

Sermon – 01/04/2007 am

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Study Text: Revelation 6:1-8

On the throne in heaven God held a scroll in his right hand, the blueprint for the future of this world and the entire universe. A slain Lamb, who is Jesus Christ the Son of God, was found worthy to open this scroll. John, who was exiled on Patmos for preaching the word of God, was very pleased. He felt like praising God just like the whole host that he saw in heaven praising the Creator and the Redeemer, God the Father and God the Son.

Before we see what happened as the seals were opened by Jesus remember what John saw coming from the throne when he first saw it. *From the throne proceeded lightnings, thunders and voices* (4:5). These herald the judgements of God which are repeated with intensification throughout the book of Revelation (8:5, 11:19, 16:18). The voice John heard from the first living creature was *like thunder* (6:1).

If the seals were down the edge of a rolled up scroll then all the seals must be broken before the scroll can be opened. However, it does not follow, as some claim, that these 'seal judgments' are not therefore part of the contents of the scroll. This is a vision which John is recording, a vision full of pictures and numbers which are not literal but symbolic. These symbols are fluid and can change from one vision to another.

Many of the symbols seem to come from the Old Testament. In Zechariah we read of four groups of horses of different colours, colours that are almost the same as those found in the passage before us (Zechariah 6). They are commissioned by God to patrol the earth and punish nations that are oppressing the people of God.

There is a NT background to this vision also (Mat 24). One day as Jesus was leaving the temple in Jerusalem his disciples commented on the architectural wonder of this temple. Jesus told them that this temple would soon be destroyed. 'When' they asked, and 'what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?' Jesus warned them of deceivers coming in his name, of wars and rumours of wars, of famines and earthquakes, and of tribulation and martyrdom. The opening of the seals reveals events very similar to what Jesus told his disciples. The judgments that occur when the seals are opened involve not only the world of unbelievers but also believers being persecuted.

White Horse – Conquest

When the Lamb opened the first seal on the scroll, John heard one of the four living creatures say 'Come!' When John looked he saw a white horse with a rider. As he opened these first four seals, the four living creatures before the throne in heaven in turn called the horses to come. When the third seal was opened John also heard a voice speak from the midst of the four living creatures.

The white horse like the others went forth upon the earth. The rider had a bow and a crown, a crown that was given to him. The bow is a weapon of war (famous with the Parthians), and the crown a symbol of kingship. He went out conquering. Is this Christ himself going forth?

Some claim that it. 'Who else goes forth to conquer' they say. Moreover white is symbolic of purity and holiness and is always associated with Christ or the saints. They claim that the vision of Christ on a white horse in 19:11-16 proves this is Christ. But can we be so sure? Others, comparing these seal with Matthew 24 claim that this white horse represents the preaching of the gospel of Christ in all the world (Matthew 24:14).

But how does this white horse fit in with the other three. Can the first be holy and the rest evil? John sees the rest taking peace from the earth and killing 25% of all mankind. Is it not possible that this horse is actually a parody of Christ – that it is the antichrist? The first rider then represents Satan attempting to defeat and oppress believers through deception and persecution.

Human rulers often ride forth in victory on a white horse. In the first century horses were the epitome of warfare. They were the tanks or attack helicopters of today. This is what horses symbolise in this vision. The white horse went forth bent on conquest.

Red Horse – Strife

This horse and rider took peace from the earth, so that people started killing one another. The colour red symbolises blood which flows on the earth when this horse goes forth. The rider himself had a great sword which presumably he used as swords usually are – to kill. It is true that the word for 'kill' should be translated 'slay' or 'slaughter' but this is insufficient reason to hold that this killing is only of Christians in 'religious persecution' (Hendriksen). In fact with the fifth trumpet it is clearly told that Christians escape that particular judgment. No such discrimination is indicated here.

Black Horse – Scarcity

When the third seal was open by Jesus, a living creature called forth a black horse. Black symbolises death also but a particular kind of death – death from starvation or disease. Bubonic plague is often called the 'black death'.

The rider on this horse had a pair of scales symbolising rationing of food. During times of scarcity every grain is carefully measured. Poor people in India still receive their daily wage in grain. If they are harvesting rice it is rice, or if wheat then wheat. They are given *ek pao* or 250g for a day's wage – which is not a lot.

In this passage we read *a quart of wheat*, the equivalent of 1 litre is given, again barely sufficient for one person. Barley is a much coarser grain because the husk does not come off in threshing. Poor people often mix barley with wheat to make coarse flour for flat bread or porridge.

Do not harm the oil and the wine. These food items are much more expensive. In time of famine the price of these will skyrocket. Poor people cannot afford food items. Persecuted Christians will certainly be among the poor deprived of such foods. But the command from the throne is *do not harm* or 'do not cheat' on these items.

Pale Horse – Death

The fourth and last horse which John saw was the colour of a corpse. The word is *chloros* from which we get ‘chlorine’ and ‘chlorotic’ – a green/grey colour. The rider of this horse is named as Death. Following death is the place of the dead called Hades (Sheol in Hebrew). This horse goes forth bringing death by the sword, by famine, by pestilence/disease, or by ‘beasts of the earth’. Ezekiel speaks of the Lord bringing similar judgments on unfaithful Jerusalem (Ezekiel 14:21). We may not be familiar with death in all these ways, although wars do rage around the world. But John’s first readers not only faced famine and the sword but also wild beasts in Roman arenas.

The Jewish historian Josephus wrote of the tyranny that came upon the Christians when in AD 66 Nero made them the scapegoat for his own evil. Houses, crops and vineyards were destroyed. As a sport the Romans watched Christians being fed to wild animals. John and his first readers had good reason to think of Imperial Rome in all its savagery as they viewed these four horses and their riders.

Sovereign God

As we see these horses going forth to kill and destroy we might ask ‘is God behind this war and hunger and death. Do these horses and their riders belong to God?’ We have seen that Jesus open the seals, releasing these horses as it were. We also hear of these horses being granted or given permission to do their evil (6:4, 8). Even the rider on the white horse is ‘given’ his crown. The rider on the black horse is told not to harm the oil and the wine. The rider on the pale horse is given limited power to kill (only 25% of the earth).

This reminds us of the heavenly council in the first chapter of Job. Satan attacked Job but only as God allowed him. From the throne in heaven God and the Lamb exercise sovereign control over all this suffering and death. In one sense it is the outworking of sin, it is what happens when God removes his peace from the earth, but still God remains sovereign. These are divine judgments.

In this tyranny of evil, Christians will suffer and even be targeted as seen in the fifth seal. Many poor and innocent will suffer also. But ultimately the tyrants who act as agents of Satan will be destroyed as we see in the sixth seal.

In John’s time Nero and Domitian were allowed to bring tyranny to the earth. Many tyrants have followed them. In our own era Adolf Hitler brought tyranny to Europe and beyond, as did the Emperor of Japan. Stalin brought tyranny to Russia and beyond.

We thank God that this tyranny was limited in space and time. These evil horsemen of the apocalypse were given power over only 25% of the earth. But the time is coming when this devastation and death will consume the whole earth. Satan and all his evil agents will be cast into the lake of fire and there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

This is what you pray for is it not? You pray ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. God’s kingdom will not be set up alongside the kingdom of evil. The kingdom of evil must be destroyed and then God’s kingdom will come in all its fullness. Even so come Lord Jesus!

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