

# **THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE**

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The world and our community are fast losing the knowledge of the true character of God. The Apostle John wrote, "God is love" (1 John 3:4). Oftentimes their perception of God is conditioned by what they hear and see from Christians in the community. They hear that God hates gays. They see hates crimes by supposed "Christians". They hear preachers talk about sinners whom God will fry in hell. They get the idea that God is vengeful. If someone makes a choice against God, He is out to hunt them down and persecute them unmercifully.

Christians do many good things in our community. They are often the first-responders in times of disaster. They feed the poor and care for the homeless. When fires burn people out of their homes, Christians are there to help. There are Christian counseling services to help people in times of emotional and psychological crises.

Yet, there are these mixed messages about who God is, that the unchurched get from Christians. It's not a consistent proclamation in word and deed of the great heart of God who is the greatest giver and lover in all the universe. What does the Bible have to say about the origin of this problem that even Christians do not properly understand the character of God?

Satan has sought to distort the character of God from the very beginning. Jesus said of the devil, "He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it" (John 8:44). He told lies about God. God is a tyrant. God is seeking revenge upon sinners. He will destroy you if you are not good and obey Him.

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse give a general picture of the advancement of the Christian church. The Gospel is about the good news that God loves sinners and His Son, Jesus Christ, literally paid the price of giving up His relationship with the Father in order to be annihilated in order to give them eternal life. From Pentecost and onward down to the beginning of the 1260 years we see portrayed the decline of the pure proclamation of the true Gospel.

"And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth

conquering, and to conquer.” Revelation 6:2. It is at Pentecost that Christ is installed on the throne of the universe (Rev. 5) and all authority is placed in His hands. What is ratified in heaven at the enthronement of the Lamb is now actuated in the experience of His people in the course of human history. Christ’s victorious death on the cross and His triumphal exaltation on the heavenly throne made the coming of the Holy Spirit possible (John 7:39). With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the proclamation of the gospel is propelled into motion. It is then that Christ “went forth overcoming and that he might overcome.” Through the Holy Spirit and through the preaching of the gospel by His faithful people, Christ begins the expansion of His kingdom by conquering and winning human hearts for himself and bringing the gospel into their lives.

Like a brilliant star shining in a dark sky, the story of the early church thrills hearts in all ages. The Good News triumphed everywhere. Hard, proud, world-loving hearts were subdued by its power. There was no need to urge the believers to work for their friends and neighbors. The love of Christ constrained them. They would not resist. Each saw in his brother a reflection of the beauty of Christ. Hearts were bound together as with a golden chain.

What is recorded by John the Revelator of Jesus’ evaluation regarding the church in Ephesus is true of today’s church: “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love” (Rev. 2:4). Gradually there came a change. Many lost that first love. They began to forget what it cost the Lord to save them. Mist and clouds covered the cross, obscuring its radiance. The church lost the very idea of what Christ’s love means. Then soon followed the loss of the seventh day Sabbath, which is the seal of God’s covenant of love in the heart of His ten commandments.

We read of the church’s decline: “And when He had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.” Revelation 6:3, 4. As the conquest of the gospel of Christ spreads throughout the world, those who accept the gospel receive great blessing and peace. However, resistance to the gospel results in a loss of peace. The preaching of the gospel always divides people. The sword represents opposition and division. Resistance to the gospel causes them to persecute one another and “hate one another” (Matt. 24:10).

Love had been the power of the gospel. One day I was driving down the freeway in a pickup truck with the family in it and suddenly the engine quit and the drive shaft dropped to the pavement. A complete loss of power. Just as an engine sputters and dies when the fuel is gone, so the soul-saving ministry of the early believers stopped when they left their first love. The church began its fights over various doctrines such as salvation, the Trinity, and baptism. Stronger bishops persecuted weaker ones. Some were put to death by the church councils.

Then hunger and thirst for the true spiritual bread and living water was rewarded by spiritual famine. "And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand." Revelation 6:5.

The living being with a face like a man calls on a third black horse whose rider holds a balance indicating famine conditions. This black horse is the opposite of the white horse. Darkness indicates the absence of the pure gospel. There is a shortage of food.

"And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine." Revelation 6:6.

The wheat and barley symbolize God's word, Jesus Christ. Amos 8:11-13. The church of the Christian era has now retrograded to such an extent that it little understands God's gift of salvation in Christ. The scarcity of true faith is apparent. Salvation by works prevails. Old covenant religion of legalism predominates. The motivations of fear of hell and hope of reward have obscured the love of God.

Instead of being a source of life and blessing to the inhabitants of the earth, the church now generates hatred, wars and slaughter. "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth." Revelation 6:8.

When the gospel of Jesus Christ is rejected the wages of sin is death. Death and the grave are given power over the fourth part of the earth. Not only did the church of the West consolidate power and deny freedom of choice in worship to its own, but it began its relentless campaign to destroy Islam and recover Jerusalem from the

hands of the Arabs. Holy war after holy war was fought until Christianity was viewed as the religion of vengeance, hate, and bloodshed. No wonder that God's name got such a bad reputation among the heathen of the world.

The riders on the four horses depict the experience of the church during the first thousand years of the Christian era. In the initial stage of the Christian church, which was characterized by general faithfulness, through the preaching of Paul and the apostles, the spreading of the gospel was victorious and triumphant. This period was followed by a progressive spiritual decline leading to the period of the famine for God's word and resulting in spiritual death that characterized the Christian church throughout the Medieval period. It was the period of spiritual decline and persecution when genuine faith was lost and the loving gospel message was resisted, forgotten, and gradually replaced by tradition.

But God has always had a true church that preserved some of the pure gospel in order to represent Himself rightly on the earth. We read of her in Revelation 12:1. "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." Such a glorious sight she is. All through the Bible, a lovely woman is a symbol of God's church. "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25). The "moon under her feet" is aptly a picture of the old Jewish era passing away as the Christian church arises in glory clothed with the sun. The Mosaic ordinances reflected the light of the gospel as the moon reflects the light of the sun. The "garland of twelve stars" is the ministry of the twelve apostles who pioneered the establishment of the early Christian church.

It was from the midst of God's true believing people that the prophecies of the coming Messiah were fulfilled. Every true and faithful mother in Israel who read her Bible longed to open their home in welcome to the Son of God. And so it was that out of the church of the Old Testament Jesus was born. "And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne" (Revelation 12:5). Here is an obvious reference to Jesus.

It was Jesus who brought the true knowledge of His Father's love to this earth and He gave it to His disciples. "And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you

must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:34, 35, GNB).

When this word was finally proclaimed by Jesus’ followers and people understood what it meant, they felt forced to *do* something about it. No one could sit on the fence and be neutral. That word was *agape*, which is usually translated as “love.” But it meant far more than what we think of as love. It packed a force that was like dynamite. Either the hearers opened their hearts to welcome what it meant, or they closed their hearts against it. If they opened their hearts to receive this *agape*, their lives were transformed, even to the point where they were willing to die for it. If they closed their hearts against it, they became transformed into bitter enemies of those who believed it. Thus this one word catalyzed humanity, and people lined up on one side or the other.

What other word has so shaken humanity? Jesus brought something new to the world. It was an idea whose time had come, and no one could set the clock back. “If you have *agape* for one another,” He said, “then everyone will know that you are my disciples.” The strange power was wrapped up within it. Even today that word inspires people everywhere when they come to understand its meaning. It still turns people’s lives upside down.

And now Jesus is caught up to His Father in heaven and His woman, the church, is left on this earth to proclaim and live the *agape* which He imparted to them.

The mainline apostate church had no appreciation for God’s true love represented by His faithful witnesses on earth and so the woman was driven “underground.” “And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days” (Revelation 12:6). For 1260 years the true church of Christ was forced to “flee” into the “wilderness” for refuge. This span of time was from 538 A.D. to 1798 A.D. From all parts of Europe, persecuted people came to seek this refuge among the mountains of northern Italy and southern France. Some of them were known as Waldenses. Their homes and churches can still be seen in their valleys walled in by the mighty snow-crowned mountains that kept out the invaders who time and again would have destroyed them were it not for the protecting hand of God.

Some of these were able to preserve the Scriptures handwritten. They were hunted down and persecuted by the

dragoons of the Inquisitors. However, “they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Revelation 12:11). The secret of their victory was they saw something in the death of Jesus that others missed. They had an appreciation for the death of Christ upon the cross for their sins. They realized that if Jesus had not died for them they would be dead as sinners. As they looked to the cross and pointed others to the cross, they lost all fear of death, for such love of Jesus transformed their personal sense of security into the *agape* of God. Such love has not fear. They served God not out of hope of reward nor fear of hell, but they were constrained by the love of Jesus, their Saviour.

Now we are given to understand the source of all these earthly carnage. “And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child” (Revelation 12:13). The dragon is the devil or Satan. When he was unsuccessful in destroying Jesus by crucifixion, he sought to avenge himself on the one whom Jesus loves the most, His woman, the true church.

But Jesus has always provided miraculous help to preserve His loved ones and the message that they proclaim and represent on earth in His behalf. “And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent” (Revelation 12:16). The loyal ones were given the swiftness of an eagle in order to escape. Like Elijah who fled the presence of Ahab in the Old Testament, the true church was given nourishment to sustain them for long periods of time. Elijah was fed by the ravens. God provided supernatural bread to feed and strengthen His people.

The “time, times, and half a time” is the Bible way of saying three years and a half. Counting twelve months to a year, this is the same total of 42 months (Rev. 13:5). Counting thirty days to a month, 42 months is 1260 days, the same period of time we found in Rev. 12:6. This is the same time period which began in A. D. 538 and ended in A. D. 1798.

“And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood” (Revelation 12:15). Armies march against God’s people during those dark years of persecution. Furthermore, cleverly invented false

doctrines having their origins with Satan, deceived many hearts. There was a smothering of the pure love of God.

Salvation was taught to come through and ministered only by the priesthood of the dominate church. God's grace came in the sacraments. Sins were forgiven through hard works of penance.

"And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth" (Revelation 12:16). The persecuted church was saved from destruction. The armies of her enemies were turned back. The false doctrines were overcome by truth proclaimed by men of God.

Except among the Waldenses, the Word of God had for ages been locked up in languages known only to the learned; but the time had come for the Scriptures to be translated, and given to the people of different lands in their native tongue. The world had passed its midnight. The hours of darkness were wearing away, and in many lands appeared tokens of the coming dawn.

In the fourteenth century arose in England the "morning-star of the Reformation." John Wycliffe was the herald of reform, not for England alone, but for all Christendom. The great protest against Rome which it was permitted him to utter, was never to be silenced. He preached the gospel to the poor.

John Huss and Jerome of Bohemia started a flourishing reform based on the Holy Scriptures as they proclaimed the gospel of Jesus. The church of Rome was not pleased and at its instigation they were burned at the stake.

In the sixteenth century Martin Luther, a Catholic monk of Germany, agonized over his salvation. He studied the word of God and discovered some of the rays of God's love in the forgiveness of his sins by faith alone in Jesus' blood. God used Luther and his associates to spark the Protestant Reformation the likes of which had not been seen for centuries since Pentecost. The protest was against Rome and its lock on the minds and hearts which froze out true religious freedom.

The Reformation produced a number of different breakaway groups from the Roman Church: the Lutherans, the Calvinist Reformed, the followers of Zwingli. Each group made its own unique contribution to the overall understanding of Bible truth, but not any one nor all of them combined captured the whole picture of the plan of salvation.

Whereas many of these mainline Protestant groups tended to

be just as intolerant of other protesting groups as was the Roman Church, the Anabaptists remained more true Bible principles of religious liberty. In addition to holding the Bible as the sum of revealed truth, excluding the traditions of the church, they taught that the forgiveness of sins was by faith in Jesus. Every believer was a priest who could come to Jesus the High Priest and obtain assurance of salvation. This was symbolized by immersion baptism represented by what Paul expressed in his words, "I am crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20). The Radical Reformation of the Baptists and Mennonites was a more pure expression of the sixteenth century Reformation.

Some of the pure sunlight truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ's love was breaking through the mists and lighting the hearts of believers. The accusations of the Romanists was that the Reformation was divisive of Christianity—that they were the true uniters of believers. The common person could not understand the Bible. Therefore, they needed an interpreter of the Scriptures. Since Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Melancthon, and a myriad of others were now interpreting the Bible it was leading to confusion in Christendom. The Pope was the only infallible interpret of the Scriptures as he was the vicar of Christ.

The love of God was not fully recovered by the Reformation, only partially. Luther's idea was love God and do as you please which was a virtual denial of ten commandments, the great principles of God's *agape* love.

John Calvin perpetuated the Augustinian error of eternal predestination, some to eternal life and others to eternal damnation in the fires of hell. This did nothing to restore the character of God's love if He could arbitrarily assign, with all due prejudice, some to destruction regardless of their own choice. Furthermore, the elect could know that once they were saved it mattered little how they lived for God had predestined them to eternal life from eternity. So this doctrine of election virtually did away with the ten commandments and the necessity to keep them.

James Arminius sensed the harshness of Calvinism and theorized that God made a provision for all to be saved by Jesus' death on the cross. Arminius said only when one does something by believing in Jesus' offer of salvation is he then adopted into the family of God. In other words, if you do something right and are smart enough to believe, then you will be saved.



During the eighteen century, John Wesley came on the scene when the Church of England had become so ritualized that it was little different than Roman Catholicism. Religion was a joke among the populace and had little influence among the common man of the newly industrialized society.

Wesley and his associates were gripped by the possibilities of the gospel in overcoming all sin in the life. They saw that “the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom. 1:16). They did not limit the gospel to just wiping the record of sin away from the books, but Jesus’ blood delivered the believing individual from the power of sin and imparted the restoration of a sinless character.

Wesley, however, did not understand how this might be accomplished. He did not see its true relationship to the second coming of Jesus. Nevertheless, he yearned for sinless living in sinful flesh.

It was to be left to a future prophetic event for the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to dawn upon the world. Because of the receptivity of Christian hearts, prophecy foresaw that men would not be able to fully comprehend all the light of God’s shining love until the prophetic time clock struck, “the time of the end.”

There are sincere people who say that God does not have one true church today, that all churches are just different paths to the same God. They all teach pretty much the same thing. It doesn’t really matter what one believes just so long as you are sincere. But the Bible says that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,” and “one body” which is “the church” (Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 28). Every true follower of Jesus is seeking to find that true church of which Jesus Himself is the Head. You do not want to miss our next time together: “How to Survive Armageddon.”

“God is love” (1 John 4:8). *Agape* is the most powerful force in all of the world. God is the greatest Giver in all of the universe. The world, once again, will be turned upside-down, as it was in the days of the early Christian church. It will be a deeper appreciation of the love God as revealed in the cross of Jesus that will do it.