

FOUR RIDERS

SERIES: WAKE UP



Catalog No. 20190125
Revelation 6:1-17
12th Message
Scott Grant
January 6, 2019

Revelation 6:1-17

In Revelation 4-5, John, the author of Revelation, took us to the throne room of God in heaven. There we saw that God was holding a scroll, which, near as we can tell, contains his plan to heal the world. John wept because no one was found worthy to open the scroll, but then he was assured that the Lion from the tribe of Judah, who is also a slain and resurrected Lamb, was worthy. The Lion-Lamb figure, of course, is a picture of Jesus Christ.

The Lamb took the scroll, whereupon twenty-four elders and four living creatures and “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” of angels and “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them” broke into worship.

We can't wait for the Lion-Lamb to open the scroll!

We now enter into the next major section in the book, Revelation 6-16, which features the opening of seven seals, the sounding of seven trumpets, and the pouring out of seven bowls. Some see the events depicted in these chapters as almost exclusively confined to an as-yet-unrealized future, though most everyone understands Revelation 12 to be depicting at least some past events. Here's the way I see it:

Jesus told John to write “the things that you have seen,” which he further defined as “those that are and those that are to take place after this” (Revelation 1:19). The things that John saw, then, would be everything that he had seen by the time he wrote Revelation. What John saw related to both the present (the things “that are”) and the future (the things “that are to take place after this”).

Revelation, like the rest of the New Testament, conveys the “now” and the “not yet”: the kingdom of God has been inaugurated with the first coming of Christ, it is advancing with the ongoing coming of Christ, and it will be consummated with the final coming of Christ. The book mirrors the Lord God himself, “who is and who was and who is to come” (Revelation 1:4, 8). The things that are, insofar as they defy the will of God, will give way to the things that will take place.

Revelation concerns, from the perspective of the end of the first century, when it was written, “the things that must soon take place”: the things that concern God's ongoing and ultimately final victory over evil (Revelation 1:1). From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, those “things” have been taking place since John wrote the book, they are taking place now, and they will take place in the future until evil is vanquished and the kingdom of God is established.

If you see it differently from me, don't let that distract you from opening up to the explosive visions in the book, which illustrate the destructiveness of evil on the one hand and the power of God to overthrow evil on the other. Don't miss the images for the timeline.

Alarming statistics

Here are some rather alarming statistics:

—Despite amazing advances in medicine, life expectancy in the United States has dropped for the second year in a row, according to the latest report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

—The annual suicide rate in the United States increased twenty-four percent between 1999 and 2014, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

—The rate of public mass shootings in the United States has tripled since 2011.

Are the statistics telling us something? Where is God in all this? The book of Revelation, beginning in Revelation 6, gives us some surprising answers.

The four horsemen

Revelation 6:1-8:

Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, “Come!” 2 And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and

to conquer. 3 When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" 4 And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword. 5 When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. 6 And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!" 7 When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" 8 And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

The four living creatures, which we met in the heavenly throne room in Revelation 4, each say, "Come!" Yes, but to whom? When the first living creature makes this request, it does so in response to the Lamb's opening one of the seven seals. Who is depicted as "coming" in the book of Revelation? The one who opens the seals: the Lamb, who is Jesus Christ, of course.

We were told at the beginning of the book, in reference to Jesus: "Behold, he is coming . . ." (Revelation 1:7). Near the end of the book, the Holy Spirit and the church say to Jesus, "Come," and John urges his readers to say to him, "Come" (Revelation 22:17). Finally, at the end of the book, Jesus himself says, "Surely I am coming soon," to which John says, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20) Jesus has come; he is coming, in the present, even now; and he will come.

With the opening of the first four seals, the four living creatures, like the Spirit, the church, and John himself, bid Jesus to come. But who and what appear in Revelation 6:1-8? Four horses and four riders. The so-called "Four horsemen of the Apocalypse," therefore, are a manifestation of the ongoing coming of Jesus, who comes in judgment and salvation. And they're not out for a casual ride through the countryside!¹

In Revelation 6, Jesus comes. Remember, since he first came, he has always been coming, and he will

continue to come until he comes in the final sense, when, as John puts it in Revelation 1:7, "every eye will see him."

We would, therefore, expect to see the effects of the four horsemen from John's day forward. John is warning the churches in his day that they're about to enter a more intense time of suffering and persecution, and indeed they did under Domitian, the Roman emperor. The imagery of the vision would be understandable to John's readers, who were familiar with crowns, swords, balances, denarii, oil, wine, and Hades in a way that we aren't.

And what of Jesus' followers? Are they exempt from such suffering? By no means. Jesus told the church in Smyrna that he knew of its "tribulation" and that it would be "tested" by even more intense tribulation (Revelation 2:8-11). Insofar as the church experiences the effects of God's judgment against rebel humanity, it is tested by such effects: it is purged and refined.

Living with consequences

Note that in the opening of three of the four seals, something was "given" or "permitted" to a rider. The riders bring destruction, but they do so under the sovereignty of God.

Is this how Jesus comes? We couldn't wait for Jesus to open the scroll, and when he begins doing so, this is what we get? What's going on? Here's what's going on: God gives humans who have turned their backs on him over to their own devices so that they will see the consequences of human rebellion against God and turn to him (Romans 1:24, 28). In so doing, God allows evil to prevail for a while.

Eventually, wise parents know they have to let their children make their own decisions and live with the consequences of those decisions—ultimately so that they will make better decisions. In this respect, God is like a wise parent.

God is saying to the world, "If you don't want it my way, I will give you your way." The horsemen ride ultimately so that men and women will turn to him (Revelation 9:20-21; 11:13; 14:6-7; 15:4; 16:9, 11). In God's judgment, the impotence of earthly gods is laid bare. God gives people what they want so that they will want what they need. His judgment, then, as Jesus comes, as evil is given a place, as the horsemen ride throughout history, is merciful. It is part of God's mission to rescue the world.

How painful this must be for God! Is it easy for a parent, who could have stopped a child from making a poor decision, to let that child suffer for a poor decision even if the parent knows that such suffering is necessary? No, it's excruciating. Can you imagine what it must be like for the Father, who so loves us so much that he gave his Son and watched him suffer for our sins?

The effects of sin

In our day, we have heard about, and we have seen conquest, war, economic ruin, runaway inflation, famine, pestilence, and death. But do we understand such devastation as the consequences of human rebellion against God? Do we understand it as an aspect of the merciful judgment of a heartbroken God, of the ongoing coming of his Son, the Lamb of God? In Revelation 6:1-8, John continually "heard" and "saw." When we see such devastation, can we hear the hoof beats and can we see the riders and know that the world is this way because of human rebellion against God?

This is not the way it's supposed to be. This is not the way God wants it to be. But this is the way it must be if the world is to be healed. Therefore, the horsemen must ride. Scholar N.T Wright explains:

Unless the ills of the world are brought out, shown up in their true colors, put on display and allowed to do their worst, they cannot be overthrown. Unless the four horsemen ride out and do what they have to do, the scroll cannot be read. The victory of the lion-lamb will not be complete

Things have to be exposed before they can be dealt with. Things have to come to light before the surgeon can perform the operation. Ancient memories of guilt and sorrow must be raked up, however painfully, before they can be prayed through and healed. Revelation is, as it were, a cosmic version of the tough pastoral struggle over the deeply wounded soul. The soul of the world is aware of immediate problems and pains; but unless we look deeper, to the ancient patterns of conquest, violence, oppression and death itself we shall not begin to understand what needs to be done if the world is to be healed, really healed rather than merely patched together for a few more years.²

The world, especially the western world, is like a man with a sore foot. He goes to the doctor, who wants to do a series of tests to find out what's going on, but the man resists. He just wants the doctor to heal his sore foot. If the doctor were to run a series of tests, she would discover that the man has cancer. The man is convinced

that his problem is minor and can be fixed with a little treatment. He's in denial. He prefers to be in denial. He has a major problem. The four horsemen are showing us that we have a major problem: rebellion against God. And it's a lot worse than we know.

Four seals down, three to go—actually, in Revelation 6, only two to go.

Souls under the altar

Revelation 6:9:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne

After the opening of four seals, we're familiar with the pattern. We expect John to hear a living creature and see a colored horse with a rider on it who is commissioned to wreak some kind of destruction. Instead, he doesn't hear anything, and he sees something entirely different. The break in the pattern is arresting, designed to get our attention. John sees "the souls of those who had been slain."

Yes, there's a break in the pattern, but we've seen the verb "slay" before. Three times in Revelation 5 we're told that the Lamb was "slain." The rider of the second horse was commissioned to take peace from the earth so that people should "slay" one another (Revelation 6:4). The people in Revelation 6:9 have been slain for the same reason that John was confined on the island of Patmos: because of their involvement with the gospel of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:9).

The souls are under the altar, where the blood of sacrificial animals would gather, which means their deaths matter: they contribute to the advance of the kingdom of God. When the horsemen ride (and they've been riding since the first century), some followers of Jesus are persecuted, and some are slain—ultimately so that humanity can see the consequences of human rebellion against God and turn to the Lamb who was slain.

Cry for justice

Revelation 6:10-11:

They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will

judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” 11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

The martyrs cry out for justice—the kind that vindicates his holy name (Deuteronomy 32:5). They don’t question God’s justice; they simply question the timing of it: “how long . . . ?” For now, they’re given white robes, symbolizing victory and purity. Yes, they’ve been slain, but in point of fact, they’ve won. They’re told to rest, trusting that God will avenge their blood in his timing. In fact, God is seen as answering their cry later in the book, especially in Revelation 16:5-7 and 18:20.

What has to happen first? More of their fellow servants—that is, their brothers and sisters in Christ—have to be killed. For the kingdom of God to finally come and for evil to finally be vanquished, more believers in Jesus have to be killed. Lamentable? Yes. It’s an evil world. On the other hand, the death of the martyrs—and all the persecution of all believers, for that matter—means something, accomplishes something. For evil to finally be vanquished, it must do its worst, and that involves persecuting and killing followers of Jesus.

Earthly and celestial disturbances

Revelation 6:12-14:

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. 14 The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

After the opening of the fifth seal, which broke the pattern established by the horsemen, we don’t know what to expect. John sees enormous earthly and celestial disturbances. We are not necessarily to take this literally—as if, for example, the stars of the sky (presumably all the stars) have fallen, are falling, or will fall to the earth.

The prophets employed such language to foretell God’s near-term judgment against specific nations (Isaiah 13:9-10, 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7; Joel 2:31; Amos 8:9).

God’s judgments were, in fact, carried out, obviously without all the stars falling from the sky or the sky’s vanishing like a scroll. Jesus also employed such language when predicting God’s judgment against Jerusalem, which was fulfilled at least in part in 70 A.D., when the Romans destroyed the city (Matthew 24:29). We might employ similar language when speaking of events that are “earth-shaking” or “cosmic insignificance”—e.g., the fall of the Berlin Wall or the attacks of 9/11.

Does John’s vision portend God’s ongoing judgment or his final judgment? Probably both. On the one hand, we have already seen that the prophets used such imagery to convey ongoing judgment. On the other hand, John uses such imagery later in the book to convey what appears to be final judgment (Revelation 16:20, 20:11). Since John’s day, God has been judging the nations, and he will continue doing so until the final judgment. In the final judgment, or even before that, will John’s vision be fulfilled literally? Who’s to say? It hasn’t happened yet.

Hiding from God

Revelation 6:15-17:

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

As God judges humans who are opposed to him—here represented by seven categories of people, representing the totality of anti-God humanity—so that they experience the consequences of rebellion against him, do they turn to him? Do they pray to him? No, they hide from him and pray to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us . . .” They don’t want to see the face of God, because they recognize that the “great day of their wrath”—that is, the wrath of God and the wrath of the Lamb against all that is unloving—has come.

Again, as it concerns God’s ongoing judgment, we are not to take this scene literally. If we were to take it literally, and all the stars have fallen to earth, and every mountain has been removed from its place, as in verses 12-14, we might question whether there are any caves and rocks to hide in and among, and we might question whether there are any mountains and rocks to cry out

to. As it concerns some future judgment or the final judgment, who's to say?

Rebel humans finish by asking a question: who is able to stand in the day of God's wrath? They recognize that they're not able; that's why they're hiding and begging for the mountains and rocks to fall on them. Is anyone able? As this part of the vision comes to an end, the question lingers. The answer won't come until Revelation 7.

Come out of hiding

Why would people hide from God? Because they want to live on their own terms and don't want to submit to God. Some would rather mountains and rocks fall on them than turn to God. As we see the consequences of human rebellion against God, will we hide from him or turn to him?

Sometimes when I'm praying over difficult situations, and I sense that my own sin is wrapped up in them, I find that I immediately want to pray about something else or stop praying altogether. I don't want to face into my complicity, and I pull back from involving God, for fear of having to feel more emotional pain and for fear of what God may want of me. What am I doing? I'm hiding from God.

Some continue to believe that conquest, war, economic ruin, runaway inflation, famine, pestilence, and even death can be overcome as humans advance, as they learn more and as they develop technologically. Although efforts to ease human suffering are commendable, such efforts that ignore the heart of the problem—human rebellion against God—have made it easier to hide from God. In fact, such efforts often result in unintended negative consequences that in the end illustrate the heart of the problem: human rebellion against God.

On the one hand, we can praise both God and humans for the amazing advances in medicine that we've seen, such as the development of pain medication. When my mother was in great pain when she was dying of cancer, I was thankful that she could press a button to release morphine into her bloodstream. On the other hand, what has happened in our day? A national crisis.

More than 2 million Americans are now hooked on some kind of opioid, and drug overdoses in 2017 claimed more American lives than were lost in the entire Vietnam War. According to the best estimates, opioids alone killed another 52,000 Americans in 2018 and will kill up to half a million in the next decade. The increase in suicides and mass shootings has contributed to the decline in

life expectancy in the United States. A much greater contributor—in fact, a key contributor—according to recent studies, is the opioid crisis.

Andrew Sullivan writes about the opioid crisis in New York magazine: “The scale and darkness of this phenomenon is a sign of a civilization in a more acute crisis than we knew, a nation overwhelmed by a warp-speed, postindustrial world, a culture yearning to give up, indifferent to life and death, enraptured by withdrawal and nothingness. America, having pioneered the modern way of life, is now in the midst of trying to escape it.”

The opioid crisis, paradoxically borne out of a desire to improve the lot of sufferers, is enough to make you lose hope in the possibility of human improvement apart from God. And that's what the four riders are supposed to make us do: lose hope in the possibility of human improvement apart from God. In order to put your hope in what does not deceive, you usually have to lose hope in what does deceive.

What are these awful statistics telling us—the decrease in life expectancy, the increase in suicides, the increase in mass shootings, the onslaught of opioid deaths? They are telling us to come out of hiding and turn to God.

Glory inexpressible

And if we do? If we turn to God? Or, if instead of hiding my sin from God for fear of him, I come out in the open? Oh my!

We will “see his face”—in the new creation, yes, but even now (Revelation 22:4). We can see his face, that is, the expression of who he is, in his power and glory and love, especially his love for us, even in our sin—especially in our sin. Listen to the apostle Paul: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). If the blood of the lamb has satisfied the wrath of God, then there is no need to hide from him.

The blood of the Lamb means love! When I see the love of God in the face of Christ, my complicity, my sin—is not the issue between God and me that I fear it is. When I come out of hiding and turn to God, it's not an issue at all!

C.S. Lewis writes, “In the end that Face which is the delight or terror of the universe must be turned upon

each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.”

What will it be, my friend: glory inexpressible or shame incurable? If you believe in Jesus, then it will be glory inexpressible—and is even now.

Come out of hiding. Turn to God. Look full in his wonderful face.

EndNotes

¹ The four horsemen echo both Zechariah 6:1-8, where four chariots, led by colored horses, are seen as executing God’s judgment, and Ezekiel 14:21, where “four disastrous acts of judgment” are seen as constituting “sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence.”

² N.T Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 60-61.

³ Andrew Sullivan, “The Poison We Pick” (*New York* magazine, February 19, 2018).

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 34.