

All Things New: The Four Horseman and the Martyrs
By Jason Huff
January 19, 2020
Zechariah 6:1-8; Mark 13:1-13; Revelation 6

Our final Scripture reading today is Revelation 6. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest. When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword. When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!" When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed. I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?""

Vengeance is pretty popular these days. The four films in the Marvel series *The Avengers* have made a total 7.7 billion at the box office – even though the good guys usually stop evil instead of bringing justice to evildoers. *Law and Order: SVU* just hit its 21st season, beating out the original *Law and Order* that ran for 20. Even in our political realm, on both sides, we seek vengeance on who we see has wronged us by making others pay. As a song by my favorite songwriter says, "Everybody wants justice done on somebody else."

Today's passage in Revelation is tricky. We start to see repeating cycles, where we can see similar events happening several times in history. At the same time we get glimpses into the final judgment at the end of the world. Today's section of Revelation is the first time we've seen the judgment of God come to the forefront. We begin to see God's plan take shape and unfold, and part of that plan is bringing His Kingdom about through judging the nations.

As a refresher, we've been in the throne room of God where the Father presents Jesus the Lamb with a scroll sealed with seven seals that only He can open. He gave Himself as the sacrifice to bring God's people to Himself, which make Him worthy. After the praise and honor and worship He is rightly due, Jesus begins to open the scroll. That's where this passage starts.

As each of the first four seals on the scroll is opened, a new horse and rider appears. The first represents conquest; the second, war; the third, famine; and the fourth, death. But what is the deeper meaning? None of the interpretations I'm about to share are unique to me, and none of them are agreed upon unanimously. I'm telling you what I think makes the most sense as I try to think like a first-century Christian.

The white horse riding in conquest represents Jesus and the spread of the gospel. In His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus brought the Kingdom into this world. The apostles and disciples spread the news of the Kingdom far and wide. By 62 AD, the gospel made it all the way to Rome, spreading to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire. The truth of Jesus would outlast and overcome the Roman Empire.

We have a couple hints that the white rider is Jesus and the spread of the salvation message. In Revelation 19, Jesus appears on a white horse to bring judgment on the rebellion against God. White also constantly symbolizes the purity and holiness of God throughout the book. Finally, this rider's conquest is different from the war represented by the red horse and rider. How do you have conquest without war? You have the conquest of the Kingdom of God, which had already started by the time Revelation was written. The invasion of the Kingdom of God into the hearts and minds of His people had already begun.

The second horse of war appears next, taking peace from the earth. Again, thinking from the first century, war had come to Jerusalem. By 70 AD, the city was destroyed, the Jews dispersed, and over a million people dead in its ruins. By 90 AD, persecution of Christians had begun in earnest. Civil war eventually ravaged the Empire for a hundred years as 59 people attempted to take the throne. The famous Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, was over.

Then there is the third rider on a black horse with scales in his hand. This one is harder to understand. Wheat and barley are wildly overpriced – a quart of wheat made a loaf and a half of flatbread, a man's daily need. The prices represent eight times the typical cost for that amount of food. The prices on oil and wine go unchanged, though. What we have is famine and oppression. The rich have their luxury items, but the poor barely survive. This again matches with the exorbitant taxes in the 2nd and 3rd century. The poor could barely buy the simplest of foods, but the rich had all they wanted. This affected Christians most of all, as their persecution led to poverty.

Finally, there is the fourth rider, which is death riding a pale horse, and a representation of the grave (Hades) following behind. By their hands, a fourth of the earth will die. This follows what happened during the second century in the Roman Empire. A pandemic hit the Roman Empire from 165-180AD. Some think it was smallpox or measles. We really don't know. What we do know is that it killed almost a third of the population in fifteen years.

It was massive. Yet the plague led to the spread of Christianity throughout the empire. The Christians had no fear of death and they loved their neighbors as themselves. As people left town trying to avoid the plague, Christians would go in and take care of the sick, often losing their own lives in the process. Their kindness and care to the sick and hurting got the attention of the Roman world. By 313 AD, Rome recognized Christianity as a legitimate religion.

Now remember, Revelation is a series of cycles. This isn't the only cycle like this in world history, and we've probably not seen the last one. You could point to other places in history that follow similar patterns, and you'd be right. But these riders have obvious parallels within the century following the writing of Revelation. This book was meant for the people of that era and their children and grandchildren, who saw it unfold before them.

The pattern shifts with the fifth seal. For the first time, we specifically see an altar in the throne room. Under the altar are the souls of the martyrs, those who died for their faith. We might wonder, why under the altar? This is symbolic. God has prepared a place for us after death but before the new heaven and the new earth. When Jesus said the thief who acknowledged Him on the cross would be with Him that day in Paradise, that is what He meant. So "under the altar" is not their final resting place. They are under the altar in that their deaths are a sacrifice to God and pleasing to Him, and their witness is present in God's throne room.

What's surprising to me is that the martyrs are not looking to see more people become believers in Jesus. Their outcry is not for mercy. Their outcry is for judgment and vengeance. They are holy, they are reverent; there's nothing wrong in what they ask. But they want to know the question that all of us have: "how long?" How long until things are made right? How long until justice is done? How long until we are avenged?

God's answer is not "when," though. If we look at the gospels, we constantly see Jesus changing the questions He was asked so that He could answer the heart of the issue. Everyone wanted to know when events surrounding the end would come, and Jesus never gave them a straightforward answer. It's not ours to know. Even those who have given their lives for Him don't know. Jesus tells us what we need to know when we need to know it.

I think this is because we have idolatry built into our sinful human nature. If we were to know when Judgment Day is coming, would we delay trusting in God? Absolutely we would. We would trust in time rather than trusting in God. And just as important, judgment could come for any one of us at any time. Once we die, there is no changing the course of our life, no righting the ship, no exploring further our relationship with God in faith and trust. To know the dates of judgment would be to lead us into a false sense of security.

So instead of answering their question, God gives them each a white robe, showing that He has declared them clean by the blood of Christ. They have the mark of purity; they receive special acknowledgement. But they are told to wait a little longer because there were still more martyrs to come. This might sound harsh or difficult, but ultimately God is showing His mercy to us. By making them wait, by having planned for martyrs to come, more people will come into the Kingdom.

Then the sixth seal is opened, and we have a foretaste of what is to come. The sixth seal describes many different possibilities. If it's *not* literal, the hiding in caves and the massive physical disturbances correlates to what happened during the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It also sounds much like what happened when the Roman Empire was sacked in the last fourth century. If it *is* literal, then it is a picture of the final judgment as the whole universe caves in, as God prepares to recreate the heavens and the earth. Many prophecies in Scripture are fulfilled more than once. Ultimately, the sixth seal tells us that justice is coming...to be patient in hope. This brief, hard-to-understand glimpse into the future shows us that God really will keep His promise to the martyrs.

This is a disturbing passage for a lot of reasons –the strange riders, the seals, and prophecy that we can look at and say, “Those things really happened.” But I don't think that these bizarre images disturb us the most. In our day and age, the greatest problems we have with faith in God have to do with God's judgment and with human suffering, particularly the suffering of people we see as innocent. And this passage has all of those in spades. Revelation 6 makes us come face to face with our biggest problems with God, and we need to deal with them so that our faith comes out stronger in the end.

First thought for our notes today: *God's judgment is not based on our values but on His sovereign knowledge of all things.* All of the riders save the first bring forms of God's judgment – war, persecution, famine, oppression, plague. And they are indiscriminate – in fact, they fall on God's people just as much if not harder than the world at large. Our modern world looks on this and doubts that God exists because God's judgment seems painful and unfair.

But God's Word tells us that everyone will be judged (Romans 14:10). 1 Peter 4:17 tells us that judgment begins with the family and household of God. Not all judgment is saved for the final day, especially not for those who are saved and escape the full wrath of God. God uses suffering, difficulties, and trials to refine us and to make us more like His Son. God, because He is sovereign, knows all things and works out His judgment perfectly.

The world hates God because the world does not want to be judged for what it does. But everyone knows that goodness requires justice. Think of the outrage we have when there is a miscarriage of justice. We know deep in our hearts that it should be set right. And we live in a world of immense injustice. We see people exploiting other people in virtually every area of life, and many times in ways that are deeply hurtful and damaging and degrading. We take advantage of those who have no power. Millions of children around the world are killed in the womb for our convenience. Dictators and tyrants and oppressive governments imprison and kill with impunity those who disagree with them. The world is deserving of judgment. Even many non-Christian religions recognize the need for justice that their version of God will eventually deliver. God has put in our souls the truth that you cannot have goodness without judgment.

Christianity reminds us that each one of us is deserving of judgment too. No one, not even Christians, are guiltless. We all agree that the Hitlers and the Stalins and the Genghis Khans of history should be punished. But those people could do what they did because quote-unquote “good” people did nothing. Hitler and Stalin didn't kill millions personally. They did it through ordinary folks who were “doing their duty.”

We think we are good because we seldom come up against anything that would test us. But time and again, even in the little tests we face, we choose our way over God's way, and for that we rightly deserve justice and judgment. We actually deserve God's wrath, His condemnation, His eternal punishment. We don't hear much about those things any more. But we must hear about them precisely because the good news is that God sent Jesus as our rescue plan from those things. The judgment we face on this earth, even pain and suffering, is nothing like what we deserve, and the blessings we receive from Jesus' salvation are never-ending.

The difference between other religions and Christianity is not judgment. It's the free gift of grace given to us not because we earned it but because of the sheer love of God for us. When we hear these passages, our first thought shouldn't be, "How wrong of God to judge us!" It should be, "I'm amazed He hasn't judged us more harshly for all we've done against Him and the people He created! I'm amazed that He hasn't brought it all down already!"

Second and final thought for today: *the sufferings of the saints will not only end, it will be made right in every way.* Suffering is never fun for the sufferer. Sometimes it feels like suffering will never end. When I read about the sufferings of Andrew Brunson in Turkey or the Chinese pastors imprisoned for their faith, I think, "Why, God?" And I wonder how I would hold up under similar circumstances.

We don't have a timetable for these things. God doesn't give us one. And suffering seems to elongate time. The worse the sensation, the longer it seems to last. God doesn't give us a timetable but a promise of a conclusion to pain and suffering and fear and doubt and dismay. Revelation is not a calendar; it's a reminder of hope. For all the bad things that happen in it, all of Revelation points toward the conclusion of history and then a history beyond history, a history where good follows good follows good follows good. And not just the good we think of, the absence of conflict, the pleasure of simple things, but the ultimate good – the presence of the perfect God loving us well beyond all time.

The martyrs will multiply; there will be many deaths for the Kingdom. The 20th century saw more martyrs than the previous 19 centuries combined! But there will be an end. And on that day of judgment, we will see that our sufferings had a purpose, to draw us closer to Jesus and to steer us away from relying on ourselves. We will see those who inflicted pain and suffering on us brought to justice – and perhaps, brought into the Kingdom too, where there will be genuine and permanent reconciliation. God's wrath – a perfect, full but properly measured wrath – will be poured out on those destined to receive it for their evil deeds. God's grace will be shown to all those He brings into His Kingdom. All will be made right. Count on it.

There is much more to come in Revelation – more judgment, more suffering, more evil, almost unimaginable evil, actually. And yet we will also see God working through it all. Nothing will happen without His permission. And ultimately, His plan will succeed; He will save His people and His Kingdom will come, His will shall be done. Trust in Him, and though we won't escape whatever modern counterparts there will be of the four horsemen, we will know that God will set all things right.