

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse • Revelation 6

After Pearl Harbor was attacked President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed the nation and said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!” Well, there has been a lot of fear lately—even among Christians. Too many Christians are living by fear rather than living by faith. They fear the worst. They imagine catastrophe. They constantly tell others their stories and their worries of panic and disaster and they succeed in spreading the fear.

Could they be right? Are we on the eve of war and plague and the end of the world? These are questions that Christians were asking 1900 years ago when the last book of the Bible was written. We call the book “Revelation” although in the Greek Bible it is called “The Apocalypse”. The words “apocalypse” and “revelation” are synonymous—they mean the same thing. The last book of the Bible is a revelation of what Jesus Christ is going to do in our world in the future.

Apocalyptic literature is not unique to the Bible. Nor is Revelation the only place in the Bible where we find such writing. It is in the Old Testament writings of Daniel and Ezekiel and a few other places as well. It is spectacular and sensational—sort of like modern science fiction movies with lots of impressive special effects that grab your attention.

Early Christians would listen intently when the Book of Revelation was read, often spellbound with the sights and sounds and smells of future events.

They were not frightened by what they heard; they were comforted. That may seem especially strange because they lived in times of trauma greater than anything any of us will probably ever experience. Yet they found great hope and comfort in discovering that God knows the future and he is in control and will ultimately win.

This sermon is part of a series on famous Bible stories: Creation; Joseph; Moses; David and Goliath; Jonah and the Fish. We finish this series with the famous Bible story of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. It is a familiar image of future judgment and

calamity, yet most of us know very little about the story of these horses, riders and their meanings.

Let’s read Revelation 6 and, as you do, try to project what you are reading on the screen of your mind. “See” what you are reading. Here is the vision of Saint John:

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!”

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

Before getting to the details of the story we need to understand that much of the book of Revelation is about prophecy and future events. It is the account of the great final conflict between the powers of God and the powers of Satan. It is the final battle between good and evil.

In many ways the Book of Revelation is not a

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pretty picture. It is a picture of sin raising its ugly head and God severely responding to punish that sin.

We also need to understand that in the Book of Revelation God reveals the future in a series of scrolls (today we would call them books). The scrolls are all rolled up and on each of the scrolls are seals. Only God can authorize that the seals on the scrolls be broken and the scrolls be read. He authorizes heavenly creatures to open and read them.

The first of the scrolls has warriors riding four different horses. They symbolize the first early events leading to the end of the world. The first horse is white. It comes galloping out representing the beginning of nations going to war with each other. Revelation 6:1-2 says:

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

The war has not yet begun but one warrior is ready to begin. Here is a leader and a nation ready to fight. He has a bow in his hand that is a weapon of war. On his head is a crown that symbolizes the leadership he has. He has the power to wage war but he doesn't do it yet. The war has not yet begun, but he is "bent on conquest."

There's nothing unusual about this. It has happened before in history. Before World War II began Adolph Hitler was ready to wage war. Before the terrorist attacks of September 11th the terrorists were aching for a fight. The rider on the white horse is not identified in terms of name, nation or position, but it is clearly someone who wants a fight and thinks he can win.

Most Americans have never experienced war first hand. That is kind of amazing considering that war has been going on throughout all of human history; therefore, many people throughout history have experienced war first hand. Twentieth century America had World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, but all of these included relatively few people and none of these wars was waged on American soil. Most people today were born after these conflicts and the wars were very far away. As a result we don't really have a direct understanding of what is here

being described. We imagine that this is just a temporary problem, a threat that can be removed and a situation that can be politically negotiated. But the Bible is saying here that there will come a time when there will be no political solution and no resolution. This is a warning of the beginning, the first hint of the beginning of the end.

Next comes the red horse and rider of the war itself in Revelation 6:3-4:

"When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" Then another horse came out, a fiery red one, the rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword."

Nations and individuals have fought one another since the beginning of human history. There has always been the threat of mutual annihilation, but God has put a limit on how bad it could get.

During the Cold War from the 1950s through the 1980s there was a constant threat of nuclear war. One of the more frequently quoted lines was that human beings have always used every weapon of war that we have developed. The assumption was that there would be a nuclear war. The uncertainties were: (1) Would the war be started by the Soviet Union or by the United States? and, (2) Would it begin intentionally or accidentally? Most assumed that nuclear war was inevitable. So, why didn't it happen? I believe that God stopped it from happening. God put a restraint on human evil and human behavior that stopped us from annihilating one another. God would not let evil fully show its ugly head.

With the red horse of the apocalypse God reduces his restraint. He allows human behavior to move toward its sinful worst. God no longer stops the large sword of war. God allows the rider of evil "to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other."

I envision this to be a time of increased civil war, of wars between nations and acts of terrorism until it starts to erupt and bubble up everywhere. The peace we now enjoy will be little more than a pleasant memory.

After the red horse of slaughter comes the black horse of war's consequences. Revelation 6:5-6 tells us:

When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was

a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat of a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"

With war comes the disruption of usual production and distribution. Farmers are killed. Roads are destroyed. Ships are sunk. Economies go into a tailspin.

Imagine what would happen if world war broke out today. What if oil was not shipped from the Middle East? What if wheat was not shipped from the American Midwest? What if there was a breakdown in telecommunications, trucking and commercial aviation? What if it were impossible for food to make it to our supermarkets?

On September 11, 2001, there were long lines at area gas stations. Some stations doubled their prices. There were runs on grocery stores until some were running out of bread and bottled water. All commercial aviation in the United States was stopped for days. All of that was without war—just because of fear over what might happen. What if war really did happen? Most of us don't live on farms with our own food and livestock. Most of us can't heat our homes with wood or coal. Most of us don't have horses to ride to work or generators to provide electricity.

With the black horse of the Apocalypse comes a time when it costs a full day's wages to buy one quart of wheat. The problem is that one quart of wheat is enough to feed one man one day. In other words, he has no money left to feed the rest of his family. Or, for the same price he can buy three quarts of barley which is cheaper food and was often used to make wheat stretch to feed more poor people in bad economic times.

These prices are twelve times the normal prices that were being paid in the Roman Empire at that time. That means that in today's economy gasoline would sell for up to \$18 a gallon. Milk would cost \$10 a quart. Bread would sell for \$12 a loaf. The average price of a new car could run over \$300,000.

Everything is under divine control and God is ready!

Rent for a three-bedroom apartment would exceed \$12,000 each month.

The consequences of war can be sudden and severe. What the Bible is describing here is a sad picture of high inflation and expanding human misery. But there is more to come.

The fourth and final horseman rides the pale horse of death. Revelation 6:7-8 says:

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

This last horse is a sickly color of grayish green and yellow. It is the color of death. The rider on the horse is named Death and is followed by Hades which is the ancient word for the grave.

Up to one-fourth of the world's population is allowed to die by weapons, famine, plague and wild animals. In today's numbers that would be more than 1½ billion people throughout the world. It would be almost 75 million in the United States.

As unimaginable as that may seem to us today it has happened before in history. In the Roman Empire and during medieval times in England and on the European Continent we have documented records of plagues taking one fourth to one half of the entire population in short periods of time. We have records of massive numbers of deaths from influenza, small pox and bubonic plague.

As scary as the prophecies about the four horsemen are, this is just the beginning according to the Book of Revelation. God still has his foot on the brakes. Evil is still restrained. This is way ahead of the really bad stuff described in the following chapters of the Book of Revelation. Things can and will get worse.

Interestingly, much of this sounded so far-fetched just a few years ago. But after September 11, 2001, newspaper headlines and cover stories in news magazines made us realize how possible all of this really is.

Do you remember why the early Christians read these words from the Book of Revelation? They read the Book of Revelation so that they would be comforted in difficult times, so they would have hope. Does that seem strange to you? Does it seem that this would actually undermine their hope and comfort? But it didn't. This helped and encouraged them because they believed that God was in control of history. They believed that if God can say in advance what is going to happen then everything is under divine control and God is ready! The ultimate victor is not some Roman Caesar or a Middle Eastern terrorist. It is not Satan. The ultimate victor is God himself. We may not understand all the details and all the symbols in the Book of Revelation but one message is clear: God wins! We believe in God and we believe we are on God's side.

Let me say in very plain words . . . Do not be afraid. Do not spread fear. Trust God. Live by faith not by fear. Just as God took care of the Hebrew people in Egypt through the plagues of long ago, God will take care of Christians today. Live with calm and confidence.

St. Paul wrote in Romans 8:31-32, 28 and 37:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

God knows everything. God knows everything and he is completely in charge and God will take care of us. God will take care of us, so we don't need to be afraid. It is called living by faith and not by fear!

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