

CHAPTER 5

The Four Horsemen

At the beginning of this chapter it will be a great benefit to remind ourselves of the Scriptures by reading Revelation 5:1-7 and 6:1-8, where we find the Lamb opening the scroll and the emergence of the four horsemen. These four horsemen have been the focus of all kind of fantasies, dramas, and artistic representations, and they are usually seen as horrific harbingers of dreadful times to come. In a measure, that is true. But what we need to understand is that these things are released not from the pit, but from Heaven. These things are called forth not by demonic powers, but by the four cherubim that surround the throne of God. "Come!" they cry, and as they cry, the horse comes forth to fulfill everything that God has ordained. We need to understand that it is the Lamb who is breaking the seals. This is not some fiendish satanic plot that is being set into

motion. This is the Lamb, the governor of all history, fulfilling His plan and His purpose.

The best commentary that you will ever find on the Bible is the Bible. The Bible explains itself. That is what it is designed to do. We compare Scripture with Scripture. The things that we say, believe, and act upon must be confirmed by the Word of God—not just by one verse taken out of context, but by the whole weight of Scripture. Somebody once said that a text out of context is a pretext. That is very true. We do not just take a snippet here and a snippet there. We seek to weigh the whole counsel of God so that we can come to an understanding of the truth. God did not write the Bible to confuse us. God had the Bible communicated to us that we might see and understand. That has always been my approach to the Word of God, as it should be for us all. What I want to try to do is to throw new light on these horses and their riders and ultimately on the purposes of God. I want to do this so that we are not those that live in fear and dread of the day when the dark clouds of the sky suddenly transform into some dreadful and fearsome quartet riding out to do us harm. Rather, we see this as part and parcel of the ongoing purposes of God.

An Equestrian Vision

The whole idea of horsemen riding forth finds its genesis in the Book of Zechariah. Zechariah is a young prophet who, significantly, has returned from Babylonian captivity. He has been a captive in Babylon. He has returned with Zerubbabel the prince and with Joshua the priest, and he has returned to Jerusalem with the specific task of building the house of God. Nehemiah will come later to build the walls of the city, but the first wave of returnees out of captivity came just to build the house. When

Zechariah, who is a priest as well as a prophet, gets his visions from God, he gets eight visions in one night—a fairly busy period of revelation. Most of his visions are to do with the house of God. He sees the visions in the context of the temple that they have come back to build. Let us turn back to Zechariah:

On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo. During the night I had a vision—and there before me was a man riding a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in a ravine. Behind him were red, brown and white horses. I asked, “What are these, my lord?” The angel who was talking with me answered, “I will show you what they are.” Then the man standing among the myrtle trees explained, “They are the ones the Lord has sent to go throughout the earth.” And they reported to the angel of the Lord, who was standing among the myrtle trees, “We have gone throughout the earth and found the whole world at rest and in peace” (Zechariah 1:7-11).

They are the messengers of God, another picture of the angels who go forth. These horsemen represent angelic messengers who serve the purposes of God. In chapter 6 of the prophet Zechariah we find another equestrian vision:

I looked up again—and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains—mountains of bronze! (Zechariah 6: 1)

In an earlier chapter, I wrote of the two bronze pillars that stood at the doorway of the temple. So these chariots are coming

out from the house of God. They are coming from the temple, past the two bronze pillars, past the two bronze mountains:

The first chariot had red horses, the second black, the third white, and the fourth dappled—all of them powerful. . . . When the powerful horses went out, they were straining to go throughout the earth. And he said, "Go throughout the earth!" So they went throughout the earth. Then he called to me, "Look, those going toward the north country have given my Spirit rest in the land of the north" (Zechariah 6:2-3; 7-8).

Note that the ultimate goal of the horsemen is to bring peace and rest. Their ultimate goal is to bring in the qualities of the Kingdom of God. For the quality of the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, it is not rule and regulation, it's not diet and day observation; the Kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). Everything God does is geared to bringing in His Kingdom. Even the judgments of God, things that appear to be destructive from the hand of God, actually have a creative conclusion. God wants to bring in His Kingdom. So these angelic messengers are not just harbingers of destruction and calamity. They are messengers of the Kingdom. God wants to bring in His Kingdom. He wants to establish peace and rest among His people.

The White Horse—The Conquering King

John is watching as the Lamb takes the book and opens the seal. The first horse out of the stable, the first horse that gallops throughout the world, is described like this: a white horse, its rider holding a bow and given a crown as He rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest. When God initiates His purpose, the first one

out is none other than Jesus Himself. Now this is when human logic begins to get into conflict with spiritual understanding. How can the Lamb open the book and let Himself out? How can it be that the Lamb opens the seal and then it is Jesus who rides out on the horse? It is illogical. Well, let me give you a very simple example. When He began His earthly ministry, when He announced His intention, Jesus went into the synagogue. He was handed a scroll, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ... The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him, and He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21).

Do you see what happened? Jesus took the scroll, opened the scroll, and introduced Himself out of the scroll. Now in Revelation we are seeing Him in a different dimension; we see Him not as the carpenter in a local synagogue but as the Lamb, the center of all Heaven. And yet He is still doing the same thing. He is taking the scroll, opening the scroll, and introducing Himself. He Himself gallops out of the scroll to fulfill the purposes of God.

All the way through the Book of Revelation white represents purity and holiness, and so the Lamb comes forth riding on a white horse. The first thing that God does when He wants to produce His purposes in the world is to declare His Word, to preach His Gospel. Everything depends on how we respond to the Word of God. We are going to see this rider later on in chapter 19, when there is no question about who He is. He is coming out riding on a

horse, and His name is the Word of God. The Word of God is the first thing that God looses into the world to judge and discriminate. This is how it works. Right at the beginning of creation, "God said." God's word comes into play. "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." And "God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness" (Gen. 1:3-4). That is how God operates. God says, God sees, and then God separates. What we will find in the Book of Revelation is that the Word of God goes out, God sees those who have responded and become light and those who have rejected and becomes darkness, and then God separates them.

Now the Lamb is riding forth as the Word of God, and He has a crown because He is King of kings and Lord of lords. In fact, in chapter 19 we will see Him riding out with many crowns on His head, and the name written on His thigh and on His robe is "King of kings and Lord of lords." He is riding forth as a conqueror. He is not going to *become* a conqueror. He *is* a conqueror. Before He has unsheathed His mighty sword, before He has strung His powerful bow, He is already a conqueror. And as a conqueror He rides forth bent on conquest, determined to overcome, determined to win, determined to bring in the Kingdom. It is the saints and Jesus who are overcomers. It is the saints and Jesus who ride on white horses. It is the saints and Jesus who wear crowns.

The last chapter of the prophet Habakkuk is a song. It is a worship song, a celebration. It is a harmonious prophecy. What the prophet is doing is recounting the historic demonstrations of God's power. He takes from different periods of history, from different victories, different times of God manifesting His power, and weaves it all together in one splendid declaration of the

triumphs of the Lord. We have pictures of God taking His people through the sea, of Joshua making the sun stand still in the sky, of David slaying Goliath. All kinds of things come together in one composite picture of the greatness of God. One of the things the prophet says is, "God we have heard of your deeds, we stand in awe of what you have done. Repeat them. Renew them in our day." One of the great things for us is to know that what God has done in the past, God determines to do again in the future. The great things God has done in the past are hints and clues to us of what God yet wants to do in the days to come. So the prophet asks God to renew these things in his day, and he begins to compose a song that weaves in all kinds of demonstrations of God's power. Bearing in mind these four horsemen have ridden out, see how Habakkuk rejoices in the power and the glory of God.

Psalm 45 is a great Psalm. We will give it fuller treatment when we get to chapter 19, but let us note here that it is about a war and a wedding. The strange thing is that, in the purposes of God, a war and a wedding are often placed together. Chapter 19 of Revelation and Psalm 45 are examples of those war-wedding pictures. The great King is riding forth: "Gird Your sword upon Your side, O mighty one; clothe Yourself with splendor and majesty." The great King is bringing in the qualities of the Kingdom, "In Your majesty ride forth victoriously in behalf of truth, humility and righteousness." He has His sword at His side and His bow in His hand, and His arrows are sharp and they are going to penetrate the hearts of His enemies: "Let your right hand display awesome deeds. Let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king's enemies; let the nations fall beneath your feet." What we are seeing here in Revelation has already been prophesied in Psalm 45.

Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy (Habakkuk 3:2).

“In wrath remember mercy” is a good motto for the Book of Revelation because there is going to be a lot of wrath breaking forth; but in His wrath, God always remembers mercy: Here is God going forth, and as we read it we are going to discover that God goes forth as a Redeemer, as a Savior. He rides out as one who will rescue His people. But as He rides out, pestilence and plague accompany Him: “Plague went before Him; pestilence followed His steps” (Hab. 3:5). It should not surprise us, therefore, when we look into the Book of Revelation and see Jesus riding out to conquer the world, that plague and pestilence are with Him, because that is one of the ways that the prophets describe the purposes of God coming to fulfillment.

The Red Horse—The Sword of Separation

One of the things we see as these horsemen ride forth is in His wake comes war, famine, pestilence, and death. That is just how the prophet in this third chapter of Habakkuk describes Him. This is none other than the Lord riding out triumphantly, and our emphasis is on His triumph, not on the repercussions that follow the rejection of His lordship. Nevertheless, there are repercussions. For the next horse that comes forth, we are told, is a red horse. In fact, it is a fiery red horse. 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. Do you remember those words of Jesus, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34)? You see, when Jesus rides out in triumph, there are those who bow the knee to His lordship and those who reject His offer of salvation; and God

separates them just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Wherever the Gospel is preached, there is inevitably a violent reaction. In fact, if we read on in Matthew after the verse just quoted about the sword, Jesus says that a man's enemy shall be that of his own household: father against son, mother against daughter. There is a division that comes between those who believe and those who reject the Gospel. Sometimes the opposition that arises between them involves violence. There are nations in the world right now where people who dare to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ could be murdered by their own family simply because they have owned the name of Jesus. These are the things that follow in the wake of the Gospel. These are inevitable repercussions that happen everywhere that the Gospel is proclaimed and everywhere that Jesus establishes His rule. There are those who rebel and are violent in their rebellion. And so Jesus brings in the Kingdom, but, in doing so, He brings a sword.

The Black Horse—Famine and Finance

He opens the third seal and there comes a black horse whose rider is holding a pair of scales and saying that the minimum subsistence will cost a whole day's wage. There is famine coming. You see, this world is God's world, and everything that happens in this world serves the purpose of God. Where there are those who do not respond to the Gospel, there is an economic effect. We sometimes divorce spiritual things from natural things. The Bible has no concept of that at all. As far as the Bible is concerned, everything is spiritual because everything issues from God. Your economic situation is a spiritual thing. It is not just a natural thing. That is why the Bible makes it very clear that God wants us to prosper. That is why the Bible makes it clear that he who sows much will reap much. Where there is a

society that rejects God, there is a society that will come under financial pressure. It may not happen immediately, but somewhere down the line it will happen. It will happen because righteousness exalts a nation but sin is a reproach to any people (Prov. 14:34). God begins to touch us, and we will see in the Book of Revelation that one of the ways God begins to touch things is economically.

So there is a sense of famine that comes. It may be a real famine, a shortage of supply, or it may be a famine of hearing the Word of God, for the Scripture speaks of that also. But while a rejecting world is suffering in the areas of its economy, God makes a promise to His people. Listen to what it says here: "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!" (Rev. 6:6). Now some interpreters see this as the poor suffering because staple things are scarce and the rich prospering because expensive things are plentiful. But when we look into the Scriptures, we discover that oil and wine actually have deep implications for us. It is one of the ways God describes His people.

Back in the Book of Judges when Abimelech had killed all of Gideon's sons and set himself up as king over the people of God, the youngest son, called Jotham, escaped. As Abimelech was trying to set himself as a king to the leaders of the nation, Jotham went up on a mountain and shouted a parable down. "Let me tell you a story," he said.

"All the trees were looking for a king and they said to the olive tree, 'Come and be our king,' and the olive tree said, 'Shall I leave my oil that blesses God and men to be your king?' So they said to the vine, 'Come and be our king,' and the vine said, 'Should I leave my wine that gladdens the

heart of men and come and be your king?’ and he would not. In the end, they submitted themselves to the thorn bush, the very mark of the curse of the earth, and he became their king and ruled over them” (Judges 9:8-15).

Now what we see here is that the olive tree and the vine actually join God and men together. When you come into the New Testament, it is very interesting that Paul speaks of believers as branches being grafted into an olive tree (Rom. 11:17). And Jesus says He is the vine and we are the branches (John 15:4-5). There is a relationship, an intimacy, between God and men. There is a relationship between Jesus and us. We are branches of His olive tree. We are branches of His vine. The olive tree and the vine represent the people of God. The psalmist says of God’s provision that He gives wine to make our heart glad and oil to make our faces shine (Ps. 104:15). The wine of the Kingdom makes us glad, and the oil of the Spirit causes us to glow. We are God’s olive and vine people. If your name was Olive Vine, that would be fantastic, wouldn’t it! You would be a personification of our relationship with God. In fact, when we come together, as the Church of Christ, wine and oil play an important part in our fellowship. We drink wine to remember Him, and we anoint with oil to receive His healing. Oil and wine have a special implication for you and me as God’s people.

So when this angelic creature is given authority to bring famine into the world, he touches everything except you and me. He touches everything except the olive and the vine. One of the things we need to understand in the Book of Revelation is that when all these plagues and perils break out on the earth, horrendous and wretched as they are, they do not touch us. One

of the things we will see as we look later at the Exodus paradigm is how much John lifts from the Exodus story and applies it to us. One of the great things about the plagues that came on Egypt is that they did not come on the people of God. They came everywhere except the camp of the Lord. Now you and I need to know that whatever breaks out on this earth, we are safe. "Do not touch the oil and the wine." You can burn the grass. You can cut down the forest. You can turn the water to blood, but you cannot touch the olive and the vine because they are the trees that fill the garden of God. These are the redeemed and the preserved of the Lord, upon whom He has set His affection.

Let me just refer here briefly to the seven trumpets and the seven plagues. In chapter 9 of Revelation, we are told of the trumpets being blown, and when they are blown, all kinds of calamities hit our world.

The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads (Revelation 9:1-4).

You see, when all hell breaks out, you and I can still live in Heaven on earth. When they are plaguing the rest of mankind, when the whole world is suffering because of its rejection of Christ and its rebellion against the Gospel, God says to those

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agents of suffering, "You are still on My leash; you can only do what I allow you to do. Do not touch the grass." It's funny because the very thing that locusts want is the grass and the trees. But God says not to touch them. Why? Because they represent God's people; the righteous spring up like grass, they are oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord. The only ones the locusts can touch are those who do not have the seal of God on their forehead. How do you know that you are sealed? You have His name upon your forehead.

In chapter 16 of Revelation, it speaks of the bowls of wrath that are poured out on our world:

The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image (Revelation 16:2).

There are two kinds of people in our world. We are not talking about future world; we are talking about today's world. There are two kinds of people in this world. There are those who have the mark of God on them and those who have the mark of the beast on them. It is not your VISA card; it is not a barcode. There is a mark of God on all those who name the name of Jesus, and there is a mark of the beast on all those who have not received the Gospel. The Bible makes it very clear; the locusts cannot touch those who have the mark of God. They can only torment and plague those who have the mark of the beast. Whichever way it falls, we are safe.

Now, that does not mean we do not get touched by pain, that we escape on some kind of cloud and look at the world through rose-colored glasses. We get persecuted. We may get martyred.

God preserves us, even if that preservation takes us through death and brings us into His presence.

The Green Horse—Rejection and Repercussions

The last of the horses that comes forth, the Bible tells us, is a pale horse or, probably more accurately, a green horse, which is very bizarre. But its very color, its very pallor, speaks of sickness, plague, and pestilence. We should note that the first fulfillment of these judgments was on Jerusalem. It was Jerusalem that had rejected the Gospel of Christ. It was Jerusalem that had refused His kingship. It was Jerusalem that claimed they had no king but Caesar. It was Jerusalem that had crucified the Lord of Glory. And in their rejection of the covenant, God therefore rejected them. And many things that happen in the Book of Revelation are warnings that God gave Israel in the Old Testament. It is Israel that had the warning. It is Israel that becomes the prostitute. It is Israel that has become Babylon. It is Israel that has rejected Him, and it is upon Israel that terrible plagues and pestilences are initially poured out. It happened dramatically in A.D. 70, when the Romans destroyed the city and scattered the Jews to the ends of the earth. But the warning actually comes way back in Leviticus:

But if you will not listen to Me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject My decrees and abhor My laws and fail to carry out all My commands and so violate My covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it. I will set My face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you. If after all this you will

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not listen to Me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over (Leviticus 26:14-18).

This passage in Leviticus 26 goes on to repeat its warning of punishment seven times, and the same seven-fold pattern unfolds in the Book of Revelation.

If you remain hostile toward Me and refuse to listen to Me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve. I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted (Leviticus 26:21-22).

Again and again, God says that there is a sevenfold judgment coming, and the sevenfold judgment has four characteristics. The four characteristics are the sword, famine, plague, and wild animals, which are the very plagues that this last horseman brings forth. He is called death, and hades is following him. But remember, Jesus said that He has the keys of death and hades. This horse can only ride forth because Jesus has unlocked the stable. Jesus is still in charge.

So God's prime purpose is for His Gospel to go forth and for all men to repent. But where there is no repentance, man sets in motion inevitable repercussions. There come hostility and violence, famine, pestilence, and death. But that is not God's initial purpose. He will destroy His enemies, but His desire is that all come to repentance. That is why the Gospel goes forth first. That is why He is the first one out of the stable, to declare the great things of God.

God is about to release the four horsemen on the earth. But before that happens, it is as if a cry goes up: "Hold your horses!

THE LION AND THE LAMB

Hold your horses!” Something has to happen first. Remember, the Book of Revelation is not chronological. It is looking at things from different angles. So John sees the four horses released, he sees what is going to happen, but before that happens, a cry goes up, “hold your horses, hold back those four spirits, because something must happen first.” We will look and see what that something is in our next chapter.