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Revelation #15

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse Revelation 6:1-8

Perhaps the single greatest controversy surrounding Revelation and the most important issue when it comes to interpreting the book, is the question of its structure. Many, perhaps most, evangelicals read Revelation as if it is describing a short period of time that is still in the future. Those who embrace what may be called the *futurist* view of the book most often will argue that what we have in Revelation 6-19 is a description of events that will take place in the future in a period of seven years they call The Great Tribulation.

And as you know, there are many who insist that Jesus will return and rapture his people out of this world prior to the outpouring of divine judgment in the “Great Tribulation.” The result is that what we are about to read in Revelation 6-19 has *little, if any, immediate practical relevance* for a lot of Christians. For them it is fascinating to talk about but it has little impact on how they live. One often hears: “Praise God that I won’t be here for any of this. Jesus will rescue me so that I won’t ever have to suffer what others endure.”

Although I held to this view for many years, I don’t any longer. Now, please understand that I do believe what we read in Revelation 6-19 applies to the end of the age, just before and including the Second Coming of Jesus. But I think it also applies to and describes *what happens throughout the entire course of church history, including our own day and age*. In other words, I believe Revelation 6-19 (actually 6-20) portrays for us *the commonplaces of history* spanning the period from the first coming of Jesus all the way through to his second coming.

Think about it this way. You are at a college football game, be it in Stillwater or Norman. It doesn’t matter. And you have been given the privilege of recording on camera the entire game from a variety of different vantage points. So, you place one camera on the 50 yard line, about 10 rows up. It is the perfect vantage point from which to view the game. Whether with your I-phone or some other form of video camera you begin recording everything that occurs, from the opening kickoff through the end of the game.

Now imagine that you are able to record or video tape the same game but from a different place in the stadium. This time your seat is located in the north end zone, about 50 rows up. Instead of viewing the game horizontally, from left to right, or right to left, you record everything vertically, as the action moves away from you, from one end zone near you to the far end zone at the other end of the field. You video tape the same game, the same plays, but the camera in the end zone provides you with a different perspective on how the game unfolds. You see the players spread across the field and can see much more accurately how a play will unfold.

Now imagine that another camera is in the opposite end zone, at the south end of the field. From this vantage point you can see the game moving toward yourself, as your team takes the ball from the far end of the field and gradually moves it toward the end zone directly in front of where you are sitting.

Now, for one more example, suppose another camera is placed in the Goodyear Blimp, hovering overhead and providing an entirely different perspective of how the game unfolds and develops. You are still watching the same game. But from this vantage point, overhead, you will have a recording of how the teams run and pass and eventually move from one end of the field to the other. From this angle in the blimp you can see both teams equally well. You can observe movements of players in a way that no one sitting anywhere in the stadium can.

Now, in each of these positions you would be watching and recording and eventually describing the same game and the same plays and the same events unfold. But your explanation of how the game started and ended would sound somewhat differently every time. But it's still the same football game, with the same events unfolding, with the same players on both teams, leading to the same outcome.

This would actually greatly enhance your understanding of what happens in the game. You get to watch it from different perspectives, from different vantage points. Each of the cameras provides its own unique contribution to the same game. One camera focuses almost exclusively on the offense, while another focuses on the defense. Yet another camera hones in on only one player, recording every move he makes. And then there is a camera that sets its sights on the coaches and how they interact on the sidelines with their players.

I want to suggest that this is basically what is happening in the book of Revelation. The technical term for this is ***recapitulation***. John the Apostle is, in my opinion, describing the events of this entire present age in which we live. His description covers the expanse of church history from the first coming of Christ in the first century to the second coming of Christ in some later century, perhaps our own. Sometimes he provides a ***panoramic view*** of the entire age of church history. At other times he focuses in on ***one major event*** or a ***series of developments***. On occasion he may concentrate on telling us about ***one person or movement*** in the course of history.

However, when John replays for you and me his videos of the game, as it were, he doesn't do it in chronological order, as if from the first play in the first quarter up through the last play in the fourth and final quarter. He jumps around, at one time describing events that occur in the second quarter and then something that happened in the first quarter and then plays that occurred in the fourth quarter. But in each case he concludes his video presentation and his written account by describing the last few minutes of the game when the winning team is known.

I believe John does this multiple times in Revelation. Some believe there are seven progressively parallel sections in which John describes this. Regardless of how many times it happens, the

principle of recapitulation is the same. *John describes the commonplaces of church history spanning the time between the two comings of Christ. By “commonplaces” I mean the conditions, circumstances, situations, environments in which people find themselves between the two comings of Christ. As he finishes one section, concluding with the Second Coming of Christ and the end of history, he circles back around to start all over again at the start of the game. Once he concludes yet another journey he circles back around and recapitulates the same period of time from yet another vantage point.*

As you know, the book of Revelation is built around *three series of seven judgments*. There are seven *seal* judgments, followed by seven *trumpet* judgments, and finally seven *bowl* judgments. According to the principle of recapitulation, the seven seal judgments, together with the seven trumpet and bowl judgments, are descriptive of events throughout the course of history between the two advents of Jesus. The only difference in the way John portrays what is happening is that at one time he may describe a preliminary, introductory and somewhat moderate or limited aspect of God’s judgment, and then at another time portray that judgment in its more complete and devastating expression.

All three series of seven judgments (seals, trumpets, bowls) portray events and phenomena that occur repeatedly throughout the course of history between the first and second comings of Christ. All three series of seven judgments bring us to the consummation at the close of human history where we see the final judgment of unbelievers, the salvation and vindication of God’s people, and the full manifestation of the kingdom of Christ.

The fact that the trumpet judgments are partial and somewhat limited and the bowl judgments are more complete and final simply indicates that what can occur in a limited or partial manner at any point in history between the two advents of Christ, can also occur, at any point in history between the two advents of Christ, in a universal or more thorough-going manner. The effect or impact of these plagues of judgment on the unbelieving world is at one time and in one place restricted, while at another time in another place, widespread.

Thus, *contrary to the futurist interpretation, Revelation is not concerned merely with events at the close of history, immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. Rather, there are multiple sections in the book, each of which recapitulates the other, that is to say, each of which begins with the first coming of Christ and concludes with the second coming of Christ and the end of history. Each of these sections provides a series of progressively parallel visions that increase in their scope and intensity as they draw nearer to the consummation.*

Try to think of it on the analogy of that football game I described a moment ago. *Each section of John’s book is like each of the many cameras placed throughout the stadium or in the blimp hovering above.* In each section John is describing, generally speaking, the same period of time, just as each camera is recording for us the same football game. But each section and each camera provide their own distinctive points of emphasis.

One objection often raised by the futurist to the concept of progressive parallelism or recapitulation is the fact that John repeatedly moves from one vision to the next by using a phrase such as “after this,” or “after these things,” or “and I saw.” The futurist contends that this indicates John is writing down the temporal sequence in which the visions occur in history, which is to say, one right after another. But these phrases need only indicate *the sequence in which John saw the visions*. In other words, those phrases that serve to connect or link one vision with another are *literary* in nature, not historical. They tell us that John first saw vision “A” *and then* saw vision “B” and *after that* saw vision “C”, but not necessarily that the events in vision “A” *occur* before those in vision “B” or that the events of vision “C” *occur* after those of vision “B”.

Introduction to the Seal Judgments (6:1)

There is no mistaking the fact that *these judgments proceed from Jesus Christ*. Each seal is broken, and thus its judgment unleashed on the earth, by the “Lamb” (v. 1). Furthermore, each of the four horsemen is beckoned forth respectively by one of the four living creatures who surround the Lamb on his throne. It’s important to remember that angels, such as the four living creatures, always do God’s will. This statement in Psalm 103 is only one of many that express this truth:

“Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will” (Ps. 103:20-21).

The point is that these phenomena are not an accident of nature, nor did they originate with Satan. They are of divine origin and are designed to call all people everywhere to repentance, to punish unbelievers, and to purify and refine the faith of God’s people.

The First Seal (6:2)

[Three OT passages sound remarkably similar to Revelation 6:1-8 and its portrayal of the four horsemen of judgment: Lev. 26:18-28, Zech. 6:1-8, and Ezek. 14:12-23. In each of these texts judgment, similar to that in Revelation 6, is threatened against either Israel or its pagan neighbors.]

There is considerable debate as to *the identity of the first horseman*. Some contend that it is symbolic of *the successful power of the gospel* gone out into all the earth. Others argue that the horseman is the *antichrist* while others say it is none other than *Jesus* himself. Let’s look at the arguments in favor of identifying this first horseman as Jesus.

The text may be an allusion to Psalm 45:3-5 where we read of an Israelite king who defeats his enemies with bow and arrows. He is portrayed as riding forth victoriously “for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness” (45:4). According to Hebrews 1:8, this psalm was messianic, pointing to Jesus.

In Revelation 19:11-16, Jesus has crowns on his head and rides a white horse in the defeat of his enemies. However, I should point out that there are also dissimilarities. The rider in Revelation 6 carries a “bow” and wears a wreath (*stephanos*) of victory, while the rider in Revelation 19 has a sharp two-edged sword in his mouth and wears many diadems (*diademata*), symbols of sovereignty.

In Revelation 14:14, Jesus is described sitting on a white cloud “having a golden crown on his head.” Elsewhere in Revelation Jesus is often said to “conquer” (*nikao*; cf. 3:21; 5:5; 17:14).

Aside from this text, the color “white” is used 14x times in Revelation and always symbolizes righteousness or is associated with the holiness of God. Advocates of this view also point out that the white horseman, unlike the other three, is not explicitly said to be the means for judgment. “Conquering” could be interpreted positively.

Others contend that the first horseman is a ***Satanic parody or imitation of Jesus***, and must be interpreted as evil. Here are their reasons.

In Revelation 13 we see that one of Satan’s primary tactics is to imitate Christ in appearance and activity. The language of “conquering” is also used in Revelation of the beast oppressing and persecuting the people of God (11:7; 13:7).

Beale points out that “the horsemen form a quartet to be distinguished literarily from the remaining three seals, like the first four trumpets and bowls with respect to the remaining trumpets and bowls. Since the first four trumpets and bowls represent parallel judgments, the same parallelism is probably present with the horsemen” (376). There are too many points of identity between the first horsemen and the remaining three to make such a radical distinction between their natures. For example, each horseman is called forth by one of the four creatures, each horseman comes forth in response to that command, the color of each horse and the object carried by each rider point to the kind of woe that he brings, and the same statement of authorization (“was given to him”) is used of the first two of the four.

The “bow” is the symbol of intention to conquer by military might and tyranny. Nowhere in Revelation or in the NT does Jesus carry a bow. Rather, he is pictured with a sword. It also seems a bit odd that Christ would be both the one who opens the seal and the content of the seal itself. There is also a possible parallel in Revelation 9:7 where we read of demonic agents of judgment that are like “horses prepared for battle” with “crowns” on their heads. The same clause of authorization (“was given to them”; 9:3, 5) is used.

Although we can’t be dogmatic, ***it would appear that the first horseman is a Satanic parody or imitation of Jesus*** (19:11-16) sent forth by God (“it was given to him” is a typical way of referring to divine authorization in Revelation [see 6:11; 7:2; 8:2-3; 9:1,3,5; 11:2-3; 12:14; chp. 13; etc.]) to provoke war on the earth. There are also several OT texts in which “bow and

arrows” are symbolic of divine chastisement (Deut. 32:42; Isa. 34:6; Hab. 3:9; Lam. 3:12-13; Ps. 7:13-14). **Thus, the rider on the white horse symbolizes every form of tyranny and oppression that comes with war.**

The Second Seal (6:3-4)

If the first rider introduces war into the earth, the remaining three delineate specific consequences of war. The second horseman has power to take peace from the earth so that people kill one another. This may also include persecution of Christians (cf. Matt. 10:34), for the word translated “slay” is literally “slaughter” (*sphazo*) which is used consistently by John to describe the death of Jesus or the martyrdom of his followers (5:6,9,12; 6:9; 13:8; 18:24).

The Third Seal (6:5-6)

The third horseman is **the agent for famine**. In the ancient world “scales” were used to ration food for distribution during times of scarcity (cf. Lev. 26:26; 2 Kings 7:1; Ezek. 4:10,16).

A voice (surely that of Christ; note its origin) then issues a command that would indicate a **limitation** on the severity of the famine. Foods essential for life (“wheat” and “barley”) will still be available. A “denarius” was typically a day’s wage (cf. Mt. 20:2) in those days. A “quart of wheat” would be enough for one person for one day and “three quarts of barley” would last for three days. The prices mentioned here are anywhere from 8 to 16x the average for the Roman Empire at that time. That the “oil” and “wine” (metonymy for olive trees and vines) are not affected also indicates a limitation on the intensity of the famine. In other words, the sparing of oil and wine may simply be an indication of God’s mercy in the midst of judgment.

The overall picture here is of both scarcity and plenty, an economic imbalance in the supply of food and the necessities of life.

The Fourth Seal (6:7-8)

Unlike the other horsemen, the fourth is given a name: “Death”. “Hades” (the abode of the dead) is said to follow after him. There are two things to note.

First, this horseman is given authority from God to inflict death by four means: sword (war), famine, pestilence (lit. “death”, but commonly used with reference to pestilence), and wild beasts.

Second, although severe, these judgments are **limited** in their scope, **touching only ¼ of the earth**. This preliminary, partial judgment of the earth is designed to prepare us for the final, consummate judgment that will come with the seventh in each of the three series of woes. Wilcock writes: “The wiping out of a quarter of the human race sounds like a disaster of the first magnitude, until one realizes that nothing has been said to indicate that this is a single

catastrophic event. After all, every man dies sooner or later, and what is probably meant here is that ***a sizeable proportion of those deaths are the unnecessary ones caused by war and famine and kindred evils***" (72).

Here we see once again God's sovereignty over history. These judgments of the four horsemen are a wake-up call to humanity. They are an appeal to everyone everywhere to repent.

What should we do? Is it permissible to give our money, time, and labor to overcome or bring a remedy to those who suffer in this way? Yes. Disease is an expression of divine judgment because of human sin, yet Jesus healed the sick. The measure of our commitment to Christ is often seen in our willingness to sacrifice in order to bring relief to the hungry and hurting (Luke 3:11; James 2:14-17). Earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, and the devastation of war can rightly be seen as God's judgment against the rebellion and idolatry of man. But we are still responsible to do everything we can to alleviate suffering wherever it occurs and to call everyone everywhere to repent.

The history of war, famine, and pestilence is an ugly one. Let me give you just a few examples.

The reality of tyranny, oppression, and the loss of human life in the 20th century alone is one with which we are all too familiar. May I remind you that Hitler and Nazi Germany were responsible for the deaths of more than 6,000,000 Jewish men, women, and children. Mao in China slaughtered tens of millions of his political enemies. Pol Pot ruled over a country, Cambodia, which at the time had some 10,000,000 citizens. He slaughtered more than two million of them, one in five. And Joseph Stalin killed more than 20,000,000 of his own citizens (some say the number is closer to 30,000,000). And all this in the 20th century alone.

It would be impossible to account for all the wars and civil conflicts since the first century, so let's just begin with the Civil War here in America. More than 640,000 died in our Civil War in the 19th century. 41 million from a variety of countries died in WWI. Over 60 million died in WWII. More than 1.3 million, both civilian and military, died in the Viet Nam War. Globally, there were 3,168 conflicts between 1870 and 2001.

The toll taken on humanity by pestilence and famine is even worse. Approximately 2.8 million people in France, 15 percent of the population, starved to death between 1692-1694 (a span of only 3 years). In 1695 famine struck Estonia, killing a fifth of the population. In 1696 nearly a third of the population in Finland died.

The Black Death, also known as the Bubonic Plague, began in the 1330's somewhere in east or central Asia. The culprit was a bacterium known as *Yersinia pestis* that was carried by fleas. Most likely rats, infested with these fleas, carried the disease to Europe and North Africa. Between 75 and 200 million people died, more than a quarter of the entire population of Europe and Asia combined. In England, four out of ten people died. The city of Florence lost 50,000 of his 100,000 inhabitants. Yes, that's ½ of the entire population of Florence.

In March of 1520 when the Spanish fleet arrived in Mexico, the population of our southern neighbor was 22 million people. Eight months later only 14 million were still alive. That's right: in eight months eight million people in Mexico died. The culprit was smallpox. Within 60 years of the arrival of Spaniards in Mexico, the population dropped from 22 million to less than 2 million.

The British explorer James Cook arrived in Hawaii in 1778. The Hawaiian Islands were densely populated by half a million people. Cook and his men introduced flu, tuberculosis, and syphilis to Hawaii. Subsequent European visitors brought typhoid and smallpox. 75 years later there were only 70,000 survivors in Hawaii.

In January of 1918 the so-called "Spanish Flu" struck soldiers in the trenches of northern France. Within a few months about half a billion people were infected with it, nearly a third of the entire population of the earth. Experts differ on the number of people who eventually died, but they range anywhere from a low of 50 million upwards of 100 million deaths.

And let's not forget, that as of today, more than 30 million have died of AIDS.

Conclusion

Finally, it's important for us to remember two things regarding the multiple outpouring of judgments on earth and the resultant suffering and death.

First, God does not want you to get him off the hook. The judgments of the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls are released by the Lord Jesus Christ himself or by one of many angelic beings who serve God and do his will. However, this does not necessarily mean that God should always be viewed as the direct cause of the suffering and death that falls on the earth. This leads to my second point.

Second, God sustains differing levels of responsibility for the judgments in Revelation. (1) In some cases he directly pours out his wrath and is the immediate cause for the destruction of his enemies. Take, for example, the portrayal of Christ as his Second Coming:

"From his [Christ's] mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (Rev. 19:15).

(2) In other instances, God simply lifts the restraining influence of his common grace. Common grace is the ministry of the Holy Spirit by which he restrains or inhibits or curtails the sinful and

destructive impulses and actions of unbelievers. Much of the suffering and destruction described in Revelation comes to pass because God chooses to withdraw his preventative influence and allow the wickedness of man against man to manifest itself in its fullness.

(3) There is finally God's release of Satan to inflict famine, pestilence, suffering, and death on the earth. This is very similar to what happened in the case of Job. God did not directly bring destruction on Job's family and property, nor on his body in the way of disease and suffering. But he did give Satan permission to afflict Job. We see this explicitly stated in Revelation 12 where it is said that Satan "was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him" (12:9). Again,

"But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (Rev. 12:12b).

Thus in each of these three ways God is still sovereign over everything that happens, but his sovereignty is revealed and expressed in different ways. In some cases he directly pours out wrath. In other instances his judgment occurs when he lifts the restraint he would otherwise exercise on the will of wicked people. And finally, in many instances he simply grants Satan free reign to wreak havoc on mankind.

But of this we may be certain. God's wrath never falls on his children. The objects of his anger are "those who dwell on the earth," a standard reference in Revelation to non-Christians.

It would be easy, and almost understandable to give way to despair. When one adds to these countless disasters the utter decay of morality and the rampant idolatry that surrounds us, I once again want to join with John and weep loudly. But praise be to God that I am told: "Weep no more! For the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb who was slain and rose again and redeemed men and women from every tongue and tribe and nation, he is worthy to take hold of the book of history and to open its contents and to orchestrate and providentially direct all things to their righteous consummation. Jesus wins. And because we are his, a kingdom and priests to our God, so do we!"

So let the horror of divine wrath and judgment in Revelation awaken you to two inescapable realities: *gratitude* and *evangelism*! First, the fact that you have trusted Jesus to endure in your place the wrath and judgment you otherwise deserved to experience ought to awaken profound thanksgiving for the forgiveness of sins. Second, countless individuals still abide under the wrath of God. If ever there were an incentive to take the gospel to men and women around us, this is it.