

"THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE"

**I. Introduction**

- A. As we move deeper into the highly symbolic world of the book of Revelation, it is important to be mindful of the larger context in which these symbols are set forth.
1. The passage that we have just read continues the visionary cycle that began in chapters 4 and 5.
  2. In those chapters, John was shown two main things.
  3. First, he saw that God's throne is at the center of everything.
  4. Second, he saw that the Lamb of God is worthy to open the sealed scroll that is in the right hand of the one seated on the throne.
  5. As we noted in last week's sermon, that scroll is symbolic of God's comprehensive plan to bring judgment upon a rebellious world and to save those whom he has graciously appointed to eternal life.
  6. This is exactly what we see happening in this text as the scroll's first four seals are opened and the four horsemen of the apocalypse are called forth.
- B. Before we consider the symbolic meaning of each individual horseman, there are several general things to note.
1. First, it should not surprise us that this symbolism is drawn from the Old Testament.
  2. There are two passages in the book of Zechariah involving four riders or four horse-drawn chariots.

3. In Zechariah 1, four riders are sent by God as a reconnaissance team to patrol the earth.
  4. And in Zechariah 6, four chariots pulled by teams of red, black, white, and dappled horses are sent to execute divine judgment throughout the earth.
  5. In those visions and here in Revelation 6, the number four is symbolic of global totality, indicating that the riders are going through all the earth.
- C. In light of the nature of the judgments that are described when the seals are opened, we should not think that each rider is symbolic of events that happen in a chronological sequence.
1. The point is not that there is first a period of conquest, then a period of warfare, then a period of famine, and then a period of plague.
  2. Instead, these are things that are taking place throughout the whole earth during the entire period in between Christ's first and second comings.
- D. We should also note the similarity between the things that are described in the vision of the seven seals and the things described in the visionary cycles of the seven trumpets and seven bowls.
1. This indicates that each cycle is depicting the same thing and is covering the same period of time, the period in between Christ's two comings.
  2. Each cycle looks at this from a slightly different angle, somewhat like a musical variation on a particular theme.
  3. Of course, as the visions progress, there is an intensification, with an increasing emphasis upon the final judgment that will come at the end of this age.

- E. The main idea in the text that we are considering today is God's chastening hand upon a rebellious world.
  - 1. The riders are symbolic of the woes that come upon people in this present age.
  - 2. And the purpose of these woes is to punish unbelievers and to refine the faith of believers.
  - 3. One other important preliminary thing to note is God's sovereignty over the tribulations that are described here.
  - 4. Christ is the one who opens the seals, and the horsemen only come forth when the angelic living creatures who serve God command them to come.
  - 5. As we were reminded at the beginning of this visionary cycle in chapter 4, God is enthroned over all.

## II. The Rider on the White Horse: A World Being Conquered by the Gospel

- A. When the first seal is opened, a rider on a white horse is called forth.
  - 1. The symbolic meaning of this rider is a matter of controversy among interpreters, even among those who hold to the same basic framework for interpreting Revelation.
  - 2. Some see this rider as symbolic of the oppressive reigns of mighty nations, contending that white can be symbolic of victory and conquest.
  - 3. These interpreters claim that it is necessary to interpret the first rider this way, because the other riders are clearly agents of woe.
  - 4. In response to those who point out that later in Revelation Christ himself is the rider on a white horse, these interpreters explain that this rider is an example of the forces of evil masquerading as an angel of light.

- B. While that view is certainly possible, there seems to be a better case for seeing this rider as Christ himself.
1. For one thing, Christ was just described in the previous chapter as the one who has conquered, and this rider comes out “conquering and to conquer.”
  2. For another thing, white is always symbolic of holiness and righteousness in Revelation.
  3. Further, the description of this rider seems to be drawn from the description of Israel’s king in Psalm 45, and that description ultimately applies to Christ because he is the supreme anointed of the Lord.
  4. In addition, the crown that is given to this rider stands in parallel with the depictions of Christ wearing a crown later in Revelation. (see 14:14; 19:12)
  5. For these reasons, the rider on the white horse is best understood as a symbol of how Christ is conquering the world through the proclamation of his gospel all throughout this present age.
  6. It is describing the same thing that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 24 when he said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”
  7. It is a picture of the gospel as the power of God unto salvation.
  8. As the apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10, “the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.”
  9. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is working through the ministry that he has given to his church to subdue people to

himself and to rule over them.

### III. The Rider on the Red Horse: A World Afflicted by Bloodshed

- A. When the second seal is opened, a rider on a bright red horse is called forth.
1. Beginning with this rider, a particular woe is attached to his coming.
  2. John says that this horseman “was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another.”
  3. This is symbolic of the warfare and violence that characterizes life in this present age.
  4. It is describing the same thing that Jesus spoke of when he said in his apocalyptic discourse, “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.” (Matt 24:6 ESV)
  5. The history of the human race is to a significant extent a history of warfare.
  6. At times it appears that the nations of the world are set on mutual destruction.
  7. In a more general sense, this rider is symbolic of the social unrest that is so much a part of life in this world.
  8. Think of the political discord and polarization that is becoming more and more intense in our own nation.
  9. This hostility and tension is yet another example of the judgment that God has sent upon this world during this evil age.
- B. It is also possible that this second rider is symbolic of persecution that is directed towards Christians.

1. One of the arguments in favor of this is that the term “slay” is always used in Revelation to refer to the death of Christ or his followers.
2. This possibility is strengthened by the fact that the opening of the fifth seal causes John to see the souls of those who had been slain because of their faithful witness to Christ, and they then cry out for the Lord to avenge their blood.
3. While it does not seem that this is the only thing being represented by this rider, it certainly falls under the general category that is being symbolized here.
4. In this present age that is so characterized by violence and strife, Christians are frequently subjected to opposition and attack.

#### **IV. The Rider on the Black Horse: A World Afflicted by Scarcity**

- A. At the opening of the third seal, a rider on a black horse is called forth.
  1. The symbolic meaning of this rider is explained by the fact that he is carrying a pair of scales in his hand and by the words of a voice saying, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and the wine.”
  2. The scales are obviously to be used to measure the grain that is being sold, and the voice is announcing the going rate for these products.
  3. A quart was enough to feed one person per day.
  4. A denarius was a day’s wage for a laborer.
  5. The prices announced here were up to ten times the normal rate in the first century.
  6. Having to buy basic food staples at such high costs would be financially devastating for most people.

7. This is describing a situation where people would be unable to provide for their most basic needs.
  8. It is the sort of circumstance that is brought about when a region is struck by famine or when warfare disrupts trade.
- B. We can extend the application of the woe that comes upon the world through this rider by thinking of economics in a broader sense.
1. There are all sorts of factors that can drive up the cost of living and impose economic hardships on people.
  2. Everyone feels the impact of inflated costs to one degree or another.
  3. It is one of the realities of life.
  4. In some times and cultures, the suffering brought about by this is intense.
  5. People experience all kinds of financial struggles in this world.
  6. And it is important for us to understand that even though some economic systems are clearly better than others, there is never going to come a time in this age when financial scarcity is no longer a problem for anyone.
  7. This is one of the judgments that God sends upon the world during the time in between Christ's first and second comings.

**V. The Rider on the Pale Horse: A World Afflicted by Untimely Death**

- A. When the fourth seal is opened, a rider on a pale horse is called forth.
1. The term "pale" can also be translated as "pale green."
  2. It is associated with the pallor of death, especially death brought about by disease.

3. John tells us that this rider's name is Death, and that Hades follows after him.
  4. In this context, the term Hades does not refer to hell as the place of eternal punishment, but is used to refer to the general dimension occupied by the dead.
  5. We were told back in chapter 1 that Christ has the keys of Death and Hades.
  6. Here we see Jesus using Death and Hades to execute his purposes.
- B. This rider is not representative of death in general.
1. Death eventually comes upon all people, but the rider on the pale horse is only given authority to kill a fourth of the earth.
  2. Like the rest of the numbers in Revelation, this percentage is not meant to be taken literally but symbolically.
  3. The point is that the death that is being described here does not afflict all the peoples of the earth, or even a majority of them.
  4. One-fourth indicates that while a significant number of people are affected by this woe, not everyone is.
  5. This is describing death that is brought about by violence, war, plague, and wild animals.
  6. We might refer to it more generally as "untimely death."
  7. This too is a reality of life in this fallen world.
  8. Even in our culture, with all of its wonderful medical advances, lives are still sometimes cut short.

## VI. Conclusion



- A. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse provide us with a heavenly perspective on the world in which we live.
- B. This is a world in which Jesus Christ is subduing people to himself through the power of his gospel.
- C. And even though a great deal of goodness and happiness can be found in this world, it is a world that is plagued by many woes.
- D. Christ uses these things as instruments to smite this rebellious world, either to bring people to the point of repentance, or to further harden them in their sin.
- E. In the words of one commentator, these are the means “by which all who reject the sceptre of [Christ’s] grace are either chastened, humbled, and deprived of their earthly supports, and so made sensible of their folly; or else, if incorrigible, by which they are punished, their opposition rendered futile and crushed out” [Ramsey, 320]
- F. As Christians, we ought to be exceedingly grateful that Christ has conquered our rebellious hearts and drawn us to himself.
- G. And as we endure the afflictions that come upon us in this world, we should trust that our Lord is using these things to work his purposes out.