

The Four Horsemen

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[0 : 00] Well, one of the most common objections to God that you will come across in this world is the question of suffering. Right? You may have heard it before.

Maybe someone at work or someone at school has come to you as a Christian. They know you're a Christian and they come to you with the great famous question. If God was so good, why is there suffering in the world?

Classic question to kind of challenge the idea of God as the Bible presents them. If there's a good God who's all-powerful, then why would He allow suffering?

In fact, the existence of suffering in the world surely proves that such a God does not exist. That's the argument. And many people use that argument against the God of the Bible.

But quite honestly, I think those people haven't read Revelation. Because as we come to the opening of the scroll and God's plans being revealed, and we read these three cycles of seven, in each of them what we're going to discover is the very uncomfortable truth that not only does God choose to allow suffering to continue in this age, but very often He's the one who sends it.

[1 : 15] And that truth alone is something that really challenges what we think about God. It demands a major mind shift in how we think about the Creator of this universe and how He works.

Because the assumption that we are brought up with, right, normally is, well, God is there to keep us safe, right? God is there to make our life comfortable and to keep us from harm.

You know, you're a little kid and you say, I'm worried about stuff. Well, pray to God, He'll make it better, right? That's the assumption that we are brought up with.

You feel unsafe? Well, pray to God, He'll keep you safe. And this assumption that God's purpose is to keep us safe is actually not right. It's not like God is some big nanny in the sky whose job it is just to make our life comfortable or to keep us safe.

That's not the God of the Bible. And so this assumption that God must keep us safe is quite wrong. And it's definitely challenged when we read Revelation and we discover, as we will today, as we open, as we start to see the opening of the scroll and these seals being broken and God's will coming out of the scroll one by one, we start to realize the very disturbing truth that God sends bad things into this world.

[2 : 35] Now, it's not saying that God likes doing that. It's not saying that God delights in suffering. No, of course He doesn't. Jesus, when He was on earth, when God was here in human form, He wept when He came into contact with the suffering that sin causes and the death that it causes.

But what we do see in Revelation is that in each of these cycles, which describes the will of God for this world and describes God's plan for this age, in each of them, which ends, by the way, each of the seven ends with God's will being fulfilled and God's kingdom coming to earth.

But as we read the seven pictures, things have to get worse before they get better. It's kind of like if you have a deadly disease. And often, the treatment for that disease makes the symptoms worse for a time before it gets better.

And the treatment, God's ultimate treatment for this world and the problems of this world and the forces of evil in this world require things getting worse before they get better.

And that's what we see here in this chapter. And it's represented by the four horsemen of the apocalypse. A very compelling image that even exists in popular culture, these four horsemen.

[3 : 58] But who are they? One of the things we learn, okay, they're bad news. Okay, you can pick that up just from the first reading. They bring bad stuff into the world. But they're getting their orders from heaven.

They're getting their orders from the throne room. Now, the picture of the horsemen is actually drawn from the book of Zechariah, which Gene read for us earlier. These horsemen are actually

mentioned in chapter 1 and chapter 6 of the prophet Zechariah.

So I'll read to you some of that from chapter 1, verse 8. This is the prophet Zechariah getting this vision from God. I looked out in the night and I saw a man riding on a red horse.

He was standing among the myrtle trees in the valley. Behind him were red, brown, and white horses. I asked, what are these, my Lord? The angel who was talking to me replied, 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 patrol the earth.

And then chapter 6 from verse 1. Then I looked up and saw four chariots. Now, it's not just horses, it's chariots being pulled by these strong horses.

[5 : 05] Between the two mountains, the mountains were made of bronze. The first chariot had red horses. The second chariot, black horses. The third chariot, white horses. And the fourth chariot, dappled horses. All strong horses.

So I inquired of the angel who was speaking to me, what are these, my Lord? The angel told me, these are the four spirits of heaven going out after presenting themselves to the Lord of the whole earth.

The one with the black horses is going to the land of the north. The white's going after them, but the dappled horses are going to the land of the south. As the strong horses went out, they wanted to go patrol the earth.

And the Lord said, go patrol the earth. So they patrolled the earth. So it's some scary imagery of these horsemen of the apocalypse and revelation.

But you see, it's rooted in the Old Testament. John wasn't just pulling this out of the sky and making it up. It was an image that was symbolic of something.

[5 : 59] I wouldn't be surprised if J.R. Tolkien, when he was writing The Lord of the Rings, got the idea of the black horses, you know, the ringwraiths, if you know Lord of the Rings. Very scary figures in this fantasy novel.

I wouldn't be surprised if he got it from Revelation or from Zechariah. He knew his Bible. And they're just as scary. They're very scary figures. And what we discover in Zechariah is they symbolize God's heavenly agents who patrol the earth.

We already have discovered, looking in Revelation, that there's an earthly realm and a heavenly realm. And there are heavenly creatures that are invisible to us.

And there are earthly creatures. Us and our pets and the animals in the world. And there's an interaction between those two realms. They're not completely separate. And so certain heavenly beings do interact with earth.

And we, as those made in God's image, we interact with heaven through prayer and other things. But here we've got these spiritual beings who are actually interacting on the earth, carrying out God's orders on earth.

[7 : 04] They're heavenly agents who carry out God's will in the world. In Zechariah, they patrol the earth. They interact with particular politics that are going on in the earth.

You see, heaven is much more involved with our day-to-day politics and news than we think it is.

And that's what we see in Zechariah. But here in Revelation, these horses aren't just patrolling.

They are actually bringing judgment into the world, as they did in the Old Testament. Right? So in the Old Testament, remember, if you think back to Genesis.

We did Genesis a few months ago. Sodom and Gomorrah. That judgment was brought by agents of God, representatives, heavenly representatives of God.

God. You think of Egypt and the angel of death coming over to slay the firstborn of Egypt. God is, you know, this is not a new thing that God does. This is how he works.

[7 : 59] Through these heavenly agents, he brings judgments to the earth. Except we think, oh, that's Old Testament stuff, you know. Well, God did that in the Old Testament. Sure, we know that.

But surely he's mellowed out since then? Not actually. According to Revelation, he still operates. He still operates the same modus operandi as he always did.

And that's scary. To think that the kind of God in the Old Testament who brought well-deserved judgments on the earth is still doing that today is a very scary thought. But it's what Revelation 6, it's what this first image is here to show us.

That God's agents are active in this age, bringing judgments on the earth. Now, let's look at what those judgments are. Look at Revelation 6 in your Bibles. The first eight verses describe these four

horsemen.

They're the first four of the seven seals. By the way, we'll only cover really six seals. The seventh seal is only in chapter 8. But chapter 6 basically covers the first cycle of these seals being unlocked. [9 : 10] And the first four of them are these horses. So let's read and see what we learn about the judgments they bring to the earth. From verse 1, Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, Come!

I looked, and there was a white horse. His rider held a bow, a crown was given to him, and he went out as a conqueror in order to conquer. Okay, so the white horse, what judgment does he bring to the earth?

Well, he brings conquering, the desire to build empires. And we've seen this, haven't we, throughout our age? We've seen in history, history is really marked and characterized by a desire to gain power by human beings.

Think of Alexander the Great, you think of Napoleon and many others. And these, obviously, these conquering kings bring a lot of suffering to the world. Because they want to invade, they have to do it by violence.

They have to get their power and their kingdoms. And what we discover here with this white horse is that this conquering that human history is marked by is actually a form of judgment by God. As it was in the Old Testament, again, God is not afraid to use pagan, ungodly nations and conquerors to carry out his judgments on the earth.

[10 : 38] So we think of Babylon and Assyria in the Old Testament. He used those nations, who didn't acknowledge him, he used them as instruments to carry out his will in judging Israel at that time.

And what we discover is that this white horse represents all form of conquering and power grabbing in our history, which is part of God's judgment.

Then we read about the next horse, the red horse, from verse 3. When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, Come! Then another horse went out, a fiery red one, and its rider was allowed to take peace from the earth so that people would slaughter one another.

And a large sword was given to him. So this red horse symbolizes when God removes his common grace of peace in countries and in places and in times in our history.

We've got to remember that the only reason we can ever live in peace is because of God's common grace. And sometimes he chooses in judgment to remove that common grace, and he just leaves us to our own devices.

[11 : 48] And what do we do? We fight each other. In fact, Romans chapter 1, if you're familiar with it, it says the wrath of God is being revealed against the ungodliness of this world.

And what we go on to discover is that in Romans 1, the way God reveals his wrath on this world, a lot of it is just for him to step back and let us do our thing.

That's actually a judgment of God, to let us have our own way. Quite a thing to think, eh? We're far more capable of violence and fighting than we think we are.

I mean, just look at Facebook and you'll see that. But this idea of God judging just by removing the restraints. It's like, imagine you told your kids they could eat anything they wanted.

You know, you said to them, okay, from now on, you get to decide what to eat for supper. You get to decide when to eat, and you just give me a shopping list, and I'll buy whatever you want from the shop.

[12 : 49] They would get fat, right? And they would get really unhealthy really quickly. If you removed your common grace as parents, you removed the restraints of your kids, and you let them do what they wanted, they would harm themselves.

Well, that's what God does, and it looks bad when he does that. But it's part of his judgment on this earth in this age is to remove these restraints as the red horse symbolizes. Then the black horse, verse 5 and 6.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, Come, and I looked, and there was a black horse. Its rider held a set of scales in his hand. Then I heard something like a voice among the four living creatures say, A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, but do not harm the oil and wine.

What? Well, this horse represents economic disaster. Because if you knew anything about the prices of barley and grain in the Roman world, you would see that the prices that are mentioned

here are about 16 times the normal market price, which happens.

It's hyperinflation. And we've seen throughout our history, haven't we, countries go into economic collapse, and they get hyperinflation, and it's a disaster in the country. I mean, just think of Zimbabwe, for example, and it's hyperinflation that it went through a number of years ago.

[14:15] And many other countries face economic disaster. That's what this black horse represents. Except, of course, so he takes, there's economic disaster for all the ordinary staple goods, except for the oil and the wine.

Those are the luxury items. You know, often when economic disaster hits a country, it's the poorest that are hit the hardest, and the rich manage to hedge themselves against that risk and keep their oil and wine.

But what this black horse is telling us, what it symbolizes, is the truth that from the famines of the first century that these early Christians were familiar with to the stock market crashes of the 21st century, economic problems are also part of God's judgment on this earth.

And then, the scariest of all four, the pale green horse from verse 7. When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, Come, and I looked, and there was a pale green horse.

Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following after him. They were given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill by the sword, by famine, by plague, and by the wild animals of the earth.

[15:32] Okay, so this pale horse essentially represents all the major causes of death, both man-made and natural. Notice, though, that even in his judgment, God has restraint.

He limits the amount of people in history that are affected by these things because he is still a merciful God, even in judgment. But these judgments, actually, very interestingly, just look at them again.

Verse 8, He was given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, plague, wild animals. If you want, turn with me to Ezekiel chapter 14, because this, again, is not the first time we hear of these.

Remember I said that almost all of these weird pictures in Revelation actually have Old Testament precedents. If you read your Old Testament, the more you know your Bible, the less obscure Revelation becomes, because it's referring to things that have already happened.

Ezekiel 14, 21. For this is what the Lord God says. How much worse would it be when I send my four devastating judgments against Jerusalem, sword, famine, dangerous animals, and plague, in order to wipe out both man and animal from it.

[16:49] So these four judgments are judgments that God has used in history before. They represent the ways, the means that death comes to us, both from disaster and from sickness and whatever.

But the shocking thing about Ezekiel is that God is using these judgments, did you notice, against His own people, against Jerusalem, who at that time were rejecting Him and chasing after the idols of the world, rejecting all His mercy to them, all that He's done in history to save them and give them a land and give them an inheritance, and they throw that back in His face.

And so He now uses these judgments to wake them up to what they're doing. But if you think about it, if God sends these judgments on His own people for rejecting Him, how much more will He not hesitate to send them on those who rebel against Him outright in our world?

And so these four horsemen, scary figures, they represent scarier truths of the reality of this age, they are here to tell us, and they are here to bring these troubles to the earth that we read about in our newspapers today, to tell us that all is not well between us and God.

If they do nothing else, they tell us that. Now I know these are shocking things to read about God sending. I mean, if these were things that the devil was sending and God was fighting against, sure, but what we see here is that these horsemen are getting their orders from heaven itself.

[18:34] And it's shocking to read that God sends these things to the earth. But if we think about it for just half a minute, we've got to admit that humans deserve nothing less.

People who have taken life that God has given them, breath and bodies and food, and they've totally just turned away from God.

They've rejected Him. They don't want to hear from Him. And they go and they misuse the lives that He's given them. He used them for their own kingdom building, ignoring what He wants and why He gave us lives in the first place.

And then even when He comes down in Jesus, not to judge us for that rejection, but to sacrificially give Himself to save us from judgment, people then just throw that back in His face.

They ignore what Jesus has done and they use His name as a swear word to mock Him in comedies and people sit on their TVs and they laugh at it. God has every right to send these judgments into this world, doesn't He?

[19 : 45] The question is, what about His people in this world who are also in this world that is under judgment? What about those who have submitted to God? Those who have turned to Him and repented of their sin and come under His salvation in Jesus?

What about them? Are they also to suffer these bad things that God sends? Well, that's the next seal. Turn back to Revelation 6. We've done the first four seals.

The fifth seal talks about God's own people who were caught up in the suffering of this world. And in fact, what it mentions is those who have suffered the worst of all.

Look at verse 9 to 10. When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the word of God and the testimony they had given.

They cried out with a loud voice, Lord, the one who is holy and true, how long until you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?

[20 : 48] So these are some of God's saved people, those who are of the number who have died for their faith.

They have been caught up in the suffering of this world and they've given their lives by the hands of those who oppose God and this stands for Christians in every age and every generation in every century.

There have been Christians somewhere in the world who have come to the point of dying for their faith. And it's understandable that these, these of all Christians have the right to ask God, how long, oh Lord?

You know, that's an appeal that we read in the Psalms right from the beginning. God's people have been asking Him, how long are you going to let this continue? When are you going to call time in the evil of this world?

Well, it doesn't take long in fact, according to these seals because it's the very next seal that God answers them and brings final judgment. Now, the video we watched earlier, the day of the Lord, talks about when God brings judgment on His enemies on this earth and He's done it a few times in history but the imagery is taken from all of those times that He's done it and it's used to describe the final day of the Lord because all of those days of the Lord in history are building up to the final day of the Lord which is mentioned in some way or another in each of these three cycles of seven that this trouble goes on and gets worse and worse and then it climaxes in this day of the Lord and let's read what happens when God does answer His people crying out to Him and when He does bring judgment and as we read it you'll see that these horsemen they're like playground ponies in comparison to what comes next look at from verse 12 then I saw Him open the sixth seal a violent earthquake occurred the sun turned black like sackcloth made of hair the entire moon became like blood the stars of heaven fell to the earth as a fig tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a high wind the sky was split apart like a scroll being rolled up and every mountain and island was moved from its place then the kings of the earth the nobles the generals the rich the powerful and every slave and free person hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains and they said to the mountains and to the rocks fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb because the great day of their wrath has come and who is able to stand imagine how scared someone needs to be to want rocks and mountains to fall on them and cover them up and that's what's going to happen when people come face to face with the God of the universe people who have rejected him their whole lives and rightly they say who is able to stand who will survive that day well that's what chapter 7 in Revelation is about that's the good news that there are some who will survive the judgment of God and that's what chapter 7 talks about the sealed it talks about now to find out who the sealed are you'll have to come back next week but in the meantime what we what we learn here in the sixth seal is the very important truth that trouble in this world will not last forever it has a terminal point there is a day set in God's calendar where he is going to call time but then why the wait you know why drag it out for 2,000 years and counting well that's what the rest of Revelation is there to help us to see what God is doing in this age before the day of the Lord and there's this repeated cycle of symbols that show us the forces and the plans that are being carried out in this age before final judgment there's a reason for it and we'll see that

as we continue in Revelation but even now if we read verse 11 we get a hint as to why why the wait verse 11 this is talking about those who are asking

[25 : 17] God when how long oh Lord verse 11 so they were each given a white robe and they were told to rest a little while longer until the number would be completed of their fellow servants and their brothers and sisters who were going to be killed just as they had been okay now that doesn't really give us the full answer it just tells us more of God's people will suffer a set amount so God has already set the amount of people who are going to suffer and die for his name but notice something a little detail in verse 11 it's through that suffering and it's through his people enduring the trials of this world that they are purified which is symbolized in this white robe that they're given which is the dress code of heaven really it's the dress code of God's kingdom it symbolizes purity and righteousness justification and they're given this through the troubles that they've been through which is a little hint that that God and we know from the rest of scripture

God uses bad things to purify his people and to save his people what we learn just here is that the same troubles God sends to warn and judge his enemies in this world are what he uses to purify his people the very same things and he's always worked like that so I mentioned earlier that these judgments that the pale horse brings come from Ezekiel when God judged his own people but if we read a little bit more in Ezekiel you don't have to turn there but Ezekiel 14 also gives us the reason why he's sending judgments to his own people Jerusalem and it's very telling listen to what it says this is 14 verse 11 sending these judgments these punishments in order that the house of Israel may no longer stray from following me and no longer defile themselves with all their transgressions then they will be my people and I will be their God okay so so God actually used these really bad things in the world in order to keep his people from straying away from him in order to keep them clinging to him and to keep them trusting him and he always that's the way

God works and I think we know if we searched ourselves that if everything was good for us you know if we were comfortable all the time we would drift away from God we wouldn't think we needed him and we would fall away from him and his people and his salvation and so what he does is he mercifully allows the bad things that he's using to judge the world and warn the world of the coming day of wrath he's also using those things to keep his people close to him to keep us purified to give us those white robes as well we see a New Testament version of this you can turn there in 1 Peter it's just a few books back from Revelation but it's one of the passages I keep going back to when I look at and maybe experience bad stuff in this world look what it says 1 Peter 1 from verse 5 you are being guarded by

God's power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time you rejoice in this even though now for a short time if necessary you suffer grief in various trials so that the proven character of your faith more valuable than gold which though perishable is refined by fire may result in praise glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ so what this is saying is that these troubles various trials if necessary that God's people suffer so he doesn't put his people unnecessarily through trials if necessary they suffer them so that their faith can be refined like gold in the furnace our faith is what saves us our faith in Christ is what keeps us under his protection under his salvation and that faith because it saves us is the most important thing in our lives knowing who Christ is and continuing each day to trust in him and submit to him as our king and savior that faith is like gold it's precious but just like gold needs to be refined from its impurities and the things that are going to corrupt it through fire so

God's people need to be refined from what's going to corrupt them through trial that's what this is saying but more than that more than just us having our faith strengthened and refined through difficulties there's a profound thing that comes out as we read revelation and we see it here as well we've actually seen it in the last chapter with the lamb the very unexpected picture of this weak animal that's been bloodied who is the only one who's able to open the scroll and fulfill God's plans for this age what we discover is that Jesus conquered through his suffering that's why it's the lamb that's opening these seals and bringing about God's plans and just as Jesus conquered through his suffering we are no greater than our master so do his people conquer through suffering and prevail through suffering that is a theme that we will see over and over again in

[31 : 05] Revelation this theme of having life through dying conquering through suffering being strong through weakness it's actually a theme we see in the whole Bible when it comes to God's people in fact we see it even in this letter we did last week if you watched the video if you didn't you can it's still on YouTube you can watch it now about the letter to Smyrna in the mid week we're

going through each of these letters in Revelation 2-3 the letter to Smyrna talking to people who are about to suffer persecution says this chapter 2 verse 10 be faithful to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life life through death and that's that's the pattern we see and that's exactly what the gospel of Jesus embodies he suffered and died and through his death we can have life and through his death he conquers and it's the same for God's people who are waiting the day of the

Lord on this earth and so I hope you see that these first seals the first cycle of of images that we read about in Revelation I hope you see how important these truths are and this vision that John has and passes on to us how important it is for us to have a right view of what's going on in this world do you see that you can't read the newspaper properly unless you understand what Revelation chapter 6 is teaching us but in closing we've got to ask how do we respond to these challenging and difficult truths that the horsemen of the how do we respond to it well I want to suggest two ways this morning firstly be patient as you wait for the day of the Lord know that it is coming know that you don't have to bring justice and judgment to God's enemies he is perfectly capable of doing that himself and he will and so be patient as you share a world with them and live in this broken world that realizing that it's through the trials that you go through that God both purifies you and achieves his work through you but then the second way to respond to this revelation is that if you are not yet under the protection of Jesus Christ if you have not come and bowed the knee to him as your Lord and Savior then you've got to realize that the troubles that you see around you in the world every day are warnings to you of the coming day of the Lord and God is mercifully delaying that so that when he does come you will not be one of those who are calling on the rocks to cover them but you would have trusted in Christ and you would be waiting for him and you will receive the crown of life and that's we've got to make sure that we're there that we're in God's people when he comes that we're in the sealed of the Lord and for more on that we'll find out next week as we look at chapter seven but in the meantime let's pray and ask for God to solidify these truths in our minds Lord we do thank you for these revelations that you give us and how they are things that we that both sober us and give us wisdom as we look around us in this world help us to realize what is really going on and as we continue this journey through revelation will you continue to reveal these truths to us so that we will live wisely that we will make decisions that are based on what is real and that when the day of the Lord does come that we won't be those who are running away from you but we will be those who are waiting for you in the meantime help us to do that patiently and help us to be willing to bear suffering for the name of Christ in Jesus name we pray Amen