

The Pale Horse of Death

By Rev. J. Kortering

From a certain point of view, we want to live here forever. Many things draw us to this life, our husband or wife, our children, our friends, our place in this life. It is obvious, "Skin for skin, all that a man hath will he give for his life," Job 2:4. The billions of prescriptions and long hours at the doctor's office testify to that. We react to the "tragedy" of teenagers killed in an auto accident, it causes shock and grief. Sometimes you even hear people say, "He died before his time."

What must we say about all this? Is death a tyrannical force breaking forth upon the human scene, causing sorrow and confusion? Or must we say that death is the servant of Jesus Christ by which Christ destroys the wicked and takes His children into glory?

We learn from Revelation 6:7, 8 that the latter is correct. "And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. 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."

A PALE HORSE

Without repeating what we have said in our three previous articles, we may observe that the presence of the last three horsemen prevents man from doing what he wants most. Man wants peace, but the red horse prevents him from realizing universal peace among the nations, Rev.6:4. Man wants riches, but the black horse brings on the struggle between rich and poor causing revolutions, poverty, and an unequal distribution of the world's wealth, Rev.6:5, 6. Man wants to live long, but the pale horse brings on disease and death, Rev.6:7, 8. All of this takes place because they follow the white horse which represents God's victorious cause of gathering His church by the preaching of the gospel, Rev.6:2. War, poverty, death serve the gathering of the church. We must now see how this applies to the fourth and final horse, the pale horse.

Quite naturally, we ask what does this pale horse represent? We have concluded that these horses represent forces that are present in the world all through history, but take on greater dimensions as the end draws near. A horse represents a mighty force in battle, Job 39:19-25. This pale horse is first of all a horse, a great power that is in the world. We learn what this power is by the horse's color, pale. According to Isaiah 29:22, "Therefore thus saith the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob, Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now be pale." The idea is obvious, the house of Jacob shall not die off. Similarly in Jeremiah 30:6, "Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness?" Here Israel is compared to a travailing woman near to death, this also typified the sorry condition of Israel at that time, but she would be restored and the paleness would disappear. We learn from the description that John gives us of the vision, that this horse represents death. In Rev.6:8 we read, "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." The text interprets for us the symbolism, the pale horse represents the grim reaper, death, as the grave follows after him claiming all the victims. This death comes in different forms, violence at the hands of man and beast, famine, and disease.

The result is that a fourth part of the inhabitants of the earth are destroyed. The whole earth is considered to be four parts, north, south, east, and west. Here mention is made that one of these parts will suffer death. This is not to say that literally one fourth of all the earth's population is removed by death, it simply means that constantly there will be a portion of mankind that dies at the hand of violence, etc. This will increase as the end comes, a third with the seals, Rev.8 and total destruction with the vials, Rev.16.

HIS RIDE

According to this text, the fourth beast calls to the horse, "Come!" Subsequently it comes forth with a rider. Obviously this tells us that this horse rides through history. Death and the grave claim a good portion of mankind every day. Its ride began after the fall of man into sin. Man was not created to die, death did not arise out of some internal necessity. Rather, death must be understood in the context of punishment. "For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die," Genesis 2:17. It is God's sentence upon sinful man, "For dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return," Gen.3:19.

His ride was slow at first, but gradually and persistently it gained momentum. Prior to the flood, people lived to be over 900 years old. This causes the world to propagate rapidly and the evil influence of wicked man persisted for many generations and the world became ripe for judgment. After the flood, this gradually decreased, Shem was 600 years, Terah, the father of Abraham, 205 years. Jacob lived to be 147 and soon, "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away," Psalm 90:10. There were moments in history when the presence of the pale horse caused shock, e.g. the plagues on Egypt, Israel's stay in the wilderness brought all people 20 years and older to their grave in 40 years time. Consider the multitude of diseased people in Jesus' time. John the Baptist was beheaded, persecution soon broke out in a terrible blood bath. There were plagues that swept over the earth. Consider the rapid speed whereby the pale horse rides today. In the United States alone, over two million people die each year. A million die by heart disease and cancer alone, auto accidents claim over 50,000, other accidents over 60,000, suicide over 21,000, murder 13,000. Then consider this worldwide! In many places there are no more cemeteries to bury the dead, indeed death and the grave today.

CHRIST THE LORD OF DEATH

Thank God that this text tells us that this horse and its rider is controlled! Death is not a terrible force running helter-skelter throughout the world. The fact the horse has a rider and indicates that it is under rational control. We must also remember that the horse answers the call, Come! Someone releases this horse. As we have insisted in considering the precious horses, so also here, Christ is the one who controls death. He has conquered death by His death on the cross. By that death he has established his right to triumph over the wicked and to save His own from the power of death.

Death is not a power that resists Christ, it is a power by which Christ rides triumphantly. How does death and the grave serve Christ's purpose? First, by defeating his enemies. The natural man opposes Christ and His kingdom. When God said, "to dust thou shalt return", man answers, but we will overcome death. He thinks that he will endure forever, he seeks for himself honor among men and earthly fame and fortune. Naturally, death is his enemy, it will take all this away from him. This prompts him to imagine that he can overcome death by his medicine, surgery, medications, proper diet, exercise and care. He envisions long life for that seems to be the supreme accomplishment. Yet, he is haunted with death, from the cradle to the grave. He cannot prevent death, ultimately he lies in the grave. Death makes havoc of his plans.

Yet, for the people of God, death and the grave serve an important purpose. From one point of view it is sad. Because man's lifespan is so short, one generation is born, lives, dies, and another soon comes. It is very easy for a generation to arise that knows not the Lord. This is happening. The brevity of life brings about constant change, the old generation soon is gone, a new generation arises, and apostasy in the church is fostered and nurtured by such change. This is the will of Christ, for there must come a falling away first. This should warn us that we work while it is yet day and the night comes when no man shall work. Secondly, death is Christ's way to deliver His church out of this life unto everlasting glory.

The Church doesn't have to worry about a population explosion, we know that death will become more and more a power to wipe out human life. God has His own way of preserving the balance between population and supply. We, however, see the urgency of being faithful in our calling to bring forth God's children, to train them in His fear, and confidently trust in God that He will preserve and keep His Church until the day when Christ shall return again and make all things new. When our life is finished we may die in peace.

“O death, where is thy sting, O grave thy victory? Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ,” I Corinthians 15:55-57. The pale horse is in Christ’s control.