judging the world in the calamities we experience. To be sure, Christians should avoid declaring that particular events represent God’s judgment on particular people. Yet John’s vision shows that the secularist pursuit of a godless paradise will not be permitted by God. God cast down the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, and he continues to smash every millennial utopia of idolatrous mankind. The Roman emperors of old and today’s politicians unite in promising peace and prosperity while flouting God’s commands. They forget that the purpose of the world is not the pleasure of man in sin but rather the glory of God in righteousness. Paul taught that “although [men] knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:21). For this reason, he said, “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Rom. 1:18).

In our own lifetime, Western society has experienced all the woes of the four riders. Despite our initiatives for peace we remain beset with the conquering designs of men bent on domination. The 9/11/2001 hijacking of jet liners and collapse of the World Trade Center towers may have shocked Americans, but would not surprise the discerning reader of history. Politicians wrangle over the failure to end wars, but none will address the underlying problem of sin and heaven’s wrath. In the days of our Founding Fathers, the American government would call for days of prayer and fasting when military defeats were suffered. This piety was lost in the secular humanism of the Twentieth Century. Demagogues called the First World War the “war to end all wars.” Their hubris was exposed by the bloodiest century on record, the scourge of which continues today.

¹² Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 103.

¹³ Cited in Geoffrey B. Wilson, *New Testament Commentaries*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), 2:511.

We could make similar comments about the red rider unleashing violence within society. When bullets shatter schoolrooms, we complain about guns and neglect the problem of sin in our hearts, refusing to call for repentance before God. When the sexual revolution of the 60's and 70's led to the devastation of the AIDS virus in the 80's and 90's, none would speak of repenting from sin. As economic debt soars, lawmakers refuse the truth about our mad pursuit of short-term pleasure at the expense of generations to follow. In each kind of woe represented by Revelation's horsemen, judgment is the logical result of sin and also the sovereign decree of the reigning Christ. This wrath calls the world to repent from sin and seek salvation through Jesus Christ.

A second emphasis from this vision is noteworthy especially for believers, as the horsemen of Revelation 6 reveal Christ's purpose in the calamities of history. I mentioned that some people object to God's sovereignty over evil, but the opposite is far more alarming. How terrible it would be if the message of Francis Ford Coppola's movie *Apocalypse Now* was really true, that no one is in charge and that the world's evils rage uncontrolled and unguided!

John's vision teaches Christians that these woes will continue in our world until Christ returns. Richard Bewes writes that the church should therefore "expect to live adventurously."¹⁴ But we also comforted that under Christ's control these woes will not destroy us. Those who trust in Jesus may suffer these trials but will be saved through them. Paul preached, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22), and the vision of our Savior opening the seals proves that we will be saved, since he rules over the trials. Leon Morris concludes: "though apocalyptic judgments be loosed against all mankind, God's people need never be dismayed. They will be preserved no matter the tribulation."¹⁵

In ascribing sovereignty over history to Christ, we should remember that these woes are not caused by him, though he grants them their sphere and limitations. It is we in our sin who are the cause of these tribulations. "The point is," writes G. B. Caird, that "just where sin and its effects are most in evidence, the kingship of the Crucified is to

¹⁴ Richard Bewes, *The Lamb Wins: A Guided Tour Through the Book of Revelation* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000), 54.

¹⁵ Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, 102.

be seen, turning human wickedness to the service of God's kingdom... nothing can now happen, not even the most fearsome evidence of man's disobedience..., which cannot be woven into the pattern of God's gracious purpose."¹⁶

I noted earlier Paul's diagnosis of the problem of this world, when he said that the wrath of God is revealed against our sins (Rom. 1:18). That may be a fitting conclusion for our study of the four riders of the Apocalypse, but it was only the beginning of Paul's gospel presentation. Though man has ruined himself and brought judgment on history through his sin, God has intervened to save through his Son, Jesus Christ. Paul states the problem in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." He continued, just as John will continue in Revelation, to reveal the solution from heaven, that sinners "are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..., to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:24). Therefore, as we contemplate the holy wrath of heaven against the sins of earth, we must never forget the gospel's invitation: "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13). With Christ reigning over history and with his salvation offer still open, let us as his people commit our time on earth to the gospel and to the work and the glory of the only kingdom that will never fail.

¹⁶ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (San Francisco: Harper, 1966), 83.