

“THE FOUR HORSEMEN.”

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Scripture Texts: Revelation 6:1-8

Introduction

With chapter six we start opening the door to some pretty harsh reality, the reality of evil and judgment. But remember we didn't start here.

We started in chapter one with a vision of a victorious Christ. Then we saw Christ the great Shepherd shepherding the saints in seven churches, speaking truth and love and life to His church on earth. He knows the details of every church and cares for them perfectly according to their need.

In Chapters four and five we saw God on the throne and the Lamb at the center of heaven, being worshiped by all creation. Christ is the centering reality, the central vision. He is high and lifted up, exalted and worshiped. Through five chapters it is all about Him.

We can face what comes next knowing that Christ is the alpha and omega, the first and the last, the one who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who has the keys of Death and Hades.

No matter how bad history gets, no matter how much suffering and persecution, we must keep our eyes on the center, on the throne and on the Lamb who holds the scroll.

Chapters 4-16 are the meat of Revelation, part of the great throne room vision from which we have the seven seals, the seven trumpets, the seven bowls of the seven plagues. This is when God reveals Himself in history in a series of judgments leading up to the second coming of Christ and the consummation of all things.

It is as if Christ is preaching four seven point sermons in which He explains to us the meaning of history and the world and evil and suffering.

The first sermon or vision is the sealed scroll which holds all the judgments of God. This judgment begins as the Lamb opens the seals one at a time. What follows is the revelation of Jesus Christ making known the will of God.

There are two keys to understanding this chapter and what follows in Revelation.

First, if you don't know about God's glory or don't care about God's glory or don't think God's glory is a big deal or you aren't offended when God's glory is mocked or despised, then these chapters will bother you.

If we understand that everything in history must work toward glorifying God then these chapters won't surprise you. If we are primarily concerned with what concerns God then we will not be shocked. If we know that God has created all things for His glory and He promises to punish whatever doesn't glorify Him and if you want to see God's glory vindicated and justice done then all that follows makes perfect sense.

For us to really understand these next chapters we need to have a heightened love for God's glory. These chapters will help us gain a more passionate commitment for God's glory.

The other key thing to remember before we open this scroll and unleash all the tumult and suffering is that the scroll is in the hand of Christ who has all things under control. Our peace and our confidence are not in world events or politicians, but in God alone.

Remember chapters 4 and 5, the vision of the throne room with God seated at the center and the Lion-Lamb next to Him holding the scroll and all of creation joined in the most exalted worship, when we turn to face the reality of evil and judgment.

In fact, understand this. The tumults and trials and judgments are because of the unsealing of the scroll. They come from the throne of God. He is executing His will and His judgment in all the earth. This is the hand of God as He punishes and chastens and disciplines mankind.

When calamities come and they will continue to come to the very end, put your trust in the Lamb and in nothing else. Not politicians, not peace and prosperity, not money, not man, in nothing.

In chapter 7 there is an important reminder of God's provision and protection for the saints in the midst of all that is happening.

The First Seal: The White Horse of Conquest, vs. 1-2

Revelation 6:1-2 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!" 2 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 action of chapter six is closely tied to what we saw in the vision in chapters four and five. The Lamb, who alone in all the universe is worthy to open the seals, opens the first seal. But the four living creatures play a role.

The first of these four living creatures speaks and his voice sounds like thunder. He summons the first rider and behold a white horse appears, the white horse of conquest.

In my first sermon on Revelation I said: I am not saying I have it all figured out now. Along the way I will tell you when I am not sure what something means. This one of those times.

Many commentators think that the rider on the white horse is Christ and the conquest He brings is the conquest of the Gospel, as the Gospel is sent out into the world. They think this for many reasons.

First of all they think since these six seals represent an unfolding of history since the time of Christ, it makes sense that Christ should come first.

The strongest reason for this claim is that in Revelation 19:11 there is another white horse and there the rider is clearly identified as Christ.

They also point to Rev. 3:21 and 5:5 which speak of Christ as the conqueror. This rider comes conquering and to conquer.

The theme of Revelation is victory, the victory of Christ and His church.

White is associated with what is holy, so this rider can't be evil like the next three.

The rider has a crown and Rev 14:14 has Christ wearing a crown.

Matthew 10:34 Christ says He brings a sword.

They also see parallels in Psalm 45:3-5, Psalm 110, and Zech. 1:8ff where the second, third and fourth riders are in the service of the first.

They see the conquering of the Gospel as the cause of the strife that follows, for Christ has brought division into the world. Because of Christ there is opposition and persecution.

But some other commentators disagree and I find myself leaning in their direction.

First, the vision of Revelation 19:11 is far ahead of this vision. And there are many differences with Rev. 19. In fact the similarities seem to end with the white horse, the rider is so different.

Furthermore there seems to be a very strong parallel between Revelation 6-8 and Matthew 24 where Jesus prophesied about these events before His death. There Jesus said there would be messianic pretenders, false Christ's.

Matthew 24:4-5 And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray.

Finally the view that this rider is Christ doesn't fit with the other three seals and other three horsemen. These four all seem to be evil powers representing aspects of God's judgment. They come forth by Christ's hand and with His authority. Is the first rider really the same as the one opening the first seal? It's possible but it seems less likely to me.

But I confess I am standing against the majority and I am not confident enough in my own perspective to say I think they are wrong. I would have to do much more study and research than my time allows.

The Second Seal: The Red Horse of War (Slaughter), vss. 3-4

Revelation 6:3-4 When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” 4 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.

Matthew 24:6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.

The fiery red horse symbolizes the fire of God’s judgment through war.

The term slaughter is a broad term which includes war, but all other forms of bloodshed as well. This is a vision of strife and conflict, the taking away of peace. Jesus said there would be wars and rumors of wars and there have been for 2000 years.

This may be a picture in particular of persecution. No century of the church has been without it.

Remember:

Hebrews 12:29 God is a consuming fire.

Revelation 1:14-15 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace.

Revelation 4:5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God.

The Third Seal: The Black Horse of Famine, vss. 5-6

Revelation 6:5-6 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. 6 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!”

Matthew 24:7-8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

The third horse is the black horse bringing God's judgment through famine.

One of the devastating effects of war was famine. Invading armies would camp in fields, steal crops, and what they didn't steal they would burn.

Wheat and barley were the basic staples of survival and in times of crisis and war the necessities of life can fall to starvation rations where an entire day's wages was needed just to buy enough to eat for one day. One ration of wheat for a day's wages and three rations of barley for a day's wages. This is a vision of scarcity, of economic hardship and inequality.

In this vision oil and wine are spared in the famine, meaning it was a partial famine, not as bad as it could be. Or the presence of oil and wine means the wealthy will still have access and enjoy their abundance. The shortage may be shortage of necessities.

In times of crisis the poor are always affected in disproportionate ways.

Famine is nature out of balance. Necessities are scarce and luxuries are in abundance. We have so much of what we don't need and barely enough of what we really need. We don't need more technological stimulation and fast food. We need spiritual inspiration and spiritual food.

The Fourth Seal: The Pale Horse of Death, vss. 7-8

Revelation 6:7-8 When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" 8 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 fourth horse is pale symbolizing the terror of death and Hades (the place of the dead). This is the worst yet of the four. They are growing in intensity as God's judgments build.

Before there was strife, now there is death. Many forms of death are described, sword, hunger, pestilence and beasts of the earth. All are included and none spared from the troubles of this life.

This sounds like a summary of all the evil that came with the first three horses and riders.

We are reminded that many Christians were persecuted and killed by being thrown to wild beasts. Christians face double trouble, persecution because they are Christian, and the general trials that all on earth face.

Yet there is a limit on this calamity as well. Only a quarter of the earth will be affected. This is still the birth pangs and not yet the final judgment.

Conclusion.

Conquest, bloodshed (war), famine and death have been a reality since the beginning of time and will continue to be until the end comes.

The first four seals are not signs of the end as Jesus says. They are but the beginning of the birth pains (Matthew 24:6, 8). They are common place all through history. These four horsemen ride all over the earth. To and fro they ride throughout the entire course of history. The world in general and Christians in particular have seen these horses and riders many times over.

These four horsemen represent the flow of human history from the time of Christ and the early church to now.

This is God's ongoing judgment against all who reject Him and His glory and who reject His Son and His glory. All such events are pictures or parables on a small scale of what happens when people reject God and of what will happen at the last day.

All the pain and suffering and tragedy and disasters and horror and death that have taken place in human history are the birth pangs of God's judgment and what happens when people don't honor and worship Him. When they refuse to worship God, He hands them over to their own gods and their own destruction.

See Romans 1-2 and Matthew 24.

The vision will now shift from the earth back to heaven. Two final questions remain to be answered in the midst of God's judgments. What about all the saints and martyrs? What about all the wicked who yet remain on earth?