

The Four Horsemen (Part Four): The Black Horse

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**"When He opened the third seal,
I heard the third living creature say,
'Come and see.'
And 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.'"
—*Revelation 6:5-6***

Oppression has been a constant factor in human history. The strong have almost always taken advantage of the weak, the poor, and the isolated—and for many different reasons. Whether because of sheer corruption of power or greedy manipulation for personal gain, powerful men and women have made the lives of ordinary, powerless people miserable. If questioned about it, many of the former would simply say with a shrug, "That's the way the world works."

Oppression is part of a cycle of turmoil and strife endemic to humanity. Usually, this cycle begins with a period of justice and relative freedom enjoyed by a majority of a populace. It is soon marred, however, by increasing government intrusion into the personal affairs of the citizenry, oftentimes in the form of rising taxes and severe regulation or restriction of employment, trade, speech, movement, and association. This situation creates a powerful, elite group of rulers who inevitably amass and hoard much of the nation's wealth, leaving pitifully little to be distributed to the squalid masses.

How long this state of affairs exists depends on the character of the people, but usually the result is rebellion and the overthrow of the oligarchy. The victors, promising a new constitution guaranteeing all the freedoms that the old regime had stolen from them, set up a new government. They proclaim, "A new day has dawned! Justice and equity will prevail! Our Golden Age lies ahead!"

Yet, the wheel continues to turn. Before long, the new rulers become the new oppressors. Another generation of average Joes and Janes feels the bite of tyranny.

A primary means of repression throughout history has been economic in nature. If a person or a group can be kept at the subsistence level—that is, financially able to afford only the bare necessities of life—he or it can be controlled. For instance, a man who must work from sunup to sundown to make enough to feed himself and his family does not have time to further his education, start a business, travel to see how others live, or collude with neighbors to rebel against his rulers. Essentially, such a person is a slave, a serf, a pauper, and those in authority have little trouble holding his nose to the grindstone day after day after day. Either he plods on, or he and his dependents starve.

Westerners usually think of famine in terms of mass starvation in remote, Third World countries. In our mind's eye, we see stick-thin, little children with distended bellies and bones clearly visible under their skin, flies buzzing around their gaunt, staring faces. We imagine interminable lines of such people, bowl or cup in hand, waiting to receive their daily ration of grain or milk. Others we envision lying in the dirt without the strength even to walk.

But there is another kind of famine, not as severe but ultimately just as calamitous. It is the famine of protracted undernourishment, one that weakens the body, making it sickly and short-lived, and crushes the spirit, causing hopelessness and apathy. Jeremiah writes in Lamentations 4:9, "Those slain by the sword are better off than those who die of hunger; for these pine away, stricken for lack of the fruits of the field."

It is such a long-term hunger that appears in Revelation 6:5-6. No matter if it is the result of war, oppression, drought, or flooding, famine is a terrible scourge, and sadly, has claimed millions of lives over the centuries. This is the work of the third horseman, the rider of the black horse.

Symbols of Scarcity

The apostle John's description of this third horse and horseman is once again spare, as he provides us only two pertinent details: the black color of the horse and the rider's pair of scales. Both of these details, though, point to an overall interpretation of famine, which verse 8 verifies by saying this rider has power to kill "with hunger." In the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus also names this seal as "famine" (Matthew 24:7).

We moderns tend to consider black to be the opposite of white, so to us, black is the color of evil, personified in the almost totally black costume of Darth Vader in *Star Wars*. The ancients made no such symbolic contrast (but see Matthew 5:36), although they did see symbolic opposites in darkness and light. Biblically, black is not the color of sin but simply an object's true color. *Black*, *blackness*, and *blacker* are found 23 times in the Bible, describing the sky, hair, cloth, marble, skin, night, ravens, cumin, and horses. In each occurrence, *blackness* appears to be a synonym for "darkness."

This does not mean, however, that the color black holds no symbolic meaning. It certainly has overtones of foreboding. Specifically, the Israelites used black to signify the mournful and unhealthy mien of those enduring scarcity, want, and famine, particularly as a judgment from God. Notice:

» **Jeremiah 14:2:** Judah mourns, and her gates languish; they mourn [literally, *are black*] for the land, and the cry of Jerusalem has gone up.

» **Lamentations 5:10:** Our skin is hot [literally, *black*] as an oven, because of the fever of famine.

» **Joel 2:6:** Before them the people writhe in pain; all faces are drained of color [literally, *gather blackness*].

» **Nahum 2:10:** She is empty, desolate, and waste! The heart melts, and the knees shake; much pain is in every side, and all their faces are drained of color [literally, *gather blackness*].

To a Hebrew, the black horse of the third seal would picture the illness and dearth of a famine, specifically the dirt and squalor of those who had nothing.

"Pair of scales" translates the Greek word *zugón*, which literally means "yoke," as in a yoke of oxen or the yoke of bondage. The beam of a balance, which resembles a yoke's crossbeam, joins or couples the two pans just as a yoke joins the oxen. Just as it is better if the yoked oxen are evenly matched, so the purpose of the balance is to determine that the contents of the two pans are equal.

Today, we have little experience with pairs of scales or balances, yet until recently, they were the commonly used means of weighing substances. Perhaps we are familiar with a pair of scales from its use in a Western movie to determine the weight of a gold nugget. In addition, most of us are aware that a balance is an international symbol of justice, depicting the supposed equality of all before the law. Elements of both of these common uses appear in the third horseman.

In ancient times, the value or quantity of a thing was determined by weighing it on scales. In fact, people bought and sold items by weight or measure rather than by our currency-based system. For instance, the shekel was not originally a unit of money but of weight according to which the price and quantity of things were determined. As such, scales were common marketplace items, and God demanded they be used justly (Leviticus 19:36; Proverbs 11:1; 16:11; Amos 8:4-10; Matthew 7:2).

Interestingly, because scales are easily manipulated, they can also be a symbol of fraudulent exaction and oppression, as Hosea 12:7 illustrates: "A cunning Canaanite [or *merchant*, referring to Ephraim, which stands for all Israel]! Deceitful scales are in his hand; he loves to oppress." Micah concurs: "Shall I count pure those with the wicked balances, and with the bag of deceitful weights? For her rich men are full of violence, her inhabitants have spoken lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth" (Micah 6:11-12).

When mentioned in terms of foodstuffs, particularly bread, scales become a symbol of scarcity because, normally, bread would be sold by the loaf without much concern for exact weight. However, during a famine when each ounce of flour was valuable, flour would be rationed by weight or measure, and neither buyer or seller would want to be cheated. Notice God's prophetic warning in Leviticus 26:26: "When I have cut off your supply of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in one oven, and they shall bring back to you your bread by weight, and you shall eat and not be satisfied." The prophet Ezekiel also mentions rationing by weight as a judgment from God:

And your food which you eat shall be by weight, twenty shekels a day; from time to time you shall eat it. . . . Son of man, surely I will cut off the supply of bread in Jerusalem; they shall eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and shall drink water by measure and with dread. (Ezekiel 4:10, 16)

God is often depicted in the Old Testament as holding scales. For example, Hannah prays, "For the Lord is the God of knowledge; and by Him actions are weighed" (I Samuel 2:3). Solomon declares, "The Lord weighs the spirits," or the motives and attitudes of people (Proverbs 16:2). Job cries, "Let me be weighed [margin, *Let Him weigh me*] in a just balance, that God may know my integrity" (Job 31:6). Perhaps the best known use of the scales in this sense appears in Daniel 5:25, where God tells Belshazzar through Daniel's interpretation, "You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting."

It is certainly possible that God wants us to understand all these seemingly disparate meanings in the third horseman. His lethal power is a terrible, divine judgment on mankind for its violent oppression and greed, and it takes the form of famine and wasting through malnutrition.

Wheat, Barley, Oil, and Wine

After describing the black horse and its rider, John hears "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'" (Revelation 6:6). Among the Four Horseman, this is an unusual departure; nothing else is said to or about them save in this verse. Being so set apart, the words are doubly significant.

Who speaks these words? John simply says "a voice." Literally, the Greek is "like a voice," which can be stated as "what seemed to be a voice." The only clue we have is that it comes from "in the midst of the four living creatures." Revelation 4:6 provides the answer: "And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures. . . ." (see Ezekiel 1:4-28). The language suggests that the creatures were situated around the throne, one creature in the middle of each of the four sides. The voice coming from the midst of these creatures must have come from the one sitting on the throne! God Himself utters these words!

What He says is a common marketplace call of a merchant shouting out the price of his wares. He is setting relative values for both wheat and barley, with wheat being three times as valuable as barley. However, His price is highly inflated! The "quart" here is *choenix* in Greek, which is roughly equivalent to our quart, the amount of grain that a normal man needs each day to survive. In ancient times, though, a denarius would buy eight to ten quarts of wheat, not one! Obviously, these are disaster prices.

The "denarius" was equal to an ordinary worker's daily wage, as Jesus illustrates in His Parable of the Laborers (Matthew 20:1-16). These prices, then, give a person an unenviable choice. If he is single, he can buy the more expensive, more nutritious wheat, yet have nothing left over, or he can buy the cheaper, less nutritious barley and save the remainder for the next day or so. However, if he is married and has children, he can choose only the barley because he needs more than one quart of grain for his family's subsistence. None of these choices really allows the person either to get ahead or to stay healthy, especially if he has dependents.

God also commands, "Do not harm the oil and the wine," which is a puzzler to scholars. To whom is God speaking—to the horseman or to people in general? It seems to be directed at the horseman, as he is the direct cause of the scarcity. Thus, the staff of life will be in such short supply as to need to be rationed or sold at extortionate prices, but oil and wine will be relatively untouched. Why?

Many commentators consider oil and wine to be luxury items, but this is false. In ancient times, olive oil and wine were staples of the Mediterranean diet along with grain, as Deuteronomy 7:13 and 11:14 indicate (see also II Chronicles 31:5; 32:28; Nehemiah 5:11; Hosea 2:8, 22; Joel 1:10; Haggai 1:11). A person, though, cannot live on oil and wine as he can on grain, yet, as science is just now discovering, they do provide additional and necessary nutrition. These items are available during the third horseman's rampage, but the average man will not have the means to purchase them, since all his money is being spent on flour for bread!

What is God picturing then? The key is to remember that this "famine" is ongoing just as the wars and rumors of wars of the second horseman and the deceptions of the first horseman are. There are occasional lulls of plenty, but the experience of history is that most of the time, the ordinary individual is just getting by. Just as God predicted in Genesis 3:17-19, he labors and toils to eke out a miserable living only to die, worn out and broken in a few, short years. The third horseman's job is to follow his red brother's devastating wars with oppression, corruption, and scarcity so that men stay weak and poor and many die.

Disaster With a Human Face

An additional detail remains: This horseman is presented by the third living creature, identified in Revelation 4:7 as having "a face like a man." Symbolically, one could say that God puts a human face on the third seal. Conversely, it could also be seen as ironic that the living creature that looks like a man introduces such inhumanity.

The man's face may also be a reminder of man's role in these devastating judgments. They do not just happen—they are caused. Man's wars not only slay thousands or millions of men, women, and children, but they also destroy valuable farmland and demolish vital industrial, manufacturing, and merchandizing businesses. Armies have one job: to kill people and break things. Thus, bereft of both workers and a viable system of commerce, a war-torn society often experiences shortages of food, water, and other necessities. Famine is a consequence of man's inhumanity.

The same also holds true if the cause of famine is oppression and corruption. One need look no further than the Communist, state-controlled system of the USSR to realize that the regular and sometimes grievous shortages of food the common people faced derived from governmental manipulation, lies, and favoritism. If the State had a "need," the people were expected to sacrifice for it, and if that meant doing without bread, cabbage, vodka, or meat, so be it. There are many stories of former Soviet citizens weeping uncontrollably in the aisles of American supermarkets, not just because of America's plenty, but because they suddenly realized the great difference between a free society and the oppressive, corrupt Communist states. Free people eat well, while slaves—men and women controlled by other human beings—eat only enough to eke out a miserable existence.

Even the so-called natural causes of famine—drought and flooding—often have human elements. The Dust Bowl years in 1930s America prolonged the Depression and forced thousands of poor farmers off their southern plains farms, as portrayed in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. What is often forgotten is that years of poor farming practices—particularly excessive plowing of less-fertile lands, destroying the ground cover that kept the soil in place—contributed greatly to the massive wind erosion that gave the drought its name. Damage from floods also frequently has human causes, such as unwise damming of rivers, unsound levees, unwarranted building or planting in floodplains, and wholesale deforestation.

In many respects, famine is a problem humans have made for themselves. The Creation will produce abundantly for all if people follow the simple rules God has laid out for abundant living. Most important of all, of course, is to obey God's law:

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. Your threshing [a result of the spring crop] shall last till the time of vintage [the fall crop], and the vintage shall last till the time of sowing [of the spring

crop]; you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in the land safely. . . . You shall eat the old harvest, and clear out the old because of the new. (Leviticus 26:3-5, 10)

On the other hand,

But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: . . . Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. . . . And your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you shall be iron. The Lord will change the rain of your land to powder and dust; from the heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed. . . . You shall carry much seed out to the field and gather but little in. (Deuteronomy 28:15, 17, 23-24, 38)

The black horse and its rider are doing their job, cultivating and reaping the seeds sown in war and oppression: scarcity and famine. Hard on its heels comes another reaper, who sweeps up and destroys what his fellows leave behind.