

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Revelation 6:1-8

Introduction

The fury and thunder of their hoof beats has been anticipated for centuries.

Harbingers of deception, destruction, deprivation and death; the world has feared and resisted their coming. Yet come they will. God guarantees it! In 1983 Billy Graham addressed their coming in his book *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. There he wrote, “the shadows of all four horsemen can already be seen galloping throughout the world at this moment” (9). Dr.

Graham is right. Their shadow looms large and they could appear at any time.

The mass murderer Charles Manson identified the musical quartet “the Beatles” as the 4 Horsemen. No one questions their popularity and influence, but it will pale in comparison to what the world will experience when the real 4 horsemen come riding into town.

Revelation 6-19 contains the heart of the end-time called the “Day of the Lord.” It is also referred to as the “time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7), Daniel’s 70th week (Daniel 9:27) and The Tribulation. Though the rapture of believers is never specifically addressed in Revelation, it is my judgment that it occurs sometime before Revelation 6. First Thessalonians 5:9 says we are not destined for the wrath of the Day of the Lord. And, the rapture is discussed in 1 Thessalonians

4:13-18 before the Day of the Lord is addressed in 1Thessalonians 5:1-11. This, and the doctrine of imminency, supports a pretribulational eschatology.

The 4 horsemen introduce us to the 1st of God's 3 series of judgements in Revelation: the seal judgements, located in chapter 6, the trumpet judgments in chapters 8 & 9, and the bowl judgments in chapters 15 & 16. I believe that there is a telescopic relationship to the judgments with each successive series coming out of the last of the former. In other words, the 7th seal is the 7 trumpets and the 7th trumpet is the 7 bowls. This would indicate an increase both in rapidity and intensity as the judgments unfold (Patterson, *NAC*, 176-77). It will be a time of great sorrow and suffering.

As we investigate the 4 horsemen it is important to note their Old Testament background and imagery is in Zechariah 1:7-17; 6:1-8, Ezekiel 14:12-23, especially verse 21, and even Leviticus 26:14-33. But it also is imperative that we note the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 24:5-8; Mark 13:7-9 and Luke 21:9-12. What we discover is a remarkable parallelism between the two [read Matthew 24:1-8]. And, the fact that in Matthew 24:8 Jesus says, "All these events are the beginning of "birth pains" must be carefully considered. There is a real sense in which the 3 series of judgments give us patterns of divine judgment and spiritual conflict that have occurred throughout history. Yet, there has been something of a spiraling nature to these judgments as they move us toward the

“omega point” of history. Eventually, these judgments come in their final and climatic fullness just before the return of King Jesus (Rev. 19:11-21) to establish His earthly Kingdom of a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-6). Now, some see the seal judgments as prior and preparatory for The Great Tribulation (6:17).

This is why Jesus refers to them as “the beginning of birth pains” (Matt. 24:8) and why He also says, “when these things happen, the end is not yet” (Matt. 24:6).

Others believe the 4 Horsemen will come and inflict judgments that fit into the first half of the tribulation; usually understood to be the initial 3 ½ years of a 7 year period of tribulation. Dogmatism is unwarranted on these kinds of details.

What is clear beyond question is those who “deny that God will judge anybody for anything” are dead wrong (Swindoll, 109). A day of reckoning is coming. The 4 Horsemen of the apocalypse are the first harbingers of this judgment that is unparalleled in human history (Matt. 24:21). As they ride forth in all their fury, what spiritual insights and lessons does our God have for every generation of His people to learn and embrace?

I. Be aware of God’s weapon of deception 6:1-2 **(The White Horse)**

The heavenly throne room vision of chapters 4-5 sets the stage for the judgments of chapters 6ff. By virtue of His act of Creation (ch.4) and His act of Redemption

(ch.5), our sovereign God has the authority and the right to judge His world. He initiates that judgment by sending forth His 4 Horsemen. Note, it is the Lamb, King Jesus, who opens the seals (6:1). All that unfolds is under His command.

1) Deception is under God's control 6:1

John sees the Lamb of Chapter 5 begin to open the 7 seals of the scroll He took from God the Father in 5:7. Then he hears “one of the four living creatures (cf. 4:6-8:5:6, 8, 11) say with a voice like thunder, “Come!”” The voice emanates from heaven’s throne with power. The thunder warns of an impending storm of divine wrath and judgment. The command to the first rider is simple and direct, “Come!” This is an imperative of invitation. Warren Wiersbe notes, “Events will now take place because of God’s sovereign direction in heaven” (62). The riders come because God sends them.

2) Deception will come to conquer 6:2

- John sees a white horse whose rider has a bow and is wearing a crown (Gr. *stephanos*). He goes out “as a victor to conquer.” Exactly who this rider is has generated much discussion and disagreement. Opinions include 1) Jesus Christ (cf. Rev. 19:11ff), 2) the advance of the gospel, 3) Apollo (representing false

religion), 4) The Antichrist, 5) The spirit of conquest, 6) Government persecuting Christians, 7) Satan's servants in general.

- The rider cannot be Jesus even though this view goes back at least to the time of the church father Irenaeus (late 2nd Century). The riders of 6:1-2 and 19:11-21 have little in common other than being on a white horse. Further, it is the Lamb who opens the seals and no angel would command Christ to do anything! The better view is this is the spirit of deception and conquest that will be embodied in the counterfeit Christ, the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:3-4), the Beast of 13:1-10. This deceptive, conquering rider keeps company with war, famine and death; the next 3 riders. This rider fulfills the warning of Jesus in Matthew 24:4-5 where He tells us to be on guard against deception and false christs.
- Beale provides helpful commentary on verse 2 when he says,

“the first rider represents a satanic force attempting to defeat and oppress believers spiritually through deception, persecution, or both (so 11:7; 13:7). The image of the rider may include reference to (1) the antichrist, (2) governments that persecute Christians, or (3) the devil's servants in general. An allusion to forces symbolized by the beasts later in the book

could be uppermost in mind (see below on 6:8). “White” elsewhere in the book does not primarily connote victory but the persevering righteousness of Christ and the saints (see on 3:4-5). Here white may refer to the forces of evil as they try to appear righteous and thus deceive by imitating Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13-15). The portrayal is intended by John as a parody of Christ’s righteousness and victory in 19:11-16: Satan’s attempts to be victorious are but feeble imitations of Christ, worthy only for ridicule (as in, e.g., 11:7; 13:1-13). Such attempts are doomed to failure from the beginning because they are ultimately decreed by God to contribute to the establishment of his kingdom and glory (cf. 17:17).” (377).

God sends this rider to reveal that which is true and that which is false, the real from the inauthentic. There is great deception today. It will increase as the final chapter of history is written.

II. Be Aware of God’s weapon of war 6:3-4 **(The Red Horse)**

Some believe the rider on the white horse promises a deceptive peace. If so, it will be temporary and short-lived. He may have carried a bow but no arrows, but the

red horse of war brings a rider who possesses a “large sword” of destruction and death. He too comes only at God’s command.

1) Destruction is inevitable. 6:3

Christ is in control as the 2nd seal is opened. What he opens no one can shut or stop. The 2nd living creature, in response to Christ’s sovereign action, beckons the 2nd rider: Come (pre. imp.). The red horse of war inevitably follows the white horse of conquest.

2) Destruction is immense. 6:4

- The color of the 2nd horse is “fiery red” and rightly depicts his mission of bloodshed and slaughter. (Mounce, 143). But note: While he takes the peace it is the people who slaughter one another. The idea seems to convey civil strife within and between peoples and nations. Assassination and civil unrest, riots in the streets and rebellion against authority will run rampant. No one will be safe. One will live in constant fear of life not knowing who to trust. Jesus said in Matthew 24:10, “many will take offense, betray one another, and hate one another.” No one will be excluded. This rider takes peace from the earth. Anarchy and worldwide bloodshed are signatures of the last days.

- On November 10, 1948, General Omar N. Bradley delivered “An Armistice Day Address” in Boston. In that address he said,

“With the monstrous weapons man already has, humanity is in danger of being trapped in this world by its moral adolescents. Our knowledge of science has clearly outstripped our capacity to control it. *We have many men of science; too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount.* Man is stumbling blindly through a spiritual darkness while toying with the precarious secrets of life and death. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living. This is our 20th century’s claim to distinction and to progress.” (Collected Writings).
- Somewhere I read the story that during World War II, Albert Einstein helped bring a German photographer to the United States. They became friends, and the photographer took a number of pictures of Einstein. One day he looked into the camera and started talking. He spoke about his despair that his formula, $E=mc^2$, and his letter to

President Roosevelt had made the atomic bomb possible, and his scientific research had resulted in the death of so many human beings. He grew silent. His eyes had a look of immense sadness. There was a question and a reproach in them. At that very moment the cameraman released the shutter. Einstein looked up and the cameraman asked him, “So you don’t believe that there will ever be peace?” “No,” he answered. “As long as there will be man, there will be wars.” (Source Unknown)

God has used man as His instrument of judgment. He will do it again as the red horse of war rides as time, as we know it, comes to an end.

III. Be aware of God’s weapon of famine 6:5-6 **(The Black Horse)**

War has a close companion, an ever-present partner. It’s the F-word called famine. Conquest, war, famine: these three tend to show up at the same time together. William and Paul Paddock warned in their book *Famine – 1975*, “Today hungry nations, tomorrow starving nations.” Some may accuse them of being alarmist. Revelation teaches us tomorrow could come any day.

- 1) Famine is unstoppable. 6:5

Christ opens the 3rd seal and the 3rd living creature commands the rider, “come” (pre. imp.). John looks and sees the black horse of famine with its rider holding “a set of scales” or balances in his hand as he rides onto the stage of history. John MacArthur notes that, “The color black is associated with famine in Lamentations 5:10 (KJV). Famine is a logical consequence of worldwide war as food supplies are destroyed and those involved in food production are killed” (182). Christ has released the black horse of famine and starvation and no one or thing can deter it. It is coming. It is unstoppable.

2) Famine will be unbearable. 6:6

From among the four living creatures John hears “something like a voice” saying, “a quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius.” A quart of wheat was approximately the amount necessary to sustain one person for one day. Barley was the poor man’s wheat and it was normally fed to animals. It was low in nutritional value and occasionally mixed with wheat to increase the feeding amount. A denarius was basically a day’s wage. In other words a man would work all day for just enough wheat to sustain himself, or enough barley to barely keep his family alive. Inflation prices are 11-16 times above

normal according to prices cited by Cicero for wheat sold in Sicily (Beasley-Murray, 133). Mounce says 10-12 (145).

The phrase “do not harm the olive oil and wine” is less clear as to its meaning. Some see the phrase as setting a limit on the deprivation caused by the horse of famine. Others argue that oil and wine were the commodities of the wealthy. The former understanding is more likely. Food for the poor will be scarce and in short supply. Still, there are limits, at least for now. However, once the trumpet and bowl judgments are finished, nothing will be left. Nothing.

Today we know that famine and hunger kill more people every year than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined. Some 805 million people in the world do not have enough food to lead a healthy active life. That’s about one in nine people on earth. The vast majority of the world’s hungry people live in developing countries, where 13.5 percent of the population is undernourished. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the highest prevalence (percentage of population) of hunger. One person in four there is undernourished. Poor nutrition causes nearly half (45%) of deaths in children under five — 3.1 million children each year. One out of six children – roughly 100 million in developing countries is

underweight. This is what hunger and famine are like today. It will get much worse when the black horse rides.

**IV. Be aware of God's weapon of death 6:7-8
(The Pale Horse)**

- B. F. Skinner was a famous behavioral psychologist who for much of his life was an optimist. However, at the age of 78, his optimism began to fade. At the American Psychological Association Convention on Sept. 25, 1982, Skinner said, "Why are we not acting to save the world? The world is fatally ill...it is a very depressing way to end one's life. The argument that we have always solved our problems in the past, and shall solve this one, is like reassuring a dying man by pointing out that he has always recovered from his illnesses...when I wrote *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, I was optimistic about the future.... A decade ago there was hope....Today the world is fatally flawed" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9-25-82; noted also in John Wesley White, "Hope: Can the World Be Saved?" Preaching .com).
- While I would disagree with B. F. Skinner on many things, his diagnosis of the condition of the world was "spot on." The world is fatally flawed. The pale horse of death with the grim reaper riding saddle is just around the corner with nothing less than a global agenda.

1) Death is controlled 6:7

Thankfully death cannot act apart from the plans and purposes of the sovereign Christ. As with the 3 previous riders, this horse comes forth at the permission of the Lamb of God and with the command of one of the living creatures. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 10:28, “Don’t fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Death is God’s prerogative. He and He alone decides when it will come and how it will come.

2) Death will be comprehensive 6:8

John looks and sees a pale horse, the ashen-green color of a decomposing corpse. Its rider is Death, that which claims the body. Following close behind is its ever-present companion Hades, that which claims the soul. The death which is visited upon the earth is massive and comprehensive in its numbers: $\frac{1}{4}$ of the earth. It is also comprehensive in its nature: it kills by the sword (cf. v. 4), by famine (cf. v. 6), by plague, and by the wild animals of the earth.

In 1800 the world reached 1 billion in population.

In 1930 the world reached 2 billion in population.

In 1960 the world reached 3 billion in population.

In 1974 the world reached 4 billion in population.

In 1987 the world reached 5 billion in population.

In 1999 the world reached 6 billion in population.

In 2011 the world reached 7 billion in population.

By 2044, the projection is 9 billion. Think about it. In all too brief a time, over 1.75 billion people will depart planet earth not by rapture, but by death. Later in Rev. 8:18, because of the 6th trumpet, 1/3 of those remaining will die. In less than 7 years, 1/2 of the world's population will be taken in death (cf. Ezekiel 14:21). In a world decimated by war and famine, even the wild beast will join in the carnage. Sound far-fetched and beyond reality? Not really.

Conclusion

In his book, *Death in the City*, Francis Schaeffer said of our modern world, “the dust of death” [is] upon everything (21). His diagnosis is correct and the dust will only grow thicker until our great God has accomplished His purposes. However, we should not fear or fret. He is in absolute control. The Lamb holds history in His hand. Are you trusting Him? He will determine, to the last detail, history's consummation. He will orchestrate each and every event according to His perfect plan. God has such a plan for the world. God has such a plan for you. Let Him who is taking the world to its appropriate end do the same for you. The way may not be easy, but I promise you: you will not be disappointed.

Literary Construction: 6:1-17; 8:1-9:21; 11:15-19; 15:1-16:12; 16:17-21:27											
	Seals			Trumpets			Bowls				
	1-6	()	7	1-6	()	7	()	1-6	()	7	()
A parenthesis between 6 th and 7 th judgments in each series.		7:1-17			10:4-11:14				16:13-16		
A parenthesis between the trumpet judgment and the bowl series.							12:1-14:20				
A parenthesis between the bowl series and the description of the second coming of Jesus.											17:1-19:10

Suggested Interrelationships of the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls:

Judgments are seen as occurring simultaneously, with repetition showing the intensification of the judgments.	7 Seals 7 Trumpets 7 Bowls
The consecutive arrangement envisions a total of twenty-one judgments; each following directly after the other.	7 Seals → Trumpets → 7 Bowls
This telescopic arrangement has the seventh seal introducing the trumpet series and being explained by it, and the seventh trumpet introduces the bowl series and is explained by it. So, the seven bowls equal the seventh trumpet and the seven trumpets are the seventh seal. This is the best view based upon the book itself.	

REVELATION 6 – 19

Content and Correlation of the Judgments of Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls

NUMBER	SEALS Opened by the Lamb	TRUMPETS Blown by seven angels	BOWLS Poured by seven angels
1.	White horse: conqueror	Hail and fire: 1/3 of vegetation burnt	Sores
2.	Red horse: war	Mountain of fire: 1/3 of creatures in sea destroyed	Sea becomes blood: all marine life dies
3.	Black horse: famine	Star called wormwood falls: 1/3 of fresh water poisoned	Fresh water turned to blood
4.	Pale horse: death	Partial darkness: 1/3 of sun, moon and stars	Scorching sun burns men
HIATUS: Last three trumpets announced as woes			
5.	Martyrs reassured	Woe #1: Angel releases locusts from abyss	Darkness on beast's kingdom
6.	Great day of wrath: earthquake, signs in heaven	Woe #2: Four angels loosed at Euphrates; they slay 1/3 of earth's population	Euphrates dries up: kings assemble for war at Armageddon
	HIATUS: Sealing of 144,000	HIATUS: Mystery of God to be concluded with seventh trumpet.	
7.	½ hour of silence: Introduction of trumpets	Announcement of the Lord's victory and the introduction of the bowls	Severe earthquake and great hail

Chronological Chart of Revelation 6-22 and the [Great] Tribulation (A Tentative Proposal)



