

The Horsemen *of* Revelation



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ew sights are as stirring as a scene of horsemen galloping across a landscape. Moviemakers use such scenes to add drama, mystery and power to their stories.

In Revelation 6, Christ uses four horsemen to represent the first four of seven seals He opens from the scroll in His hand. These images have intrigued generations of Bible scholars and students. Thundering across the prophetic landscape, these dramatic images cast a pall of terror on the world.

What is their meaning for our troubled and uncertain world? Do these ominous riders foretell a coming wave of calamity for the earth's inhabitants? Let's look and see.



The White Horse of False Religion

Mankind's destiny hanging in the balance

To understand the seals in Revelation 6, we first need to examine chapter 5. John is experiencing a vision of the throne of God when he sees “in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals” (Revelation 5:1).

No one in heaven or earth is able or worthy to open the scroll and reveal its contents. John bemoans the absence of anyone capable of opening the scrolls. But a voice from one of the elders around the throne says: “Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals” (verse 5).

What John saw next was the sight of the glorified Jesus Christ in the commanding position to receive and dispense the full power of God. “And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne . . . stood a Lamb as though it had been slain . . . Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne” (verses 6-7).

What follows from this awesome scene of angelic praise is the stirring

anthem to Christ's role in the plan of God. The four living creatures and 24 elders sing a new song. “You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals,” they proclaim in unison.

To this scene is now added the voice of many angels, perhaps numbering into the hundreds of millions, all loudly proclaiming, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!” (verses 11-12).

With a thundering crescendo the next stanza arrives from “every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them . . . saying: ‘Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!’”

Such is the scene that stands as a prelude to the opening of the seals. The fate of mankind rests in God's hands, and His patience is at an end. Christ alone is pronounced worthy to open the seals that announce God's judgments on the nations. The destiny of humanity is not a matter of chance or whim, but has been spelled out in the seals that He opens.

Setting for the horsemen's ride

What is the time setting of these prophecies? Scholars offer divergent opinions, but the book of Revelation itself reveals the time setting as the prophetic “Lord’s day” (Revelation 1:10), elsewhere called “the Day of the Lord.” Notice how the prophet Joel described this period: “The sun shall be turned

Four ominous horsemen arise in an eerie sequence. To better understand what these horsemen represent, let’s look at another key prophecy Jesus Christ gave during His ministry.

The gathering storm

Jesus’ disciples were visiting Jerusalem with Him. After admiring the temple’s



into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD” (Joel 2:31).

The Day of the Lord begins with God’s intervention in world affairs to spare human life during a period of unparalleled global conflict and catastrophe. Mankind has suffered for centuries from the combined impact of war, famine and disease, but no previous period of turmoil will compare to this age-ending storm described in Revelation.

When the seals open before John, he sees the first four uniquely pictured.

buildings, they crossed the Kidron Valley, climbed the Mount of Olives and paused to ask Christ for signs of His coming and the end of the age (Matthew 24:1-3).

Jesus gave four signs that correspond with the first four seals of Revelation 6: “Take heed that no man deceive you. For *many shall come in my name*, saying, I am Christ; *and shall deceive many*. And ye shall hear of *wars and rumours of wars*: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For *nation shall rise*

against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in diverse places. All these are the beginning of sorrows" (Matthew 24:4-8, King James Version, emphasis added throughout).

Here Jesus reveals an overview of trends and conditions from the first century until the end of the age. Take note

Here is a rider who appears to come in the name of and bearing a message of peace. But he is a conqueror, one who imposes his version of peace on the world.

of the four significant developments He foretold: Religious deception, war, famine and disease.

As this booklet will show, humanity has long suffered from the effects of these four signs. But nothing in history will compare to the catastrophes unleashed at the opening of the seals by the Lamb. The unprecedented devastation brought by the opening of the four seals will set the stage for the return of Christ as King of Kings.

Let's now look more closely at what John saw.

The first seal: Conqueror on a white horse

As the first seal opens, John writes the following: "Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, 'Come and see.' And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He

who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer" (Revelation 6:1-2).

White is a symbol of purity and peace. Here is a rider who *appears* to come in the name of and bearing a message of peace. But he is a conqueror, one who imposes *his* version of peace on the world.

Possibly this rider will even bring about a pseudo peace, a condition described by the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:3: "For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them . . . And they shall not escape."

Some confuse this rider with Jesus Christ, whom Revelation 19 shows riding a white horse at His second coming. But a careful examination reveals important distinctions. Christ is wearing "many crowns" at His return, not just a single crown as worn by this first horseman. And instead of wielding a bow, Christ is brandishing a sword with which He strikes the nations.

To be consistent with Christ's statements in Matthew 24, we must conclude that this rider represents not Jesus, but instead *false teachers* who appropriate His name while corrupting His plain teaching and leading many into destructive heresy.

Remember His warning: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name . . . and will deceive many" (Matthew 24:4-5).

What Did the Early Church Believe and Practice?

The book of Acts records eyewitness accounts of the early Church from Christ's resurrection until about A.D. 60. Chapter 2 records the beginning of the Church.

This special event began when the place in which the apostles and other disciples were gathered suddenly was filled with the sound of a mighty wind and "tongues, as of fire," that appeared to alight on them. They went out and almost immediately began to speak to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem, for these events occurred on the biblical Feast of Pentecost. Miraculously, the apostles' preaching was comprehensible to all people from many lands so that all understood their words in their own language.

Often overlooked in this account is the significance of these events occurring on *the Day of Pentecost* (Acts 2:1). This was one of the festivals God commanded for His people many centuries before (Leviticus 23). In revealing these festivals, God exclaimed, "... These are *My* feasts . . . the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations . . ." (verses 2, 4). Then God proclaimed them to be "a statute forever" (verses 14, 21, 31, 41).

The Gospels show Jesus keeping the same festivals (Matthew 26:17-19; John 7:10-14, 37-38). Both the book of Acts and Paul's letters show the apostles observing these festivals long after Christ's crucifixion (Acts 2:1-4; 18:21; 20:6, 16; 27:9). This is the example they

set for us.

Today, however, most churches teach that these festivals were somehow annulled by Christ's death. Yet the unmistakable record of the Bible is that the early Church continued to observe them long after His death—but with a greater grasp of their spiritual significance.

Speaking of one of these God-given feasts, the apostle Paul urged the Church congregation in Corinth—a mixed group of gentile and Jewish believers—to "keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:8).

Paul was obviously referring to keeping the biblical Feast of Unleavened Bread (see Leviticus 23:6; Deuteronomy 16:16). Paul similarly explained the Christian significance of the biblical Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7; Leviticus 23:5) and gave instructions on how to properly observe this ceremony in the Church (1 Corinthians 11:23-28).

Such passages prompt an obvious question: Since Jesus, the apostles and the early Church kept these days, why don't churches teach and observe them today? After all, Paul directly tied the feasts to Jesus, His purpose and His sacrifice for mankind (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The Gospels and Acts are equally clear that Christ, the disciples and the early Church kept the weekly Sabbath

on the seventh day of the week as their day of rest and worship (Mark 6:2; Luke 4:16, 31-32; 13:10; Acts 13:14-44; 18:4). It was Jesus' custom to go to the synagogue on Sabbath days to worship (Luke 4:16). Contrary to the teaching of those who say that Paul abandoned the Sabbath, it was his custom, too, to go to the synagogue every Sabbath (Acts 17:1-3), using this God-ordained assembly to teach others about Jesus as Savior and Messiah.

Of course, most people and churches ignore the biblical seventh-day Sabbath. But why? Shouldn't we observe a weekly day of rest and worship as God commands (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15), and shouldn't it be the same day that Jesus and His apostles kept?

A closer examination of the Scriptures reveals many other differences between the teachings and practices of Jesus and His apostles and what is commonly taught. For example, the belief that obedience to God's law is unnecessary is directly contrary to Jesus' own words (Matthew 4:4; 5:17-19) and the teachings and examples of His apostles (Acts 24:14; 25:8; Romans 7:12, 22; 1 Corinthians 7:19; 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Jesus and the apostles never taught that the righteous ascend to heaven at death (John 3:13; Acts 2:29, 34), and they understood that man does not possess an immortal soul that would spend eternity in either heaven or

hell (Ezekiel 18:4, 20; Matthew 10:28). Rather, they followed earlier Scripture passages in referring to death as being like an unconscious sleep in which the dead await a future resurrection (compare Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10; Daniel 12:2-3; John 11:11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17).

Nowhere in the Bible do we find any mention of, or hint of approval for, today's popular religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Though the Greek word *pascha* is once incorrectly translated "Easter" (Acts 12:4, KJV)—and that only in one Bible translation—this is a flagrant *mistranslation*. *Pascha* always means "Passover," never Easter!

Instead of approving such celebrations rooted in paganism, God condemns them even when they are used in attempts to worship Him (compare Deuteronomy 12:29-32; 1 Corinthians 10:19-21).

These are some of the major differences between the Christianity of Jesus and the apostles and the Christianity commonly practiced today. But don't simply take our word for it. We encourage you to follow the example of the Bereans (Acts 17:11) and look into your Bible to see whether today's popular beliefs and practices agree with what Jesus and His apostles practiced and taught.

(Adapted from the booklet *The Church Jesus Built*. Download or request your free copy at www.ucg.org/booklets).

A different gospel takes root

It didn't take long after Christ's death for a "different gospel" (Galatians 1:6) to invade the Church, causing division and confusion. The apostles were forced to deal with this problem, as evidenced by their writings to the Church.

Paul warned the elders of the congregation at Ephesus to beware of false teachers: "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which

He purchased with
His own blood. For

I know this, that
after my departure
*savage wolves will
come in among you,
not sparing the
flock. Also from
among yourselves
men will rise up,*

speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:28-30).

As the apostle Peter neared the end of his life, God compelled him to give a stern warning about the apostasy that he saw looming on the horizon.

The second chapter of his second epistle is a powerful rebuke of those who would bring false teaching into the Church: "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as *there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction*" (2 Peter 2:1).

He went on to say, "*Many will follow*

their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed" (verse 2). Peter calls the Church's doctrine the "way of truth." It is like a trail of truth along which the faithful have always walked. Christ called it a narrow and difficult way that few find (Matthew 7:13-14).

The Church corrupted by deception

Near the end of the first century the apostle John, last of the original 12 apos-

This rider represents not Jesus, but instead false teachers who appropriate His name while corrupting His plain teaching and leading many into destructive heresy.

tles, saw a rapid escalation in the heresy and persecution that was plaguing the Church. During the reign of Roman Emperor Domitian a virulent strain of antagonism was unleashed on Christians. For a time, the government even exiled the aged apostle to the Aegean island of Patmos. It was there that he received the book of Revelation in vision.

The three epistles bearing his name reveal the mounting tension in the churches and John's desire to warn the members of the devastating impact of false teaching. He wrote of their individual and collective responsibility to examine those teachers who presented themselves as spiritual guides and experts.

He knew it was easy to claim divine

authority and thereby deceive people into following ideas that were spiritually destructive. “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but *test the spirits, whether they are of God*; because *many false prophets* have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

We see the apostles warning of the corruption of the true faith brought by Jesus Christ. Jude summed it up perfectly when he wrote of the need to “*contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3).

we see in the New Testament. In fact, two vastly different “Christian” faiths were now locked in a struggle—the true followers of Jesus’ teachings and the tarnished followers of a spiritually corrupt, *counterfeit* Christianity!

Over the centuries, persecution from the Roman authorities took its toll. This counterfeit church further compromised the faith under threat of death from the state.

Roman Emperor Constantine combined the power of the state with the



Within decades, the truth of God was gravely corrupted by false teachers. The result was teachings that no longer resembled the gospel brought by Christ. In Galatians 1:6, Paul had to reprimand the Galatians for “turning away . . . to a *different gospel*.” From the teachings of these corrupters evolved a church bearing Jesus’ name, but vastly different in doctrines and practices from the Church

ecclesiastical structure and authority of the false church. This created a union of church and state with the ability to create order by squelching dissent. Thus, Constantine and succeeding Roman emperors allied themselves with a deceptive religious system represented by the symbolic white horse of peace. Their mission was to conquer, in the name of Christ, all those who opposed them.

A final great deception to come

Christ's prophecy of false teachers coming in His name, claiming He is the Christ but deceiving many, indeed came to pass. Church history is largely a story of teachings and practices of the *counterfeit* Christianity, with its system of beliefs and practices fundamentally different from what the early New Testament Church believed and taught. The story of those who held to or at times recaptured the essence of true Christianity is not easy to follow through history.

Today those who strive to practice the teachings that Christ put into His Church are few in comparison to the thousands of churches that call themselves Christian but are

in fact descendants of the counterfeit movement begun in the first century. Christ said that "wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it . . . Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

Yet even for these few, there is danger from a *coming* deception—Satan's end-time effort to defeat and enslave humankind.

Christ's Olivet prophecy progresses, in concert with the book of Revelation, toward the final events before His return. He said, "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). Even the

elect, the people of God who "keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 12:17), will be susceptible to this great deception.

The apostle Paul spoke of this time of deception in 2 Thessalonians 2. This prophecy of a "man of sin" to arise before Christ's return stands out within Paul's writings.

This end-time deception is led by a figure "who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is

False religion marches on at the same time that the world's citizens are desperately in need of hope and solutions for survival.

worshiped" and who will even sit "in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God." In Paul's day, this opposition to the law and doctrine of God was already at work. But before the coming of Christ it will expand "according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders" (verses 3-9).

This "son of perdition" matches the description of the figure described in Revelation 13 as a "beast," one of two beasts in this section, this one with two horns like a lamb and speaking like a dragon (verse 11).

This person acts in tandem with the first beast (verse 1), actually causing people to worship the first beast with great adulation (verse 12). "He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come

down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived" (verses 13-14).

What is this talking about? Here we find the description of Satan's final attempt to engineer a system based on his lying words of deceit and confusion. That it involves false religion is obvious from all the markers we have seen in the New Testament Scriptures.

A man claiming to be God, in the temple of God, performs signs with the intent of persuading men to worship a system that appears to be doing good for the world. This is the final resurgence of a system God calls "MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Revelation 17:5).

His allure will likely lie in bringing about a peaceful solution to a world crisis where no one else has succeeded. The world will wonder in amazement at the ability of this system to impose a "peace" that will seemingly bring security in which the world can prosper economically. It will be a global system unlike any previous system, and it will seem to work.

An unparalleled religious movement

The ride of the first horseman, false religion, will greatly impact the nations in the last days. It will mark the expansion of a religious movement without parallel in history.

Religion continues to be a powerful force among the nations. A great wave of religious change is moving continually throughout the world. Not only are the large world religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, growing and changing, but countless other new faiths are springing up, almost on a daily basis.

Scholars who keep track of the world religious scene identify more than 9,900 distinctive religions. Despite predictions at one time that religion would become extinct, it continues to grow, reinventing itself after the personal interests and whims of people.

False religion marches on at the same time that the world's citizens are desperately in need of hope and solutions for survival. Their desperation provides fertile ground for religious extremism.

The rise of fundamentalist Islam has precipitated a cultural clash that could lead to dramatic changes in the world geopolitical structure. Religious-based terrorism has implicated this major religion in a radical movement that will drag others, including Christian-professing nations, into a clash of civilizations—one that could possibly trigger the age-ending crisis foretold by Jesus Christ.

Christ spoke of false religion as the precursor to "wars and rumors of wars." The second seal of Revelation 6 is a rider on a red horse described as taking peace from the earth. Religious strife has often been the cause of war. We will see the connection between the two in the next chapter as we look at the ride of this next horseman.



The Red Horse of War

Approximately 180 million men, women and children were slaughtered in 20th-century wars. The new millennium has continued the trend, with the addition of mass-murder terrorism. What do history and the Bible tell us about the second horseman of Revelation?

In the mid-1980s, at the height of the Cold War and nuclear arms race, President Ronald Reagan once openly pondered the potential for an age-ending world war in our time.

“... I turn back to [the] ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon,” he mused, “and I find myself wondering if—if we’re the generation that’s going to see that come about ... There have been times in the past when we thought the world was coming to an end, but never anything like this.”

Those who lived through World War I felt the same way. They called it “the Great War” and “the war to end all wars.” If only that were true, and warfare had ended almost a century ago! More than 150 million people wouldn’t have had their lives snuffed out prematurely by bullets and bombs, stones and spears in the decades since. But it was not to be.

A coming war to end all wars

The war to end all wars *is* coming,

but it will follow a time of global conflict and turmoil unlike anything ever seen (Matthew 24:21). That age-ending period will be so bloody, so dangerous and deadly, that Jesus Christ warned us that “if that time of troubles were not cut short, *no living thing could survive*, but for the sake of God’s chosen it will be cut short” (verse 22, Revised English Bible, emphasis added throughout).

In the first chapter we saw that the first of the four horsemen of Revelation 6 represents a massive Satan-inspired religious deception. The ride of the second of the four horsemen unleashes the malignant forces of evil and removes the last vestiges of peace from the earth. However, Jesus Christ cuts short this horseman’s ride, *preventing human extinction*, with His appearance and the establishment of His world-ruling Kingdom.

Notice what the apostle John saw with the breaking of the second seal: “When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, ‘Come

and see.’ Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it *to take peace from the earth*, and that people *should kill one another*; and there was given to him *a great sword*” (Revelation 6:3-4).

This vision corresponds with Christ’s prophecy of the end time recorded in Matthew 24: “And you will hear of *wars and rumors of wars*. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For *nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom*” (verses 6-7).

The record of history shows a pattern of the red horse of war often following the white horse of false religion. An example is the Thirty Years War in Europe during the mid-17th century. Following the Protestant Reformation, the resultant shift in power among European states led to 30 years of carnage from 1618 to 1648.

Religion, the newly emerged Protestant versus Roman Catholic theology, was the ideology that fueled the winds of war. It led to strange alliances: Catholic France aligned with Protestant Holland to offset the powerful Catholic Hapsburg dynasty. This resulted in prolonging the conflict. By the time “peace” (a euphemism for balance of power) was restored in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia, 8 million people had lost their lives—a staggering toll, especially at that time.

What can we expect to see as this red horse of war rides across the landscape in the last days, unleashing the fury of nations on the world?

A look at the history of war will give

us a clue. Let’s first look at what the Bible reveals about the roots of war.

The beginning of war

Those who understand man’s nature know he is on a course toward destruction—and has been since the beginning.

In Genesis 4 we read of the first human “war:” the conflict between Cain and Abel, the sons of the first human beings, Adam and Eve. When God refused to accept the offering of Cain, reading his sinful heart, Cain’s self-interest was threatened. He did not control his anger and aggression and subsequently “rose up against Abel his brother and killed him” (Genesis 4:8).

Expelled from the family environs, Cain went to the land of Nod on the east of Eden (verse 16). Some biblical scholars say he built on the ancient site of Jericho.

Regardless of the accuracy of those speculations, excavations at the earliest levels of this site, one of the oldest inhabited settlements on earth, reveal a fortress city with walls 12 feet high and 6 ½ feet thick.

The remains of a large tower, 30 feet across at the base and 30 feet high, tell a story of people living in a fortress city, protecting what they had—probably food—from those who would take it by force. Clearly Jericho was a site of conflict long before Joshua and the Israelites encircled its walls.

In Genesis 10, God provides a narrative of the sons of Noah and the cities that grew from their dynasties. One descendant, Nimrod, and the city he built, Babel, are inserted into the story.

Nimrod was “a mighty hunter before the LORD” (verse 9). The “before” here denotes “in the face of” or “against,” indicating an adversarial relationship with God’s purpose and plan. This is made clearer in the story of the Tower of Babel in chapter 11. The cities associated

waged for national interest has brought lasting security for any city, state or empire. The peace sought by man is all too often a peace that only suits nationalistic interests and lays the groundwork for subsequent conflict.

The war to end all wars is coming, it will follow a time of global conflict and turmoil unlike anything ever seen. It will be so bloody, so dangerous and deadly, that Jesus Christ warned that “if that time . . . were not cut short, no living thing could survive . . .”

with Nimrod war back and forth for centuries. Babylon becomes a city, then an empire.

Eventually it becomes the symbol of the system that opposes God, His people and His plan throughout the Bible story. It is that city, described in Revelation 17:5 as a “MYSTERY . . . THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH,” which in the time of the end provides the cultural and religious inspiration to a political-religious empire called “the beast.”

The roots of this end-time system reach back to the pattern started by Nimrod at Babel, thus bridging the intervening centuries. This system will form the backdrop for the final conflict of the age brought on by the red horse of war.

No war has brought peace. Wars waged in the name of religion have not achieved religious harmony. No war

The terrifying nuclear genie

As a result of the breakup of the Soviet empire in the early 1990s, its nuclear stockpiles and those of the United States have been dramatically reduced.

However, the nuclear genie has not been put back into its bottle. Through various means some of that nuclear technology and know-how has migrated to other nations or been independently developed.

Today longtime enemies India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons, frequently rattling their sabers often over the disputed Kashmir region. A potential war between them could kill over *100 million people* (“Rapidly expanding nuclear arsenals in Pakistan and India portend regional and global catastrophe,” Science Advances, 2019).

North Korea, in violation of signed agreements, has tested long-range missiles with the capability to deliver nuclear warheads as far away as Washington, D.C. U.S. analysts also fear that cash-starved North Korea, which markets its Scud-class missiles throughout the Arab sphere, may up the ante by adding nuclear warheads to the weaponry it offers for sale

What's at the Root of War?

Volumes have been written describing the root causes of war. It has been studied, no doubt, since the first conflict erupted among human beings. The ancient Greeks felt human behavior was guided by fear, self-interest and honor—characteristics that cause war and instability. When these aspects of human nature create a crisis, the normal course of events leads to a breakdown in order, and anarchy or war is the result.

Relations among nations are likewise generally guided by self-interest. When nations' interests are jeopardized, the natural instinct for self-preservation takes over. War is often the result.

The apostle James wrote quite pointedly on this subject: "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight

and war" (James 4:1-2).

James identifies *lust, desire and covetousness* as the primary sources of strife among people who cannot focus on the right relationship with God. He goes on to say: "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (verse 4). Again we see that self-interest plays a dominant role in human aggression.

Left to itself, without a spiritual relationship with God, *the human heart* is the seat of conflict. Jeremiah the prophet observed that "the heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick . . ." (Jeremiah 17:9, New American Standard Bible).

Jesus Christ confirms that "out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (Matthew 15:19).

around the world—possibly making them available to terrorist groups for the right price.

After president Trump withdrew the U.S. from the Iran nuclear deal, the Islamic regime there has pushed through limits on enriched uranium, a key component of nuclear weapons. Although a coalition of European nations still adheres to the treaty, it's widely believed Iran is still experimenting with centrifuge technology that would allow them to quickly create a nuclear weapon if and when they decide to withdraw from the

treaty. They claim they are only interested in atomic technology for peaceful nuclear energy production, but have simultaneously threatened to withdraw from a key nonproliferation treaty as retaliation if the U.S. continues its arms embargoes.

Pakistan's government denied that it had helped spread its nuclear technology to countries such as Libya, Iran and North Korea—but later confessed that Pakistani scientists had done so on their own.

Taken together, these many troubling developments point to unstable dictator-

The apostle Paul tells us that the natural, human way of thinking “is hostile to God” and “does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Romans 8:7, New International Version).

But the Bible reveals that the real source of this hostility within human beings is Satan the devil. In a heated discussion with the Pharisees who were challenging Him, Christ labeled Satan as the source of human hostility. “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (John 8:44).

Paul describes Satan as controlling the “power of the air,” swaying people to disobedience without their conscious awareness. Until man’s nature undergoes a fundamental change, he follows

after the natural “lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind.” He is a child “of wrath” caught up with the rest of humanity in a spirit of conflict (Ephesians 2:2-3).

It will take a change of heart along with the addition of God’s Spirit to turn the human mind from pursuing pure self-interest to following the lead of God. We find this solution alluded to in a quote from Russian author Leo Tolstoy’s famous novel *War and Peace*: “Drain the blood from men’s veins and put in water instead, then there will be no more war!”

When the world comes under the covenant in which God writes His law of love on the human heart through His Spirit, we will see the end of war. Until then, we will see wars continue—and escalate in ferocity and devastation as mankind uses technological advancements to introduce ever-more-deadly means of killing other human beings.

ships and paranoid regimes scrambling to develop or acquire nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction so they can become the biggest bully on the block.

Present world scene ready for war

Of course, such weapons would be the ultimate tool in a terrorist arsenal should some groups get the funds or other resources needed to acquire them.

The great fear is that nuclear weapons, or other weapons of mass destruction, would fall into the hands of terrorist

groups like al-Qaeda or ISIS, and be used against Western nations. The end of the Cold War did not bring us any closer to the end of possible nuclear war. The grim reality is that it simply shifted the power into the hands of more players—some of whom view themselves as having nothing to lose by unleashing such weapons against the West.

Those who study war understand the persistent danger. In a comprehensive look at the subject, author Gwynne Dyer made this chilling, sober and almost hopeless observation: “To begin quite

close to the end: we may inhabit the Indian summer of human history, with nothing to look forward to but the ‘nuclear winter’ that closes the account. The war for which the great powers hold themselves in readiness every day may come, as hundreds of others have in the past.

“The megatons will fall, the dust will rise, the sun’s light will fail, and the race may perish. Nothing is inevitable until it has actually happened, but the final war is undeniably a possibility, and there is one statistical certainty.

Any event that has a definite probability, however small, that does not decrease with time will eventually occur—next year, next decade, next century, but it will come. Including nuclear war” (*War*, 1985, p. xi).

One world government

This bleak prospect has led many to conclude that a supranational world government is the only hope for universal peace. The medieval writer Dante Alighieri, in his work *De Monarchia*, speaks of the inevitable contentions between two governments which require arbitration by a third power with the authority to settle the dispute.

“This third power is either the world-government, or it is not. So, we must arrive at a first and supreme judge for whom all contentions are judicable . . . Therefore, world-government is neces-

sary for the world” (quoted in *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World*, Volume II, William Gorman, general editor, “War and Peace,” 1952, p. 1018).

At the end of the age, war will bring the nations to the point where a system will be created with the capability, and perhaps even the stated purpose, of

One unmistakable message of the book of Revelation is God’s control of seemingly uncontrollable events. The only hope of human survival is the reality of Christ’s intervention to prevent the total destruction of the earth and its inhabitants.

bringing peace to the earth. Revelation 13 describes this system rising up out of the sea and calls it “the beast.”

By a series of apparent miracles, a world in crisis is persuaded to accept this system. Nations surrender their sovereignty and the world worships this “beast,” asking, “Who is able to make war with [the beast]?” (verse 4).

To enforce this type of “peace,” this system has authority “over every tribe, tongue and nation”—a worldwide power (verse 7). But in enforcing its rule it makes war on the true servants of God, who recognize the true nature of this power and system as satanic.

Revelation 17 describes this “beast” receiving power from 10 “kings”—leaders of nations or groups of nations allied together to support this system and its human leader. And apparently it will

bring a temporary peace to the world (compare 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3). Yet the “peace” that is brought ultimately leads to war against God. This system and its leader will make war with the Lamb (Jesus Christ) but in the end will be overcome by Him.

Throughout the ages man has sought to organize a universal government.



What began thousands of years ago at Babylon as an attempt to reach to the heavens and defy God will be resurrected in an age-ending attempt to unify the nations into a global political and economic system.

The intended goal of this system will be to bring order, peace and prosperity among the warring factions of humanity. But once “peace” is attained, the attractive mask will be removed to reveal a hideous beast of a system that will tear and destroy any opposition to its rule and authority. The desire of the ages—peace—will prove elusive one more time,

when left in the hands of man.

The stage will be set for the climactic battle at the end.

Christ's intervention to save humanity

Peace, when left to human beings, has little chance of permanence. The rise of this end-time Babylonian system will be a major factor in a time of world calamity unlike any experienced in history. The prophet Daniel was told that this period will be “a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then” (Daniel 12:1, New International Version).

Christ spoke of this time as well: “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved . . .” He offered the light at the end of the tunnel when He added, “but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:21-22).

This final time of war will ultimately rest in the hands of God. Remember that Revelation 5 shows us that it is the Lamb, Jesus Christ, who unlocks the seals. Christ is in charge of history, and He will bring this trial to a conclusion that will

at long last result in peace for all peoples. But genuine peace will not come without a terrible cost in human suffering.

The final war of this age will serve to humble mankind to the point that people finally will obey God and become willing to live the way that will produce peace.

Look at the description of this time of world conflict. It begins in Revelation 8 with the opening of the seventh seal, containing seven trumpet plagues of unimaginable destruction to come on the earth.

The next chapter describes what happens when the sixth trumpet sounds: “Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, ‘Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.’ So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released *to kill a third of mankind*. Now the number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million” (Revelation 9:13-16).

This 200-million-person army is fearsome to contemplate. Verse 18 tells us that a third of mankind—more than 2.5 *billion lives* at our planet’s current population level—will be snuffed out in this age-ending wave of warfare.

One unmistakable message of the book of Revelation is God’s control of seemingly uncontrollable events. The only hope of human survival is the reality of Christ’s intervention to prevent the total destruction of the earth and its inhabitants.

As this crisis at the close of man’s age reaches its crescendo, the heavens will open and Christ will appear on a white horse. Here, in God’s message of hope, appears a fifth horseman whose ride will be decisive and final. Revelation 19:11 says He is “called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war.”

Christ will wage this battle in righteousness because He alone holds the keys to death and the grave (Revelation 1:18). No other person waging battle or war in history, no matter how “just” the cause may seem, can make this claim. God’s judgment on the nations has been building over the millennia and will be executed at precisely the right time.

Christ’s victory in this ultimate battle will result in the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Finally the world will see lasting peace.

But before this takes place two other horsemen must ride. Next, we’ll look at the ride of the third horse, famine.

————— The Third Horseman —————

The Black Horse of Famine



The food-rich countries' potential to feed the entire planet makes it hard to imagine a famine extensive enough to thrust the earth into a global crisis. Yet the third seal of Revelation 6, employing the symbol of a black horse, describes just such a horrifying scene. How could this happen? What would be its consequences?

People are—and have long been—suffering from famine in many parts of the world. Approximately 30 million people in northern Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia and Yemen face major food insecurity, with 10 million of those already in famine conditions.

The combined disasters of the Sudanese civil war, the Yemeni civil war, the rise of terrorist groups like Boko Haram, and the ongoing governmental corruption means many people in Africa are at risk of starvation by simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The scourge of famine has appeared cyclically throughout history. Often it is caused by drought, blight, floods and other natural means beyond human control. At other times the causes are all too human—war, social unrest and breakdown, and inefficient or outright malevolent government policy.

In today's global society, there should be no real obstacle to alleviating the effects of food shortages wherever they occur. Modern agricultural methods and generally stable weather patterns produce bumper crops in the developed world resulting in massive levels of food production, more than enough to feed

the hungry of the world.

There is no reason to expect people to starve when this is coupled with the means to transport food to any location in the world. Yet famine and suffering from food shortages continue—and at times even grow.

It's easy to dismiss famine when it's on the other side of the planet or some far-off, isolated corner of the globe. Is it conceivable famine could spread to impact the wealthy, food-rich countries of the world?

The third horseman rides

We come now to the third horseman's ride. What does it portend for the world?

Notice what it says in verses 5-6: "When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, 'Come and see.' So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard 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 the wine.'" What does this mean?

The Expositor's Bible Commentary

explains regarding this passage: “This amount [of money] suggests food prices about *twelve times higher than normal* . . . and implies inflation and famine conditions (Matthew 24:7). A quart of wheat would supply an average person one day’s sustenance. Barley was used by the poor to mix with the wheat.” Food shortages cause inflation in food prices. And higher prices make the remaining food harder to afford.

Oil and wine, though, are typically symbols of plenty. The reference here could indicate there will be pockets of abundance in the midst of famine. Christ’s reference to famine “in various places” (Matthew 24:7) indicates the same possibility.

The cry to not “harm” the oil and wine could represent attempts to safeguard the pockets of abundance against plundering. However, The Living Bible interprets the phrase in Revelation to mean that there is practically no oil and wine left. That would also fit with the admonition that what is left not be harmed—lest there be none left at all.

In any case, the opening of the third seal indicates the onset of a period of severe famine unlike any in the past. While famines of varying severity have struck throughout history, it appears things will get much worse. Most of us have seen pictures of famine in our time, usually in parts of drought-stricken Africa. In 1984, a famine in Ethiopia developed through natural means, but was aggravated by

the unstable government. Millions were at risk of starvation.

Thankfully, a massive humanitarian effort from around the world stopped the famine from killing as many as pre-



In 1984, a famine in Ethiopia developed through natural means, but was aggravated by the unstable government. Millions were at risk of starvation.

dicted. (Even then, corrupt government officials withheld some of the donated food as a weapon to starve their political opponents.)

This was testimony to the generosity of the many wealthy nations and the glob-

al means of transport that is available. However, if a nation's social fabric begins to unravel, larger problems can set in. The crises in Africa may be a foretaste of larger tribulations to come.

Prelude to an apocalypse?

Food insecurity and outright famine is already a reality faced by hundreds of millions of people throughout the world. According to the UN report of COVID-19's impact on food security, before COVID-19, already 820 million people worldwide were considered as being "food insecure," of which 135 million were in crisis and emergency status. There has been slow, steady progress in the international effort to reduce those numbers and lift people out of poverty. But the large, worldwide economic interruption caused by COVID-19 threatens to undo recent progress made and plunge more people on the brink deeper into a crisis of nutrition. It is estimated an additional 130 million people could fall into acute food insecurity by the end of 2020. Those impacted the most primarily live in South and Southeast Asia, with the majority of the remainder in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Exacerbating the major economic

impact that threatens to plunge ever more into poverty are overlapping threats from rainfall patterns in east Africa causing floods, landslides and even fostering conditions for the ongoing locust swarms that are devastating the region. Abundant rains brought an



For keeping His statutes and commandments, God promises the necessities for plentiful food production: "rain in its season" so that "the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit . . . you shall eat your bread to the full . . ."

earlier planting season at the beginning of 2020—a good thing—but also bringing about flooding, mudslides, flash floods, and river overflows that have displaced many people, damaged infrastructure and destroyed some crops. Meanwhile the locust outbreak that began in 2019 continued into 2020, hitting Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia particularly hard. From the UN report:

“Swarms of Desert Locusts there are extremely large, highly mobile, and are damaging food crops and forage. The Desert Locust is the most destructive migratory pest in the world. In response to environmental stimuli, dense and highly mobile Desert Locust swarms can

“triple menace”

Even in nations where food security isn't as large of a problem, breakdowns in the supply chain have resulted in destruction or waste of perfectly good food simply because it isn't able to be delivered. “Border restrictions and lock-



For disobedience, God says He would bring a nation from afar to besiege and blockade the cities. All the food stores would be forcibly taken. The resulting starvation would cause the social structure to unravel at a frightening speed. The results are horrifying to contemplate.

form. They are ravenous eaters who consume their own weight per day, targeting food crops and forage. Just a single square kilometer of swarm can contain up to 80 million adults, with the capacity to consume the same amount of food in one day as 35,000 people. When combined with the COVID-19, flooding and the spread of these locusts, East African people find themselves combatting a

downs are, for example, slowing harvests in some parts of the world, leaving millions of seasonal workers without livelihoods, while also constraining transport of food to markets.

Meat processing plants and food markets are being forced to close in many locations due to serious COVID-19 outbreaks among workers. Farmers have been burying perishable produce or dumping milk as a result of supply chain disruption and falling consumer demand. As a result, many people in urban centers now struggle to access fresh fruits and

vegetables, dairy, meat and fish.”

Devastating famines of the past

Famine is listed in Revelation 6 as following the previous horsemen of religious deception and war. While nature—drought, floods and insect infestations—is often the cause of famine, quite often war and misrule, as well as malignant political or religious ideology, are prime

factors. A look at past famines gives us an idea of how devastating they can be.

During the 20th century two humanly engineered famines brought devastating consequences. In 1932-34, the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin sought to suppress Ukrainian nationalism by forcing a system of collectivized agriculture on the peasants. Food supplies were removed to the cities, crops failed and food supplies were barred from the region. This *man-made* famine resulted in the starvation of between 6 and 8 million people. It was a state-sponsored attempt at genocide.

China's "Great Leap Forward" in 1958-60 resulted in mismanaged food production and the disruption of distribution chains. Fertile rice fields were plowed over and factories built on them. Farms were collectivized. Farmers who knew only the land were at a loss in factories. Coupled with bad weather, the result was the death of 20 million people by starvation during 1960 and 1961.

Famine in prophecy

Let's step back in history to the book of Leviticus for a look at God's warning to man through the example of Israel. Here we can see the consequences of false religion, war, famine and pestilence when Israel was unfaithful to God.

Leviticus 26 is a chapter of promises from God—the promise of blessings for obedience and of curses for disobedience. The first step toward blessings is faithfulness in the worship of the

true God. "You shall not make idols for yourselves; neither a carved image nor a sacred pillar shall you rear for yourselves; nor shall you set up an engraved stone in your land, to bow down to it; for I am the LORD your God. You shall keep My Sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary: I am the LORD" (verses 1-2).

For keeping His statutes and com-





mandments, God promises in the next verses the necessities for plentiful food production: “rain in its season” so that “the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit . . . you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely.”

Continuing, He says: “I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid; I will rid the land of evil beasts, and the sword will not go through your land . . . For I will look on you favorably and make you fruitful, multiply you and confirm My covenant with you” (verses 3-9).

By living righteously and avoiding false religion, Israel would be able to receive divine blessings of

good weather, fertile soil and plentiful rainfall. Peace, material abundance, good health and the absence of disease would follow. In other words, the curses like those accompanying the horsemen of apocalyptic disaster would not go through their land as long as they sincerely obeyed God and worshipped Him in truth.

This promise will be applied to all nations after the return of Christ. In time, they also will receive these same promised benefits when they, too, learn to live the way God has revealed in His Word. But until then, we will continue to see cyclical occurrence of famine, from all sorts of causes, resulting in millions of people dying when they *could* have lived.

Terrifying look into the future

In Deuteronomy 28 God details the horror of a people stricken with the curse of famine. It demands our attention so we may understand what lies ahead for the world when the third horseman rides.

For disobedience, God says He would bring a nation from afar to besiege and blockade the cities. All the food stores would be forcibly taken. The resulting starvation would cause the social structure to unravel at a frightening speed. The results are horrifying to contemplate.

“You shall eat the fruit of your own body, the flesh of your sons and your daughters . . . in the siege and desperate straits in which your enemy shall distress you. The sensitive and very refined man among you will be hostile toward his brother, toward the wife of his bosom, and toward the rest of his children whom he leaves behind, so that he will not give any of them the flesh of his children whom he will eat, because he has nothing left in the siege . . .” (Deuteronomy 28:53-55).

Famine-induced cannibalism is the lowest depth of depravity to which a nation can sink. Yet scenes like this have

occurred in history—and God says they will happen again. Reading this in the light of today’s reported tragedies is profoundly sobering. But such deeply distressing events inevitably occur when men and women become entrenched in their disobedience to God’s laws.

Hope in the midst of horror

Jesus Christ wept over the fate that was about to fall on Jerusalem in the first century. He knew that terrible scenes would occur within the “city of peace.” He wanted to gather the people into a loving and protective embrace and keep them from such tragedy.

But their sins and defiant attitude would not allow them to repent and escape what was coming. So the only course left for them was impending desolation and the cruel lessons of experience (see Matthew 23:37-39). The worst horrors described above in Deuteronomy 28 fell on them during the Roman siege of Jerusalem. Those horrors will only grow as mankind continues its self-destructive course of rejecting God.

Nothing is more basic to human survival than food and water. Yet the entire world is wholly dependent on elements totally beyond human control—namely sufficient rainfall, sunshine, temperate weather and fertility of the earth beneath our feet—to keep us alive.

The many recurring reports of droughts, floods, losses of fertile land and disturbed weather patterns should wake us out of our complacency. Ultimately, *we are dependent on God for everything*. When He decides to pull the

plug on the systems that support human life on earth, it will be too late to realize how much we’ve taken these things for granted.

One horseman is yet to ride in this grim scenario. We will see in our next chapter that he rides in tandem with this third horseman. We have not yet seen the full depths of the catastrophe that awaits the world as the seals of Revelation 6 are opened and the human tragedies described in them unfold.

In His Olivet prophecy, Jesus gave the first description of the events symbolized by these seals—and His prophecy is unerring. He foretold that there will be a time of great tribulation, greater than any previous world conflict, and unless that time is cut short, no human flesh will survive.

No treaty, no cease-fire, no human being, will be able to stop this end-of-the-age cataclysm. Events will drive the world into an out-of-control spin. But for the sake of a remnant called “the elect,” His true followers, “those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:21-22).

Too often, people speak of this period as “the end of the world” or by some other similarly gloomy name. Terrible as that time will be, the world will not end and human life will not be extinguished. The Bible gives us hope that the light will dawn out of the chaos at the end of this age.

It is when we keep our eyes firmly focused on this truth that we can have hope beyond the tensions of our present world.

———— The Fourth Horseman ————

The Pale Horse of Pestilence



Disease travels in tandem with fear. While the first can lead to the death of thousands, the second can unravel the social fabric, disrupting the precarious balance of relationships essential for the stability of nations.

The most recent disease fear was COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019), which killed hundreds of thousands and panicked millions more. Before that it was ebola, which killed thousands in Africa before being largely contained. Before that it was AIDS, which has killed tens of millions and even today is still decimating the populations of some countries. Tomorrow it could be another, even greater plague to sweep across the landscape, leaving death and destruction in its wake.

In this booklet we have been examining each of the first four seals of Revelation 6. These seals, dramatically depicted by four horsemen, show the effect of false religion, war, famine and plague among the earth's population in the days leading to the return of Jesus Christ.

Each of these seals represents powerful forces that devastate human life on the earth. The cumulative effect will lead to such conditions that if Jesus Christ did not intervene and cut short the time of trial, "no flesh would be saved" (Matthew 24:22).

We now come to the fourth seal, the fourth horseman, and his ride of death by plague. How will the ride of this horseman affect the nations of the earth?

The ride of the fourth horseman

Revelation 6:7-8 tells us this about

the fourth seal: "When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, 'Come and see.' So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him."

The Expositor's Bible Commentary says this about the color of the fourth horse: "'Pale' (chloros) denotes a yellowish green, the light green of a plant, or the paleness of a sick person in contrast to a healthy appearance." Put bluntly, this horse is the color of death.

In Jesus' parallel prophecy in Matthew 24, He explained that in the wake of religious deception, war and famine would come "pestilences" or disease epidemics (verse 7).

The seals have a cumulative effect. False religion causes instability within relationships leading to war. Famine follows war, and when malnourishment occurs and social systems break down, human beings are more susceptible to disease. These seals depict the ferocity of problems unleashed on the world in the lead-up to "the Day of the Lord."

There would be other calamities as well. Jesus also listed in the same context "earthquakes in various places" (verse 7). "Plague" in Scripture denotes not only pestilence but also other calamities in nature that God uses to punish a disobedient humanity. Of course, any such calamity make populations that much riper for the spread of disease epidemics.

The latter part of Revelation 6:8, speaking of all four horsemen, states: "And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth to kill with sword,

with hunger, with death and by the beasts of the earth.”

By the time the fourth horseman completes his ride, a fourth of earth’s inhabitants will experience incredible devastation. The death toll will be unlike any from plague and disease in human history.

To understand how bad it can be, let’s go back and look at some of the great plagues of history.

The Black Death

Perhaps the most famous plague in history is the Black Death of the 14th century, thought by most to have been bubonic plague. Estimates are that more than 20 million people (a third to half of Europe’s population) died in the outbreak.

In 1346, reports reached Europe of a devastating disease from China that was affecting many parts of Asia. The next year a mysterious disease appeared in Italy. Ships from the Black Sea sailed into Messina with sailors infected with black boils in their armpits and groins. It was the bubonic plague.

The disease was so lethal that people were known to go to bed well and die before waking. There were two types of this plague. The first was internal, causing swelling and internal bleeding. This was spread by contact. The second concentrated in the lungs and spread by coughing airborne germs. There was no known prevention or cure.

Whole towns were depopulated. The social structure completely broke down. Parents abandoned children; husbands and wives left each other to die. In many

cases no one was around to bury the dead, both from fear of contagion and lack of concern. One writer of the time tells of observing 5,000 bodies lying dead in a field.

In that age, the Bible was the primary means to measure any natural calamity. The only way to understand what was happening was to believe the world was coming to an end. There seemed no hope for the future.

The bubonic plague has appeared in more recent times as well. The Great Plague of London in 1664-65 resulted in more than 70,000 deaths in a population estimated at 460,000. An outbreak in Canton and Hong Kong in 1894 left 80,000 to 100,000 dead, and within 20 years the disease spread from the southern Chinese ports throughout the whole world, resulting in more than 10 million deaths.

The plague came to America from Asia in 1899. Today cases are still reported, and an average of 15 people die each year. The disease originates in rodents and is usually transmitted to people by fleas, although animal bites can also be the means of transmission. It is still a virulent disease. As few as 10 bubonic plague cells can cause a person’s death.

Perhaps disease transmission from rodents is part of what Revelation 6:8 means by death from “the beasts of the earth.” Microbial and viral infection could also be intended.

Human-engineered plague

Throughout its history, plague has been used as an offensive weapon against populations. The Mongols would

catapult plague-infested corpses over the walls of besieged cities. Thousands would die as the disease spread through the walled-in population.

During World War II, Japan dropped plague-infested fleas on China. American research growing out of the war experience led to a decades-long research project at Fort Detrick, Maryland, proving that biological warfare was a feasible method of waging war.

In 1969 U.S. President Richard Nixon ordered the research stopped, and in 1972 the United States signed a treaty with 70 other nations outlawing the production, stockpiling and use of biological weapons as a means of war. Despite this treaty, it is known that many nations, rich and poor alike, have developed biological weapons.

The former Soviet Union conducted a sophisticated effort to manufacture biological weapons during the Cold War years. For years scientists researched ways to genetically alter bubonic plague so as to make it resistant to many forms of modern treatment.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992, the tracking and inventory of all this work has been a great concern. The United States and its allies fear that some of it could have fallen into the hands of terrorist groups and could one day be used against them.

After the first Gulf War in 1991, weapons inspectors confirmed that Iraq had developed biological weapons and had



even equipped some warheads with germs to use against Saddam Hussein's enemies.

Are nations prepared?

Today America and the West brace themselves for further attacks from terrorist groups. What is perhaps feared most is a biological attack with smallpox or some other widely communicable germ. Experts know that the West is woefully underprepared for such an attack.

In June 2001, the Center for Strategic and International Studies hosted a senior-level war game examining the security challenges of a biological attack on the American homeland.

The premise was the appearance of a case of smallpox in Oklahoma City, rapidly spreading throughout the coun-

try. Among the lessons learned from the exercise: “An attack on the United States with biological weapons could threaten vital national security interests. Massive civilian casualties, breakdown in essential institutions, violation of democratic processes, civil disorder, loss of confidence in government and reduced U.S. strategic flexibility abroad are among the ways a biological attack might compromise U.S. security” (heritage.org/node/19110/print-display).

Other estimates say that within days a million people would be dead and two to three times that many infected. No one knows what lies out there waiting to be used by groups wishing other nations harm. We only know that it could happen.

Naturally caused disease

Beyond the human-engineered biowarfare, another type of pestilence is waiting as well. The pandemic spread of the recent novel coronavirus strain COVID-19 has, following an explosion of cases into a worldwide pandemic in 2020, given us another real-time example of how quickly world conditions can change and give rise to fear and panic.

Stock markets were destabilized, with whole nations diverting resources and attention to containment and cities and regions quarantining citizens. It’s been like a storm that rises quickly on the horizon and, before anyone can discern what’s happening and take shelter or other precautions, it slams into society and upends normal life.

This virus is serious for several reasons. First, like flu viruses, it causes death in a

significant number of cases, the elderly being most vulnerable. Second, as of this writing, there is no vaccine, and development takes months. Third, many who have the virus show no symptoms, making it hard to tell who does or doesn’t carry it and may be spreading it to others. COVID-19 is simply the latest worldwide pandemic to suddenly arise and wreak havoc around the world.

“[One hundred] years ago a sudden mutation in the virus that causes influenza initiated a worldwide epidemic that in only 18 months killed an estimated 25 to 40 million people around the world. Many consider this to be the worst natural disaster in history” (Hillary Johnson, “Killer Flu,” *Rolling Stone*, Jan. 22, 1998). Some historians feel this epidemic hastened the end of World War I.

One expert, W.I.B. Beveridge, said, “There is no known reason why there should not be another catastrophic pandemic like that of 1918 or even worse. The flu always has the capability of becoming a global plague: a spark in a remote corner of the world could start a fire that scorches us all. Should a super flu like that of 1918 make a comeback now that the population has quadrupled and more than a million people cross international boundaries on jets each day, experts say it could kill hundreds of millions” (*ibid.*).

As we’ve witnessed with the novel coronavirus in 2020, influenza is one of the most underrated biomedical hazards in today’s world. Medical science takes eight months or more to create a vaccine once a new strain appears. Researchers know they cannot stop a pandemic,

hence draconian measures like total lockdowns to try and “flatten the curve” of infections to buy time for medical workers to learn how to treat the disease and researchers to develop treatments. In the meantime other mutant strains are waiting to jump the species barrier from animals to humans. When they do, the results could be catastrophic. A breakdown caused by war in one part of the world, coupled with an outbreak of influenza, as in World War I, would be all it would take to set in motion a major disease pandemic on the scale of those described in the book of Revelation.

The seals in context

When we look at the four seals of Revelation 6, we have to understand them in the context of God’s agelong message to mankind. False religion, war, famine and disease are the results of man’s broken relationship with Him. And when these horsemen make their rides, it will be after repeated warning and pleading from God to turn from sin and live righteously based on His eternal law of love toward God and man.

When God first set ancient Israel in a land of promise, He gave them instruction on how to live and conduct their affairs in a way that would bring peace and harmony. God wanted them to live with blessing and abundance, not suffering and misery. In His basic instruction, our Creator explained how to avoid the problems that will devastate the world with the opening of these seals.

Notice the pattern set in Leviticus 26: “You shall not make idols for yourselves; neither a carved image nor a sacred

pillar shall you rear for yourselves; nor shall you set up an engraved stone in your land, to bow down to it; for I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 26:1).

Here is the solution to false religion, represented by the first seal and its horseman. Any form of worship other than that given by God is a false idol having no value or validity. Lacking meaning or sense, it is worse than nothing because it leads to willful ignorance and lack of understanding of the true God and His purpose for human life.

False religion and deception breaks the bond between God and His creation and leads to false systems of religion. When this bond is broken, human relationships suffer, leading to conflict and war, represented by the second of the seals.

Verse 6 says: “I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid.” This peace, in contrast to the second horsemen of war, is a gift from God when man obeys Him from the heart and puts His laws and ways first.

“If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit” (Leviticus 26:3-4). For obedience, God promises the opposite of the third horseman of famine—plenty of food from abundant harvests.

And the antidote to the fourth horseman of disease? When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, He told them: “If you diligently heed the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right

in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the LORD who heals you” (Exodus 15:26). However, if they disobeyed and broke the covenant, they could expect disease to afflict them, their families and their nation.

Notice: “But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God . . . the LORD will make the pestilence cling to you until He has consumed you from the land into which you go to possess. The LORD will smite you with consumption, with fever and inflammation . . . and the tumors, the scurvy and the itch, from which you cannot be healed. The LORD will smite you with madness and blindness and dismay of [mind and] heart” (Deuteronomy 28:15, 21-22, 27-28, Amplified Bible).

Bound within the promises of blessings and curses is the larger context for the four seals of Revelation 6. The human race is bound to its Creator in a relationship that will reach a conclusion. God will accomplish His purpose of “bringing many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10). Mankind eventually will come face to face with God and admit that He is the one and only true God.

The book of Revelation shows God’s merciful intervention in human affairs to both correct and save man from destruction. God will bring justice to the earth, but first there will be a time of unparalleled tribulation.

The fifth horseman

All around the world, COVID-19 has

forced governments to shut down virtually all public life.

The world media machine contributed to both an awareness of the disease and a fear that’s led many to anxiety and paranoia. The economic impact is disastrous, with the long-term consequences still uncertain. We will likely be feeling the impact for years to come.

One can only imagine the worldwide impact to come from the culmination of the ride of the pale horseman. The world has seen relatively mild precursors. What will happen when modern communications and travel allow people to see literally millions of deaths?

Which brings us to the only hope this world has to survive this devastating stampede. People commonly refer to these four seals as “the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” Because the last word here is often synonymous with global destruction, there is typically no hope in this reference. But “Apocalypse” is simply the Greek name of the book of Revelation—meaning “revealing” or “unveiling.” And this book reveals more than the gloom and doom that lie at the end of the age.

Indeed, John saw more than four horsemen in his vision. He saw five. Revelation 19:11-16 shows us the ride of the fifth horseman. It is the appearance of Jesus Christ, on a white horse from heaven, intervening in world affairs at its most crucial point. Next we will focus on this “horseman of hope,” the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, whose appearance will bring an everlasting Kingdom of truth, peace, plenty and ultimate well-being.

The Fifth Horseman Rides



Most Bible students focus only on the first four horsemen of Revelation 6. The phrase “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” is synonymous with frightening prophecies. But there is another horseman—a fifth, whose ride signifies a much different future and brings promise of a far better age to come.

It seems as if it were a lifetime ago that U.S. President George W. Bush put the prestige of his office into the quest for peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

In June 2003, the American president met in Aqaba with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Jordan’s King Abdullah and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas to commit their efforts and energies to “the road map for peace.”

The Israeli and Palestinian leaders shook hands, expressed regret for the suffering of the peoples, stated their desire for peaceful relations and committed to travel the road to peace.

But within days of this highly heralded meeting, another wave of violence broke on the streets of Israel. Sniper attacks and homicide bombings took more Israeli lives. Seventeen were killed in one grisly bus attack, followed by other suicide bombings that killed and maimed dozens more. Israeli counterattacks took the lives of Palestinian leaders as well as innocent children.

No sooner were the hopes for peace raised than they were dashed to the ground, leaving many to wonder if any peaceful solution to this problem is possible.

Diplomats shuttle between nations, while new solutions to age-old enmities are tried and found wanting. One U.S. senator suggested that the United States may need to commit troops to Israel as a peacekeeping force. The last thing Israel wants is the death of American soldiers in defense of its territory. The imposition of a foreign army into Israel sounds ominous notes to students of prophecy.

Fruitless search for peace

Where do we find the way to genuine peace? Beyond the Middle East, other areas of conflict continue to flare up. In Sudan and the Congo, little-noticed wars have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Africans. While attention is focused on Iraq, these wars have been all but ignored by the world powers. It is a sad and discordant commentary on those who try to work for peace in the world.

In the previous four installments of this series, we have focused on the rides of the four horsemen of Revelation 6. These horsemen, who make up the first four of the seven seals opened by Jesus Christ, show the coming destruction caused by false religion, war, famine and

pestilence.

Christ said these seals would herald an unparalleled time of sorrow and great tribulation “such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:7-8, 21).

The prophecies show dark days ahead for this world and its inhabitants. Revelation 8 shows the effect of further plagues, which affect the earth’s vegetation (verse 7) and devastate the waters of the rivers and seas, the planet’s life-support system (verses 8 and 10).

Conditions will grow so bad that men will seek the escape of death in that day, but it will not be found (Revelation 9:6). Why will all this come on the earth, and where will it lead?

God’s righteous judgment

We need to understand a basic principle of God’s judgment on mankind. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He would much rather see men and women live righteously and enjoy the blessings that come from obeying His way. But when the way of man becomes too wicked, there follows a time of righteous judgment, the end of which is ultimate restoration.

Notice Ezekiel 18. In verse 23, God rhetorically asks, “Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? . . . and not that he should turn from his ways and live?” Again in verse 30 He says, “Therefore I will judge you . . . , every one according to his ways . . . Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin” (emphasis added throughout).

The book of Revelation shows that God will bring a time of divine judgment on the world that in the end will result in peace. It is the only way this warring, fractious world will be brought to a state of harmony.

Notice what is sung at the throne of God in anticipation of the seven last plagues. A song of Moses and the Lamb includes these words: “Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested” (Revelation 15:3-4).

Another angel, holding a bowl of judgment says: “You are righteous, O Lord, the One who is and who was and who is to be, because You have judged these things. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. For it is their just due” (Revelation 16:5-6).

To the human mind, unaccustomed to thinking about divine judgment, these words strike a jarring and harsh note. How can a loving and merciful God do this to His creation?

Yet our judgment must be guided and shaped by the words of another angelic being from God’s altar, who says, “Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments” (Revelation 16:7).

The ride of the fifth horseman

However, the fifth horseman of Revelation, Jesus Christ, rides not with famine, pestilence or a false gospel like

the earlier riders. His ride is not the fifth seal of Revelation 6. Instead He is the returning King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Christ rides onto the world stage at the moment of earth's greatest crisis—and “makes war.” But it will truly be the war to end wars.

And it will be a war waged in righteous judgment. Notice the description in Revelation 19: “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war” (verse 11).

Throughout the ages men, women and children have looked and longed for one who would bring lasting peace to the world.

Like the first horseman of Revelation 6, Christ sits astride a white horse, this image in both places symbolizing conquest. But here the similarity ends. Unlike the deception of the first rider, Jesus comes with truth. His name is “The Word of God” (verse 13) and He wields a sharp sword, which in other places is used to symbolize the Word of God.

Indeed, there will be a literal battle, after which the true way of God will replace the governments of this world and nations will be subject to the Kingdom of God, the divine reign of Jesus Christ over the entire world. Unlike the previous four horsemen, which foreshadowed increasing world turmoil and tribulation, Christ's ride will

lead to a time of peace throughout the earth.

The war that finally brings peace

Christ will rule the nations according to all the prophecies that foretold His righteous government. Revelation 19:15 carries forward the thought recorded in Isaiah 11:4: “Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.”

Christ's second coming, with power and great glory, will be a time of great conflict and a final battle of the nations gathered at Jerusalem. These armies gather for what will seem to them to be an earth-

ly, temporal matter. But God will have another purpose.

An angel, emblazoned against the sun, appeared to John with this ominous command to the fowl of the skies: “Come and gather together for the supper of the great God” (Revelation 19:17). Plainly, after Christ destroys those armies gathered to fight against Him, there will be nothing left but food for the scavenging birds.

Read in your own Bible the words describing this dramatic scene at the end of this present age of human misrule. While not pretty, it is the only solution to the continual warring of mankind.

When giant oil wells are burning out of control, often the only way firefighters

can extinguish the flame is by igniting an explosion in the well head. The explosion sucks out the oxygen, thus taking away a key element needed for the fire. Similarly, the righteous war Christ will wage is like a massive explosion of force that brings the raging flames of war to a halt. Only then will the conditions be set for ushering in the peace of the Kingdom of God.

The Desire of All Nations

Through the prophet Haggai, God sent a message of comfort that echoes through the ages. It speaks to the world at the time of great calamity mentioned in Revelation.

“‘My Spirit remains among you; do not fear!’ For thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory . . . The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former . . . And in this place I will give peace,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Haggai 2:5-9).

Clearly, Jesus Christ the Messiah is “the Desire of All Nations.” What do all nations long for? Is it not peace? Is it not the chance to live and love and grow old through the generations without fear of war, wasting diseases and want?

Throughout the ages men, women and children have looked and longed for one who would bring lasting peace to the world. The first-century world looked for a golden age that would bring justice and peace to mankind. They sensed the

time was right for restoring a time of prosperity and wisdom when the physical and spiritual world worked together in harmony.

The Roman poet Virgil spoke of the return of justice from “a new breed of men sent down from heaven” and “the boy’s birth in whom the iron shall cease, the golden age arise . . . He shall receive the life of gods, and see heroes with gods commingling, and himself be seen of them, and with his father’s worth reign over a world at peace” (Eclogue 4.5-13, 15-18).

Of course, the Roman Empire did not bring a “golden age”—it was more like iron than gold. The peace of Rome was achieved at the end of the legionnaire’s short sword—war, but not a righteous one. No leader or nation since then has brought lasting peace to any age of man.

A lasting peace

Where can you turn for a reliable promise of peace and justice?

The search will continue for a lasting peace among today’s nations. Conferences will be held, treaties produced and accords signed. There will be short periods of calm giving the illusion of peace. But in the end, the only real peace must be brought by the hand of God through the ride of the fifth horseman of Revelation.

Today the world awaits the voices that will declare, as foretold in Revelation 11:15: “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!”

The Horsemen *of* Revelation



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The Fifth Horseman Rides

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