

The White Horse of the Apocalypse

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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. Revelation 6:1-8 presents to us what is commonly referred to as the four horsemen of the apocalypse. This portion of your Bible is presented here.

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.

When considering this passage, 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) Rev.4:4. There was the innumerable throng of the saints, Rev.7:9. The brute creation was represented by the four beasts taken from the different spheres of the animal worlds (Rev. 4:6ff) and the angels were there as the heavenly choir (Rev. 7:11) and as servants of God, (Rev8:2ff).

John saw heaven in all its glory.

The focal point of the vision is Christ. God is the one sitting on the throne (Rev. 4:11) and in His right hand is a book, a scroll, that is rolled up and sealed with seven seals. These seals are on the edge of the scroll, spaced in such a way that when one is broken, the scroll can be unrolled until the reader comes to the next seal. This scroll represents the counsel of God as it pertains to the history of the world and the things that have come to pass in order that Christ may realize the kingdom of heaven. In a sense it contains 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 also 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 is 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 world". This indicates that Christ is already in heaven as the Exalted One, having completed the work of redemption on earth, Matthew 28:18. Christ earned the right to receive the power from God that He might reveal the secret counsel of God and bring it to pass. 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 say, "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 and broke the seals, thereby revealing 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 simply read, come!) rather, to the horse and 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 represent 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" as if the church will not be present in the world at that time. Rather, they refer to all of history, from the beginning of the world to the end, especially from the moment of the ascension of Christ until His personal return. Throughout all our days, these four horsemen are riding. We emphasize that four are riding. It is not correct to interpret this passage as if the four horses ride in some chronological succession, as if at one point in history the white horse rides, then later on the red one, 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.

WHY HORSES?

What then is the symbolism of a horse? This animal was principally used for war. Consider Job 39:19-25, "He paweth in the valley and rejoiceth in his strength... he mocketh fear... neither turneth he back from the sword." Israel was forbidden the use of horses in battle lest they attribute the strength of victory to men and animals rather than to God, see Psalm 20:7, 33:17. The horse here represents power. Throughout history there are 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 forth the horses to ride, see also Rev. 19:11-16.

A WHITE HORSE

In our present article, we consider the first of these horses, the white one. "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," Rev.6:2.

The first thing we note is the color, it is a white horse. The Bible tells us that white is a sign of purity, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow," Isaiah 1:18. The saints, victoriously gathered in heaven, wear white robes, Rev.7:9, Rev.19:11.

Next we recognize the fact that this horse and rider are going to battle, he has a bow. This too indicates that this horse represents the power of God whereby one is made white or purified. The battle of the ages is exactly this, between spiritual forces which are fighting each other, see Ephesians 6:11-17, especially verse 17, "take the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God". The power whereby God saves His people and condemns the wicked is none other than the preaching of the gospel.

We also observe that this is a victorious rider, he has a crown of victory on his head and he goes forth conquering and to conquer.

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 people 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 elect through the power of the preaching of the gospel.

A VICTORIOUS RIDE

We may well ask, how can the preaching of the Word be described in such a glowing way? Does it not often appear the very opposite? Indeed, Paul confessed, "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe," I Corinthians 1:21. Preaching seems very foolish.

What seems foolish with men is powerful with God. The power of the gospel lies first of all in the message. The content of the Word preached is not the vain ramblings of men, not the philosophies of depraved and sin laden men,

but it is in truth the revelation of God! “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works,” II Timothy 3:16.

Such a message based upon the Bible is powerful. As the Word of God, it lifts man into a responsible relationship with God. The message correctly describes man as depraved. “Every imagination of the thought of his heart was only evil continually,” Gen.6:5. It declares that God is holy and will have no fellowship with sin, “For the righteous Lord loveth righteousness, his countenance doth behold the upright,” Ps.11:7. It unveils the glorious news that salvation is in Christ Jesus alone, “Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved,” Acts 4:12. The gospel message calls men to respond, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house,” Acts 16:31. It warns that such a correct response is important, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned,” Luke 16:16.

The power of the preaching includes more than the message, it also includes the proclamation of that message. We may well ask, how can the preaching of the gospel be described as a man with a bow, having a victor’s crown on his head, going forth conquering and to conquer? The answer lies in the fact that Christ is the one who calls, “Come!” He is the one who breaks the seal and sends forth the horse to ride. The power of the preaching is entirely in the hands of the exalted Lord.

Christ is the one who speaks through His ministers. This is the important difference between the preaching of the gospel and our personal witness concerning the gospel. In preaching, Christ Himself speaks! This is the powerful call of our exalted Lord. Christ has instituted the office of the ministry for that purpose. “And he gave some apostles, and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors, and teachers,” Eph. 4:11. The call to the ministry comes from Christ, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle,” Rom. 1:1. Consequently, when a minister stands before the church to preach, he is an ambassador of Jesus Christ, for he is an appointed mouth piece, “Now then, we are ambassadors of Christ, as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.” II Cor. 5:20. So true is this that Christ Himself speaks through His called servant who stands in His behalf, “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed; and how shall they believe in him of whom (literally WHOM) they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach except they be sent? as it is written how beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace and bring good tidings of good things,” Rom. 10:14-15. The power of the proclamation is in Christ Himself.

Finally, the application and fruit of such preaching is divinely determined. Man does not have to try to help Christ along by winning souls for Him. The preaching is not a begging, pleading, nonsense as if poor Jesus can’t save those for whom He died. Christ is quite able to direct His word to His own and save them and judge the wicked who refuse to believe. “For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved and in them that perish, to the one we are the savour of death unto death, and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?” II Cor. 2:15, 16.

Christ directs the preaching of the gospel so that the church sends its missionaries exactly to the place He wants them. Paul was, “Forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia,” in order that he might receive the vision of the Macedonian man and go to Europe, Acts 16:6-9. Christ provides the open doors for the church, Rev. 3:8. He gives the church both the direction to preach and the assurance that He will enable them to fulfill their calling, “Go ye therefore and teach all nations... lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world,” Matt. 28:19.

The white horse is riding victoriously now, for by it, Christ is gathering and preserving His church unto the day when He will come again and receive us unto himself, John 14:3.