

## Revelation 6:1-8 – The Four Horsemen, Part 2

“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.” (Ps. 20:7) Some trust in a good job, others trust their investments, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. Some trust in good health, some trust in medicine, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. Some trust in democracy, others trust in the Supreme Court of Canada, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. When chariots and horses, jobs and investments, health and medicine, democracy and the Supreme Court fail, some will despair, but we will not. Because we trust in the name of the LORD our God. Last week I showed you that the symbol of the fiery-red horse and rider was fulfilled in the century of civil war throughout the Roman Empire, ending about the year 285AD. During that time, Christians did not lose hope, they told unbelievers about Jesus Christ. In spite of the chaos and uncertainty in the empire, to quote one historian, that period saw “enormous numerical growth of the church”.<sup>i</sup> Unbelievers weren’t becoming followers of Jesus because it made life easier. It often made them targets of persecution. And as we will see under the emblems of the black and pale horses, the civil wars of the red horse left a shattered economy, a weakened empire, leading to such severe conditions that normal people no longer worried about their rights, or retirement, but about survival. And local churches grew by leaps and bounds, because it was in the preaching of Christ that people found hope. In the middle of all this, a brave preacher warned his own governor, “Lo, those things are happening which were before foretold by the words of God,” and that, if he would not listen to God’s warnings in this lifetime, God would not listen to his crying in “the eternal dungeon, and the continual fire, and the everlasting punishment” to follow.<sup>ii</sup> Now 1800 years later, this morning as you hear how two more of those ancient prophecies were fulfilled, in detail and in order, do not close your ears to the Word of God. Do not harden your heart to His call. Turn from your sins and believe; trust in the name of the LORD our God.

### The churches of Christ call on Jesus

[**read v5a**] The Lamb, symbolic of Christ ascended to the throne of God, breaks a seal on the scroll from God, and events are unleashed on the symbolic “earth”, which I’ve said stands for the whole Roman Empire. For the third time, one of the living creatures standing for the ministers of the Word in the Church of Christ call out “come!”, (a word that can also mean, “go”) alluding to Zech 1:21 and 6:7. You see in Zechariah’s prophecy, Christ interceded for God’s people praying for mercy on them and justice on those who had killed so many of the Jews. Let me read those verses for you and explain (since it helps us to see how important the word “come!” is in the first four seals of Revelation). [**read Zech 1:12-15—notice the command for the prophet to “Cry out”**] Then after seeing symbolic “horns” standing for the four non-Jewish empires that each crushed the Jewish people (the fourth of which was the Roman Empire when Revelation was written), and four symbolic angels coming toward them, we read, [**read Zech 1:21**], and you can easily imagine Zechariah praying in his heart that these angelic avengers would indeed “Come!” That’s the reason why each of these four living creatures in Revelation, standing for Christian ministers who serve the churches of Jesus, “cry out” in voices “like thunder”, “Come!” One of the duties of Christian pastors is to give voice to these kinds of prayers of Christians in the name of Christ. The one word, “come” is a symbol for the prayers of pastors leading their churches to call on Jesus to intercede for the Church like He did for the Jews in Zechariah. If you are a Christian, pray for Christians who suffer persecution. Pray that God will intercede. Pray along with these living creatures who cry out, “Come!”

One of the wonderful themes in the Book of Revelation is prayer. God commands Christians to pray so that when He acts, and our prayers for mercy and justice are answered, it is God who is glorified for being merciful and just. Notice that the seven seals of the scroll in the hand of the Lamb are introduced with prayer: In Rev 5:8 the elders hold bowls with incense “which are the prayers of the saints”, and in Rev 6, each of the four living creatures cries out the prophetic prayer, “Come!”, and God acts upon the fourth empire of Zechariah, the fourth Beast of Daniel, the Roman Empire which crucified Christ, destroyed Jerusalem, and persecuted Christians. Then just before the seven trumpets in Revelation, again it is the “prayers of all the saints” in Rev 8:3-5, which introduce the blowing of the trumpets in Rev 8:6. Finally, just before the seven bowls of God’s final judgements are poured out in Rev 15:1, John hears a loud roar as all Christ’s people together put down their bowls of incense for praying, and play their harps for praise, because the time had come for God to finally judge the earth. So all throughout Revelation, Christ acts with power to intercede on the earth, in answer to the prayers of His people, in order to glorify God’s mercy and justice. Now that you know that, how will it affect the way you pray? Do you pray? For God to show mercy to His people? For God to bring justice to the Earth? For God to save sinners? For the suffering? Or only for yourself?

### The third seal

[read v5b] This time John saw a “**Black horse**” – being symbolic, the colour black isn’t hard to figure out, given that black was the colour of mourning and gloom even in the ancient world. (Our thoughts might jump to the idea of death, but that’s for the next horse in verse 8.) In the Hebrew OT, the word for “mourner” (e.g., in Mal3:14) comes from the word for black.<sup>iii</sup> So now as we try and match these symbols with the period of time they predict, we’re looking for an era of loss, mourning, or gloom. Then John saw “**a pair of scales**”. Scales like this are obviously connected with doing business by weighing out goods and coins, but they mean more than just that. In Daniel 5:27, for example, Daniel tells the king that his life was weighed in the balance and found wanting, so he was being judged for cheating God. In Job 3:16, Job asks God to weigh his life in a fair and just balance. So scales are also symbols of justice, from the idea of fair prices. What this predicts is made clearer by what John writes next. [read v6] The **voice** calls out (*continually* according to the Greek grammar), from **the midst of the four living creatures**. The voice doesn’t belong to the living creatures but seems to come from *where they are*.<sup>iv</sup> Now, as I’ve explained before, since these four living creatures stand for ministers of Christ’s churches, *where exactly could this be?* Well, Jesus told his followers to “go into all the world” (Mk 16:15), and that we are “the light of the world” (Mat 5:14); Paul said that we live in the midst of a “twisted generation” and “shine as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15); and Peter writes, “keep your conduct among the nations honorable” (1 Pe 2:12). Christians are scattered among the people of the world. The voice coming from among the pastors of the churches seems to stand for the general population—not just of unbelievers but including members of local churches as well. Among the people with whom pastors work, where they live. That’s why the voice *doesn’t belong to the living creatures but seems to come from where they are*. Which means that the things predicted affected the lives of non-Christians and Christians alike. Christians should share the blessing we receive with the people living around us, just as we also share in the sufferings our neighbours and co-workers and fellow-citizens experience. *How should this reality affect the way we pray?* Do you pray for your neighbours?

The voice is **saying** or **calling** for a consistent, although very inflated price for wheat (**a quart of wheat for a day’s wages!**), and **3 quarts of barley** for the same price (which was usually about a third the price of wheat).<sup>v</sup> People would be mourning living conditions in the Roman Empire, but ordinary people

would want fair prices for basic staples like wheat and barley--suggesting that unfair prices due to severe inflation was making life hard. **Oil and wine** were also, like wheat and barley, normal staple foods in Roman culture.<sup>vi</sup> The part about the oil and the wine gets clearer when we realize the word translated "harm" in the ESV, comes from the word, "injustice" and could mean "don't be unfair".<sup>vii</sup> So it makes better sense in ordinary English to read this as the cries of believers and unbelievers alike for economic justice, saying something like, "*because of inflation, at least set a consistent price for grain, and don't be unfair with the oil and wine!*" Taken together, the black horse, the *scales of injustice*, and a voice calling out, suggest an era of economic hardship affecting basic food staples, leading ordinary people, including Christians, to suffer together under unfair prices and even unjust economic policies that drive the population to speak out against the government. The succession of horses, one after another—white, red, black--means that these conditions described by the horses are in order, but not necessarily that one ends when the next starts (they could overlap for example). And so, following last week's sermon, we should expect to find, in the years during or after the civil wars and military overthrows of the Roman government in the third century, a period of economic inflation and unjust policies.

In fact, that's what we find in history. During the era Wikipedia calls "The Crisis of the Third Century", the "Empire nearly collapsed".<sup>viii</sup> From about the year AD 212, taxes soared, and bad government policies made things worse. Emperor Caraculla decreed that taxes must now be paid by all Roman Citizens, and no longer just by the upper class. Then he made all free people into automatic Roman citizens, a backhanded gift that oppressed everybody with the burden of unfair taxes.<sup>ix</sup> Ordinary people cried out for fair policies to the deaf ears of bad governments. A famous historian of the Roman economy, named Guglielmo Ferrero, said that this economic crisis in the third century erased the upper and middle class of the Roman population, so that, "The Empire sank back internally into barbarism..."<sup>x</sup> Ironically, the hypocritical symbol of the government tax collectors was (you guessed it) a set of scales--still found on coins from that era.<sup>xi</sup> The people longed for fair prices, but it was the government that cheated the people. Another historian wrote that government bureaucracy sped the collapse of civilization by "destroying local self-government and hastening the process of civil decay".<sup>xii</sup> It's a pretty amazing fulfillment of this seal, that during the policies of Emperor Alexander Severus, taking account of the various factors, the price of staples quoted in this prophecy really were, for the first time, about a day's wage for a quart of wheat or for three quarts of barley!<sup>xiii</sup> This period of economic collapse was the result of so much civil war, and sped up the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

### The fourth seal

[read v7] Finally, Christ opens the fourth seal of the scroll He received from God, and Christian ministers pray for Jesus to impose His rule on the Roman Empire. [read v8] And John saw "**a pale horse**". I said earlier that the colours of the horses graphically picture conditions in the Roman Empire starting with a time of success and prosperity, but then getting worse and worse. The colour of the fourth horse, a sickly green,<sup>xiv</sup> announces **Death**. In fact the rider of the fourth horse is named Death (v8), and **Hades**, or the Romans' idea of Hell, follows Death wherever he rides. This picture implies that for the people of Rome as they saw Death all around them, it was a warning that Hell was next. If they didn't turn from their sins, to the living God now, after all this it would be too late. "**A fourth of the Earth**", again, is about the land of the Roman Empire, or the population living in that land.<sup>xv</sup> **Authority to kill** means that even though many of these deaths were of natural causes, they were ultimately *authorized* by Christ the Lamb, imposing His sovereign rule on the Empire that had for so long been persecuting, torturing, and killing Christians. These ways of dying listed here--sword, famine, disease, and wild animals—are familiar

Old Testament punishments for rejecting God (c.f. Lev 26).<sup>xvi</sup> The Gospel of Jesus had spread throughout the Empire, from the lowest slave to Caesar, but they didn't listen. Then Jesus sent the first three horsemen, and still they didn't listen, but continued rejecting the Lamb of God, and began systematically killing His followers. So history shows what the prophecy predicted: disease followed the sword (as it usually does), and where cities and towns were depopulated, survivors were left vulnerable to wild animals. But instead of repenting, the Roman government blamed Christians for their troubles.

Death in the form of bloodshed, famine, pestilence, and ravaging wild animals tormented the Roman Empire from about AD 248-270.<sup>xvii</sup> Historians note that in the year 249, the emperor Decius, shaken by enemies on the borders and the "serious economic crisis",<sup>xviii</sup> officially blamed all this on the people who no longer worshiped the old Roman gods. A historian named Gonzalez said that in the eyes of the government, "Those who refused [like Christians] to worship the gods were practically guilty of high treason" because "the survival of Rome" was at stake.<sup>xix</sup> For most of the second half of the third century, conditions were catastrophic. Gibbon estimates 5,000 people died every day in the city of Rome alone.<sup>xx</sup> Another historian quotes that brave pastor, Cyprian, graphically confirming, "behold, the roads closed by brigands, the sea blocked by pirates, the bloodshed and horror of universal strife. The world drips with mutual slaughter, and murder...", and then the historian comments, "Famine and plague rode side by side with Rome's enemies..." (it's like he had the fourth horseman in mind!) "...The scourge of epidemic disease raged for fifteen years, decimating whole regions and undermining the Empire's already weakened powers..."<sup>xxi</sup> No statistics survive to prove that 25% of the whole Roman Empire perished, but many historians accept those numbers are realistic.<sup>xxii</sup> And the Roman emperors, instead of turning from their sins, turned on the saints. Brave pastor Cyprian declared to his local Roman governor, "that wars continue frequently... that death and famine accumulate anxiety, that health is shattered by raging diseases, that the human race is wasted by the desolation of pestilence, know that this was foretold...these things happen not, ...because your gods are not worshipped by us, but because God is not worshipped by you."<sup>xxiii</sup>

When Cyprian was put on trial and sentenced to be executed for treason, history bears this witness: "His only answer was 'Thanks be to God!' The execution was carried out at once ...He removed his garments without assistance, knelt down, and prayed. After he blindfolded himself, he was beheaded by the sword." We must not hope in courts of law or in government; we must hope in the name of the LORD our God. If you will not pray for mercy, and worship the Lamb in times of peace and prosperity, will you turn and repent when the suffering comes? As Cyprian preached 1760 years ago, if you will not hear the Word of the Lord now, all that remains is the judgement dreadfully foreshadowed as the symbol of Hades following after the rider called Death—what the Bible calls "Hell". But we have heard the Word of the Lord, and by His grace we trust in the name of the LORD our God. And we will rejoice and hope and pray, in safety or in suffering, and with Pastor Cyprian, we will remember that the Lamb is still on the throne; that God is still good; that Jesus still saves, and we will say, "Thanks be to God."

<sup>i</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1; 2<sup>nd</sup> printing (Prince Press, 2001), p. 98.

<sup>ii</sup> Cyprian, Treatise V, "An address to Dementrianus". In Philip Schaff, *Early Church Fathers*, ANF05. BibleWorks Edition.

<sup>iii</sup> Brown Driver Briggs Lexicon, #8433, 8434

<sup>iv</sup> Many take this to be the location of God's throne, but that is based on an assumption that in Rev 4:6, just because the living creatures are "around the throne", they are therefore *immediately* around the throne, i.e., in the innermost circle. But in 4:4, the 24 elders are described as sitting on their own thrones "around the throne".

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The picture is of concentric arrangements of symbols: the throne, the elders, the torches and laver, and then the four living creatures. The pattern corresponds to the place and orientation of the Camp of Israel around the Tabernacle: the Holy of Holies for the throne; the torches and laver; the Levites camped around the Tabernacle, and the four flag-carrying tribes of Judah, Reuben, Ephraim, and Dan each with a quarter of the tribes of Israel, arranged under their flags on the four sides of the Tabernacle, c.f. Numbers 2 (and the diagram in the ESV Study Bible, Crossway Books, p. 267). If the voice was from the middle of the four living creatures, therefore, it could be from the 24 elders, or from the torches, or from the throne. In this case, it seems more appropriate to understand this as a reference to the tribes of the people gathered under their four flag-bearers, symbolizing Christians living among the general population of the Roman Empire. (I've argued that the flag-bearers correspond to ministers of the Word in Christ's Church, and therefore that the four living creatures stand for preachers and teachers [c.f. Matthew Henry on Revelation 4:6].)

<sup>v</sup> Collins, p. 134

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid., pp134-135

<sup>vii</sup> Friberg, #459-462

<sup>viii</sup> Wikipedia, "Crisis of the Third Century" [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crisis\\_of\\_the\\_Third\\_Century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crisis_of_the_Third_Century)]. Accessed June 16, 2018.

<sup>ix</sup> Collins, pp. 136-137.

<sup>x</sup> cited in Collins, p. 137

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Solomon Katz, quoted in a review by R.L.P. Milburn, Worcester College, Oxford: "The Decline of Rome and Rise of Medieval Europe. By Solmon Katz." *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. Google Books. [<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-ecclesiastical-history/article/decline-of-rome-and-the-rise-of-mediaeval-europe-by-solomon-katz-pp-ix-164-2-maps-ithaca-new-york-cornell-university-press-london-geoffrey-cumberlege-1955-10s/22D6A9BF0C59108AEA8C13830B1E806B>]. Accessed June 15, 2018.

<sup>xiii</sup> Collins, p. 139 and fn #33

<sup>xiv</sup> Friberg's Lexicon, #28653.

<sup>xv</sup> But as "land" does not die, and neither does "the earth" worship like in Rev 13:12, I agree with Dr. Robert Mounce, in his commentary on Revelation, that this refers to a fourth of the population; ["This expression does not indicate a geographical area but sets forth in a quantitative sense the limitations placed upon their murderous activity. They bring about the death of one-fourth of humankind." Mounce, Robert H.. *The Book of Revelation (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (p. 145). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition. ]

<sup>xvi</sup> See Collins, p. 140.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid, p. 141. Collins quotes Gibbon here to illustrate: "During that calamitous period every instant of time was marked, every province of the Roman world was afflicted, by barbarous invaders and military tyrants, and the ruined empire seemed to approach the last and fatal moment of its dissolution." And goes on to quote Gibbon regarding wars, famine, and pestilence.

<sup>xviii</sup> Gonzalez, p. 86.

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xx</sup> Gibbon, Edward, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Harper and Bros.), 1.329; cited in Collins, p. 141.

<sup>xxi</sup> Solomon Katz, *The decline of Rome* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1955), 32-33. Cited in Collins, p. 141.

<sup>xxii</sup> Collins, p. 141.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Cyprian, Treatise V.