

# The Four Horsemen

By Rev. J. Kortering

In all of Scripture one cannot find a more complete and incisive interpretation of history than we find here in the passage we wish to consider in this chapter.

*REV 6:1 And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see. [2] And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer. [3] And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. [4] And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword. [5] And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. [6] And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine. [7] And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. [8] And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.*

We must remember that the vantage point is heaven. The Apostle John was on the isle of Patmos and while confined there for the sake of the gospel (Rev. 1:9) received a vision. In this vision he saw the throne of God (Rev. 4:2ff.) and round about this throne there were gathered representatives of the entire redeemed world. The church was officially represented by the 24 elders (12 patriarchs of the Old Testament and 12 apostles of the New Testament) Rev. 4:4. There was the innumerable throng of the saints Rev. 7:9. The brute creation was represented by four beasts taken from the different spheres of the animal world (Rev. 4:6ff.) and the angels were there as the heavenly choir (Rev. 7:11) and as the servants of God Rev. 8:2ff.

In one word, John saw heaven in all its glory as it is now constituted.

The focal point of the vision was Christ. God was the one sitting on the throne (Rev. 4:11) and in His right hand was a book, a scroll, that was rolled up and sealed with seven seals. These were seals on the edge of the scroll, spaced in such a way that when one was broken the scroll could be unrolled until the reader came to the next seal. This scroll represented the counsel of God as it pertained to the history of the world and the things that had to come to pass in order that Christ might realize the kingdom of heaven. In a sense it contained the blueprint for the heavenly kingdom that John saw in the vision. The question was asked, "Who is worthy to open the book?" Rev. 5:2. By this is meant, who has the authority and the power to reveal its contents not only, but to realize the events that are contained therein. When John wept at heaven's silence, he was overcome with the prospect that the kingdom of heaven, as he saw it in the vision, would never be realized. At this point the attention of John and all the inhabitants of heaven are directed to the "Lamb as it had been slain, having the seven horns and the seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent forth into all the earth." Rev 5:6. This indicates Christ is already in heaven as the Exalted One, having completed the work of redemption. By this work He merited all power in heaven and earth Matt. 28:18. Christ earned the right and received the power from God to reveal the secret counsel of God and bring it to pass so that throughout all history all things are being directed with view to the personal return of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of heaven as John saw it. They all sang "Worthy is the Lamb" (Rev. 5:9).

The four horsemen are the revealed contents of the first four seals after they are broken one at a time. John watched as Christ took the book, broke the seals, and revealed the contents. When the first seal was broken, John heard a voice call "Come!" This call was not directed to John (the inclusion of "and see" is not a correct translation, it should be simply come) rather to the horse and the rider. After the breaking of each seal the same command is given and each time another horse and rider come forth. The total is four horsemen.

According to the proper method of interpretation, the four horsemen represented certain historical events. Taken in their totality they represent history as it is being unfolded today. We must not be entirely futuristic and apply them to the events of the "Great Tribulation" when the church will not be present in the world. Rather they refer to all history from the beginning of the world to the end, especially from the moment of the ascension of Christ to His personal return. Throughout all our days these four horsemen are riding. We emphasize all four are riding. It is not correct to interpret these four horses as if they ride in chronological succession, at one point in history the white horse rides, then later the red begins to ride, etc. All four are present in the world at all times, only at certain points in history one may be predominant and seem to draw the "spotlight" of attention.

To interpret these horsemen we must use Scripture with Scripture.

A horse was principally an animal of war. Consider Job 39: 21-22 "he paweth in the valley and rejoiceth in his strength... He mocketh at fear... neither turneth he back from the sword." Israel was forbidden the use of horses in battle lest they attribute the strength of the victory to men and animals rather than to God. The Psalmist declared this in Ps. 20:7 and Ps 33:17. The horses as they ride throughout history represent certain powers that prevail as they are under the rational and moral direction of Christ (the rider is not identified here, for it is not significant, merely the fact that they do not run wild). Each time Christ breaks another seal, another horse rides. Obviously these four powers are under the direct control of Christ who alone is worthy to break the seals and send for the horsemen.

What are these powers that prevail throughout history?

We get our first clue from the colors of each horse and then from the additional description given in the text.

The first horse is described as white. In Scripture white is a symbol of purity, "though your sin be as scarlet they shall be white as snow," Isa. 1:18. The saints, victoriously gathered in heaven, wear white robes Rev. 7:9 and Rev. 19:11. Besides it is added in the text itself that the rider receives a crown, the symbol of victory and he is sent forth, "Conquering and to conquer," repeated for emphasis. The white horse therefore represents the victorious power of the preaching of the gospel which alone is able to purify the hearts of men and bring the entire church into heavenly perfection. Over against the blackness of this world, which remains black, Christ gathers His own out of the world through the sanctifying power of His Spirit and Word. It is the victory of the truth over the lie, of the holy will of God over the moral depravity of men. This truth and holiness is applied to the hearts of the elected through the power of the preaching of the gospel. Notice emphatically that the power is under the direction of Christ! He send His Word to all those for whom He died on the cross and therefore surely realizes the eternal good pleasure of His Father in heaven, Consider Acts 2:47, "The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." Acts 16:6, "forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia." Also Acts 13:48, "As many as were ordained to eternal life believed." This horse has been riding throughout all history and continues to ride with power and glory till the last elect shall be gathered within the church.

The second horse is red in color. According to Scripture red is a symbol of lust and passion. The contrast is made between red and white (purity) in Isa. 1:18. There, our sins are described as scarlet and crimson. The redness of Esau indicated robust power. Gen. 25:25. The dragon, Satan, is pictured as red, burning with lust and evil. This evil lust for power and wealth produces war and bloodshed. Prov. 23:29 speaks of "redness of eyes" as a result of wounds. All this indicates that the red horse is the power of lust that produces bloodshed. This is confirmed in the text, "power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another; and there was given unto him a great sword." This takes place throughout all history. From Abel's blood that cried to the God of heaven to the last battle of Armageddon, human history is written in blood.

The third horse is black. Also in this connection the Bible speaks on the meaning of this color. "Our skin is black like an oven because of the terrible famine." Lam. 5:10, or "Judah mourneth, and the gates thereof languish, they are black unto the ground" Jeremiah 14:2. Blackness speaks of famine, of so great scarcity that one is in anguish. This black horse represents the power of economic and social strife associated with poverty and riches. The rider has a pair of balances by which he measures out one's daily portion (a measure of wheat and three measures of barley) for one's daily wage ( a penny). Here we see scarcity, a meager existence by which one has not

enough to live, but too much to die. This is in contrast to “touch not the wine and oil.” This represents riches and luxury present in the world. What an accurate description of history this really is. There has been constant striving between the haves and the have nots. Labor unions with strikes and boycotts, public riots have their deep roots in the distribution of wealth. Surely this third horse is also riding today, individually, nationally, and internationally.

The fourth and last horse is pale in color. Literally this is greenish yellow. Scripture makes two references to this color. Both in Isa. 29:22 and Jer. 30:6 it describes people that are faint and about to die. The power of death upon the body produces this effect, a pale corpse is a terrifying sight to behold. This horse represents death in all its horror and the many ways that bring one to the grave. In our text the name of the rider is “Death” and “Hell” follows after him. Graphically this portrays the grim reaper claiming mankind at any given point in history bringing them to the state of the dead and grave (Hades, hell). A substantial number of the earth’s population is constantly being killed (one fourth indicates that one portion of the four corners of the earth, not literally, rather a goodly number). To wit diseases, murders, violence of many forms, traffic accidents (50,000 a year in the United States alone), plane crashes, earthquakes, floods, etc. This horse also rides on and on throughout history.

We must now ask, what is the relationship between these four horsemen? Is there any significance to the fact that the white horse is first and the other three follow? Do they have a causal relationship amongst each other at all? These questions must be related to Christ Who is the One Who breaks the seals and sends the riders forth. Each time Christ opens the seal and one of the beasts (representatives of all creatures) calls, come!

In brief we must see that the white horse is the first because it represents the essential purpose of God in history. The preaching of the gospel and the cause of the church in the world is essentially the only purpose that God has with all events in time. The world continues to exist because God will gather from the fallen human race of men His own elect, redeemed in Christ. This is the one work of God in history.

The remaining three horses are important only in their relationship to the first, the cause of the church of Jesus Christ. I emphasized at the outset that if we can understand properly these four horsemen, we will have the key that unlocks the proper interpretation of history. Here it is then! There is significance to wars, to economic and social unrest, to pestilence and riots that lead to death only in their relationship to the church. Their significance is that they serve the gathering in two ways, first by preventing the premature establishment of the anti-christian world kingdom, and secondly, by strengthening the faith of the people of God so that they continue in the midst of affliction looking for the day when Christ shall establish His kingdom of peace, not on earth, but in the glory of the new heavens and the new earth.

Let’s consider how this is true.

Take wars first of all. The red horse (war) follows after the white horse. We ask, how do wars serve the purpose of the church? Throughout history fallen man has scoffed at God’s sentence of death. Using his depraved reasoning and perverse will, he envisions a kingdom of pleasure in the midst of this world. Mockingly he scoffs at Christ and His kingdom. He reacts to the pure preaching of the gospel with bitter hatred and becomes all the more determined to erect his kingdom in defiance of God and Christ. (In this sense the first horse causes the rest of the horses to follow.) So he strives in passionate envy and greed to build this kingdom. He wants to take hold of his neighbors land and possessions and soon his passion for power brings him into war with his neighbor. This makes a divided world and such a world cannot stand in great power and victory. Today man strives for international peace, yet it is as elusive as the mechanical rabbit. By this division the powers of the world fight amongst each other instead of concentrating their power against the church. While this takes place the church is able to dwell in the world and be busy with preaching of the gospel. While war hardens mankind into deeper hatred and determination against God and excites him to build the kingdom of antichrist, the effect of war on the church is that of humility. When our sons go off to battle, and we send them there in obedience to Christ who places rulers over us, we as Christians are made to see that we have no abiding city here below. The red horse serves the white as Christ controls all events with His eye upon His church.

Similarly also the black and pale horses follow the white and red horses. Economic stress, the unbalance of the distribution of wealth which produces riots, unrest, boycotts, strikes and all the rest follow upon war and serve the

purpose of the church. We can see this round about us daily. Man may build wonderful machines like the automobile, yet death and hell follow as more people are killed with them than with all the wars combined. Christ sends forth the black and pale horses. By their presence Christ casts out His hand of judgment on His enemies. Our surgeons practice their skills, yet they stand baffled before an increase in diseases. Murders, suicides, "accidents" abound more and more. This too serves the church. While these things plague the world, their dream of the great society must also be put off. They are frustrated in their design to build the perfect man in the perfect society in the perfect world. While this transpires the church is still able to be gathered and to worship together. We can still enjoy a measure of freedom to let the light of the gospel shine forth. The terrifying effects of the presence of these two horses on the people of God also works for spiritual strength. Through poverty, through the loss of employment, through sickness, and even death we are brought closer to God by His all sufficient grace.

When the four horses will have finished their course, there will be a brief period of international peace, economic prosperity, great advances in medicine and science, so that all will wonder at man and his achievements. During this time the great tribulation will take place for the people of God that are yet on earth. Then the full anger of the wicked will be directed against the faithful witnesses and they shall be slain in the streets.

That day is near at hand. Yet, we fear not, for we know from history's lesson that God's all sufficient grace will surely give to His church the complete victory. All things serve the wellbeing of the church, this includes the coming of Antichrist.

When Christ shall come, He will shake the heavens and the earth in His divine wrath. The wicked will see briefly the terrible fury of His anger before being cast into the burning depths of the unquenchable fire of hell.

When Christ shall appear upon the clouds of heaven, we may be found poor, naked, hiding in the caves of the earth, yet we will see Him in power and great glory and hear His blessed voice say, "Enter into the joy of the Lord."

Christ is all powerful. He controls all events as He sends forth the horses and his rider working all things for the day of His coming. With this insight into the Word of God we have reason not to be faint hearted, but to watch and pray.