



Part 14 – The Cavalry of the Lamb’s Judgment

Revelation 6:1-8

Chapters six through sixteen make up the middle section of Revelation which is organized around three sets of seven: *the seven seals*, *the seven trumpets*, and *the seven bowls*, with three interludes placed between. What John records is not a strict chronology of successive events immediately prior to Christ’s return. Rather, each of the three cycles of seven depict the history of the world from Christ’s first advent leading up to his return and the consummation of the age. The seals, trumpets, and bowls each depict a different vantage point on the period of time prior to Christ’s second coming and so each cycle concludes with a reference to the end of the age.¹

The Rider on the White Horse

There has been much debate surrounding the identity of this rider. Some argue that it is the Lord Jesus who leads the way in bringing judgment upon the world. Thus he stands apart from the other riders. Others however object to this view believing instead that it is meant to depict a satanic parody of Christ specifically or more generally mankind’s lust for violent conquest. I am not comfortable offering too strong an opinion on the matter though I lean toward the white horse rider representing violent conquest rather than Jesus.

The Rider on the Red Horse

“The fiery red of the second horse suggests the bloodshed it brings with it. If the first horse symbolized conquest...then the second symbolizes the means by which such conquest happens: warfare.”² In the first century, Rome prided itself in the peace it had established throughout the Mediterranean and beyond, the *Pax Romana*. But even as Tacitus, writing in AD 98, observed that it was a “peace” built upon violence and plunder. The world under Rome’s rule was not nearly as peaceful as she boasted.

The Rider on the Black Horse

Like red, the color black in this instance refers ultimately to death. But rather than warfare the death is brought about by famine. The scales refer to the scarcity of resources and the injustice of those seeking personal gain at the expense of the poor. A denarius (a day’s wage) could usually buy about 16 quarts of wheat rather than the meager one quart described here. The command not to touch the oil or the wine may be the Lord’s restraint by causing other necessities to be preserved. However, some argue that the opposite is in view since the continued production of oil and wine may only agitate the consequences of failing grain production. For example, in AD 92 the Emperor Domitian, in an effort to curb a famine, ordered half the grape vines across the empire to be destroyed so that greater efforts would go into growing wheat and barley.³ It demonstrates the desperation caused by famine.

The Rider on the Pale Horse

This rider is death personified. The color of his horse is one of decay. The word translated “pale” indicates a green appearance which signified sickness and death.⁴ The horse’s rider is Hades which in the Greco-Roman world, was the place of the dead. The Hebrew *Sheol* is a rough equivalent. Like famine, death is inevitably associated with war.

The import of this part of John’s vision is not to puzzle out the meaning of the riders and their horses. Their meaning is clearly explained. The greater import of the vision is the terror it provokes. John’s first century readers would have recognized his depictions of violent conquest, civil war, disease, economic swings, famine, and death. But their familiarity with these calamities would not have reduced the horror of it all. What shocks many contemporary readers is that John ties these horrific riders directly to God’s judgment.

¹ Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018) p. 142

² Ian Paul, 144

³ Ian Paul, 146

⁴ Dennis Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 123

Love and Justice

The middle section of Revelation is where much of the frightening language of judgment is found that makes it so challenging to many readers. That John attributes the calamities described as expressions of the Lord's judgment cannot be denied. Grant Osborne observes:

"The primary theme is divine sovereignty, as the Lamb initiates the event, and in three of them the divine passive 'was given' (6:2, 4, 8) controls the action. This means that the activities of the horsemen take place only as authorized by God. Christ controls the process from the throne of God, and the living creature commands the situation."⁵

There are many unbelievers and believers alike that think God's judgment seems inconsistent with his love. It has been argued that God would never pour out judgment upon the world while his people still inhabit it. Some have sought to deal with this challenge by suggesting a secret rapture of the church in which God removes his people from the world prior to judgment. But there is nothing in Scripture which teaches this.

Indeed, the world is currently experiencing God's judgment. Certainly there will be a final judgment when the Lamb returns to earth to judge the living and the dead. But every generation knows the terrors John describes in these verses. Jesus calls these terrible times "the *beginning* of the birth pains," (**Matthew 24:8**). The Apostle Paul tells us that the world is *currently* experiencing God's judgment: "For the wrath of God *is revealed from heaven* against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (**Romans 1:18**).

The Scriptures make clear that God is sovereign over all things including calamity. The calamities are the "beginning of the birth pains" of God's judgment. Some of these things happen by direct fiat from God. Others are described as instances in which God lifts his restraining hand allowing mankind to experience the fruit of his rebellion. There are even times when God allows Satan to inflict suffering as we see in the four horses and their riders. And in all of this God's goodness, love, and justice are never in question.

Jesus' teaching concerning the last days (*which we take as the entire church age from Christ's ascension to his second advent*) corresponds in many ways to John's vision and is one of our most important passages concerning God's judgment and the church's response (**Matthew 24:3-51**). In it he prophesies the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, calls his people to endure, promises the world-wide reach of the gospel, and promises his return (discouraging all attempts to establish the timing).

1. Repent

Luke's gospel records an encounter between Jesus and those who desired to know why a group of Jews from Galilee were killed in the temple on Pilate's order. To that act of evil Jesus brings up the collapse of a tower in Siloam which killed 18 people. Jesus' concern with these catastrophes is not to satisfy their curiosity. His desire is that they would consider the condition of their hearts.

2. Endure

The Scriptures make clear again and again that faithful endurance is a characteristic of the Christian. Jesus tells us that "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (**Matthew 24:13**). Throughout her years, the church is in the last days. (**Matthew 24:34**). So the church has always had need of endurance. There has never been a time when, somewhere in the world, she has not been persecuted.

3. Evangelize

Jesus tells us that the end will not come until the gospel goes to every nation (**Matthew 24:14**). Obviously, he could not promise this unless he were truly sovereign over all things including the salvation of the elect. The Apostle Peter tells his readers to "always be ready to give an answer for the hope that you have" (**1 Peter 3:15**). Have you ever considered that such questions will not be raised in times of ease and plenty but only in times of great trials? Calamity always provides the church with an opportunity to give powerful witness to the salvation of the Lamb.

⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) p. 272