

## The Four Horsemen (Part Five): The Pale Horse

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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**"When He opened the fourth seal,  
I heard the fourth living creature say,  
'Come and see.'  
And I looked, and behold, a pale horse.  
And the name of him who sat on it was Death,  
and Hades followed with him.  
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"  
— Revelation 6:7-8**

The Office of Statistics and Programming at the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, part of the Centers for Disease Control, supplies an interesting list of the ten leading causes of death in the United States. The data includes all ages and races and both sexes for the year 2001, the latest year for which such figures are available. The number beside the cause of death is how many Americans are known to have died of that particular affliction that year:

1. Heart disease (700,142)
2. Malignant neoplasms (cancerous tumors) (553,768)
3. Cerebrovascular diseases (strokes) (163,538)
4. Chronic lower respiratory diseases (bronchitis, emphysema, asthma) (123,013)
5. Unintentional injury (101,537)
6. Diabetes mellitus (71,372)
7. Influenza and pneumonia (62,034)
8. Alzheimer's Disease (53,852)
9. Nephritis (kidney disease) (39,480)
10. Septicemia (blood poisoning) (32,238)

Though the media make a great deal of noise about terrorism, accidents, murder, and suicide—all terrible tragedies—the far greater killer is disease. Only one cause of death in this top-ten list is something other than disease, *i.e.*, unintentional injury. Of the total deaths among the ten leading causes—over 1.9 million—94.66% (just under 1.8 million) are caused by disease!

In addition, most of these diseases are in many respects self-inflicted, caused by years of abuse through overeating or poor nutrition, smoking, drinking, or dealing with known carcinogens. The number-one killer, heart disease, usually occurs after years of poor diet, lack of exercise, and the fatigue and stress of everyday living. On the other hand, diseases that erupt and spread after war and famine—plague, dysentery, tuberculosis, smallpox, cholera, typhus, and the like—do not even make the list!

Other than in times of war—and sometimes even during them, as now—disease kills far more than violence or its aftermath. The pestilential plagues of today, the years leading up to Christ's return, are

cancers, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and long-term, organ-abuse diseases like heart, kidney, liver, and lung diseases. These occur by the millions in our so-called "advanced" societies with our cutting-edge medical technology, superior pharmaceuticals, and highly trained and experienced specialists and surgeons. As far as medical science has come—and frankly, at no time in man's history has it come farther—it is still a long way from solving the mystery of disease and death.

The final actor of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse bears the name of "Death" and rides on a horse the color of "deathly ghastliness," as one commentator aptly describes it. He efficiently sweeps up and disposes of what his fellows leave behind, in the final tally ending the lives of up to a quarter of the earth's population. To use a sports analogy, he is the anchor, the strongest, most lethal member, of the Fearsome Foursome relay team, and he is off and running!

## **Pestilential Symbols**

The fourth seal is introduced by the fourth living creature, identified in Revelation 4:7 as "like a flying eagle." In the United States, we think of eagles as noble and majestic creatures, sharp-eyed and sharp-taloned, fierce and swift in striking their prey, mating for life, and caring tenderly for their young. The Bible's view includes these characteristics but adds one more: They are carrion eaters.

Leviticus 11:13 refers to eagles as being forbidden to the Israelites as food: "These you shall regard as an abomination among the birds" (see also Deuteronomy 14:12). Eagles are listed first and in the company of vultures and buzzards. Proverbs 30:17 speaks of "the young eagles" eating the eye of one who mocks and scorns his parents. Perhaps the best-known biblical reference to this aspect of eagles appears in Matthew 24:28 (also Luke 17:37), in which Jesus says, "For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

The flying eagle, then, needs to be seen in both lights: as a swift and deadly hunter, spying out its prey from afar, as well as a detestable eater of putrefying flesh. The first reflects God's position as the divine and sovereign Judge on high, and the second, the grisly and dreadful effects of His judgments for sin. It is a picture of a noble and righteous God obliged by His own holiness to execute the proscribed penalty for human transgression.

Characteristically, the apostle John describes the fourth horse and rider using a paucity of verbiage: The horse is "pale," the rider's name is "Death," and "Hades" follows him. This is the extent of the biblical description, yet even so, these provide us with sufficient clues to deduce a cogent interpretation.

First, the horse's coat is a unique and otherworldly pale. The Greek word is *chlooros*, which we recognize as the origin of such English words as "chlorine," "chloroform," and "chlorophyll." It technically refers to a greenish-yellow color found in nature in the pale green of just-sprouted grass or new leaves (see Mark 6:39; Revelation 8:7; 9:4; these are *chlooros*' only other occurrences in the New Testament).

Secular Greek writers, however, did not confine *chlooros* just to sprouting plants. In *The Iliad*, Homer describes fearful men's faces with this term, suggesting a pallid, ashen color, and in other instances, it is the pale golden color of honey or the gray bark of an olive tree. Sophocles writes that it is the color of sand, while Thucydides applies it to the skin color of those suffering from plague.

It is this last description that is probably John's intended meaning; the color of the horse reminded him of the pale, greenish-gray color of a corpse or decaying flesh. The Phillips translation renders *chlooros* as "sickly green in color"; the New English and the Revised English Bibles, as "sickly pale"; the New Jerusalem Bible, as "deathly pale"; and the New Living Translation, as "pale green like a corpse." The fourth horse sports a coat only producers of horror movies would love!

Upon the back of this gruesome beast sits one whose name is "Death." This is another unique feature of this horseman, as none of the others receives a name. The Greek word is the normal word for "death," *thánatos*, suggesting on the surface a generic application of the term. However, this would be jumping to a conclusion, for the term is probably meant to be understood more specifically as "pestilence" or "disease."

The evidence for this meaning here derives primarily from the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. In several places, the Septuagint translators rendered the Hebrew word *deber*, meaning "pestilence" or "disease," as *thánatos*. For instance, in Exodus 5:3, Moses and Aaron tell Pharaoh, "Please let us go three days' journey into the desert and sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest He fall upon us with pestilence [Hebrew *deber*; Greek *thánatos*] or with the sword." This combination of translations also occurs in the fifth plague, that of the murrain or cattle disease: God tells Moses to inform Pharaoh, "There will be a very severe pestilence" (Exodus 9:3; see also verse 15). In a later instance, God warns Judah through Jeremiah, "I will send . . . pestilence among them, till they are consumed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers" (Jeremiah 24:10).

The most convincing piece of evidence for *thánatos* meaning "pestilence" in this passage comes from the mouth of our Savior in the Olivet Prophecy, as He describes the events leading up to His return. He prophesies to His disciples, "And there will be famines [third seal or horseman], pestilences [fourth seal or horseman], and earthquakes in various places" (Matthew 24:7). He does not use *thánatos* but *loimós*, which literally means "pestilence" or "disease." Once Jesus Himself weighs in, there is no argument. The pale rider brings death by disease.

### **Constant Companions**

The final descriptive item regarding the fourth seal is "Hades followed with him." Obviously, "Hades" has been left untranslated in the New King James; it is "Hell" in the Authorized Version. *Strong's Concordance* defines this simply as "the place (state) of departed souls," although this is in itself an interpretive definition. A more complete definition would include that it is a proper name of the Greek god of the lower regions, known as Pluto by the Romans, who gave his name to the realm of the dead (*Thayer's Greek Lexicon*).

However, this barely scratches the surface of the subject. *The Complete Word Study New Testament* adds, "In Homer and Hesiod the word is spelled *Ha?d?s* meaning obscure, dark, invisible," suggesting that it is a place or condition about which mortal man understands little. The same reference work mentions that it equates to the Hebrew word *Sheol*, and that in all the New Testament passages in which it occurs, Hades is associated with death (with the *possible* exceptions of Matthew 11:23 and Luke 10:15).

Cutting through all the scholarly speculation, much of which is based on either Jewish or Greek—not necessarily biblical—conceptions of *Sheol* or *Hades*, the basic idea is the grave, the place where the dead go after death. As Solomon writes so plainly, "But the dead know nothing, and they have no

more reward. . . . [F]or there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10).

Many scriptures show that God will resurrect or redeem us from the grave, not from some shadowy netherworld of spirits. For instance, the psalmist writes, "But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave" (Psalm 49:15; see 30:3), and God prophesies through Ezekiel, "Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves" (Ezekiel 37:13). Jesus Himself says, "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5: 28-29).

The Old Testament instruction, carried into the New, is that death and the grave are parallel if not synonymous ideas. Notice these passages:

- » For in *death* there is no remembrance of You; in the *grave* who will give You thanks? (Psalm 6:5)
- » Like sheep they are laid in the *grave*; *death* shall feed on them. . . . (Psalm 49:14)
- » [I am] adrift among the *dead*, like the slain who lie in the *grave*, whom You remember no more, and who are cut off from Your hand. (Psalm 88:5)
- » What man can live and not see *death*? Can he deliver his life from the power of the *grave*? (Psalm 89:48)
- » For love is as strong as *death*, jealousy as cruel as the *grave*. . . . (Song of Songs 8:6)
- » I will ransom them from the power of the *grave*; I will redeem them from *death*. O *Death*, I will be your plagues! O *Grave*, I will be your destruction! (Hosea 13:14; see I Corinthians 15:55)
- » And they made His *grave* with the wicked—but with the rich at His *death*. . . . (Isaiah 53:9)

These verses accent the common-sense truth of Revelation 6:8: "And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades [the grave] followed with him." Death, in this case by pestilence, and the grave—Hades or Sheol, the abode of the dead—are inseparable companions; where one goes the other must follow because they are essentially the same. One can argue that they are technically different—that death is the cessation of life, and the grave is the repository of a person's earthly remains—but the difference is purely semantic. In the end, they both describe a state of lifelessness and corruption, of being cut off from the living and from God.

### **Wild Beasts**

A minor controversy exists concerning the last half of verse 8: "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." The argument deals with whether this sentence applies to the fourth horseman alone or summarizes the depredations of all four. The latter seems preferable.

Jesus appears to treat the first four seals as a subgroup in His Olivet prophecy, saying of them, "All these are the beginning of sorrows" (Matthew 24:8). His intent is clear: These four judgments are a distinct set of calamities that acts as a kind of warm-up for the exceedingly more terrible judgments of the time of the end. As He warns, "See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet" (verse 6). It is entirely logical to believe that the same Revelator would likewise separate the Four Horsemen from the last three seals with a short summary of their work as well as the limits of their authority.

Another proof involves the fact that the sentence restates the missions of the red ("to kill with sword"), black ("with hunger"), and pale ("with death [as above, *thánatos*, meaning disease]") horsemen. Applying these means of destruction to the fourth horseman alone would make the other two redundant and significantly diminish their roles. In addition, lumping pestilence in with hunger, war, and beasts as activities of the fourth horseman would obscure the role of disease as a judgment of God.

Commentators argue that the plural pronoun "them" in Revelation 6:8 has "Death" and "Hades" as its antecedents. They are certainly the *closest* antecedents, but the Greek does not demand them to be the pronoun's true antecedents. Besides, the real subject of the previous sentence is not really "Death" and "Hades" but the singular "name" of the fourth horseman. If God intended it to be a summary statement of the whole passage, we can easily recognize "them" to refer to the entire subject's active characters—the Four Horsemen—the ones to whom the Lamb gave authority to execute His judgment.

A final, curious factor is the inclusion of "by the beasts of the earth" in the powers of the horsemen; it seems to come out of the blue. However, it follows naturally in the progression of catastrophes. In times of severe war, famine, and disease, depopulation occurs, which upsets the precarious balance between human civilization and wildlife. Suddenly, with hunting and developing of wilderness areas reduced or eliminated, the population of predatory creatures expands, increasing the chances of animal attacks on humans.

The Bible provides an example of this in Genesis 10:8-9. It is thought that Nimrod's rise to power over the post-Flood world began with his skills in hunting and killing predators, which had the upper hand over the miniscule human population at the time. Another example appears in Exodus 23:29, in which God promises Israel, "I will not drive [the Canaanites] out from before you in one year, lest the land become too desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you" (see also Deuteronomy 7:22; Ezekiel 34:25, 28). Incursions of lions actually killed some Samaritans after Assyria took the bulk of the Israelites into captivity (II Kings 17:25).

Wild beasts are included in the curses for disobedience of Leviticus 26: "I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children, destroy your livestock, and make you few in number; and your highways shall be desolate" (verse 22; see Deuteronomy 32:24; Jeremiah 15:3; Ezekiel 14:15). Through Ezekiel, God prophesies that disasters such as the Four Horsemen bring happen together with the scourge of wild beasts: "So I will send against you famine and wild beasts, and they will bereave you. Pestilence and blood shall pass through you, and I will bring the sword against you. I, the Lord, have spoken" (Ezekiel 5:17; see 14:21; 33:27). Though death by wild beasts is included in the text of Revelation 6:8 without warning, it fits nonetheless.

## **Reminders of God's Judgment**

It is clear that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—the first four seals—parallel Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24:4-8, which ends with the words, "All these are the beginning of sorrows." Our Savior is letting us know that deception, violence, scarcity, and disease are only preludes to the catastrophic events of the last days. We could paraphrase His remark as, "These calamities are par for the course under man's civilization—far worse is yet to come."

The progression of disasters—of false ideas leading to war, war to famine, famine to pestilence, pestilence to wild beasts—is vital to understanding the spiritual teaching underlying the Four Horsemen. Through a kind of parable, Jesus is instructing us in the principle of cause and effect. If people believe the message of the father of murder (John 8:44) rather than the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), they will eventually turn to murder and war to resolve their differences. Like the law of gravity, war causes shortages of food, producing malnutrition and opening the door to disease.

God is showing us that these sorrows trace their roots back to disobedience and rejection of Him. Mankind has built his civilization on a foundation of sand (Matthew 7:24-27), and it is no wonder that disasters ensue upon mankind with terrifying regularity. Because God is just, it cannot be otherwise. He has said, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), and "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). In addition, He has given us two sets of blessings and cursings (Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28) to provide us frightening and vivid depictions of what happens when we disobey Him. The Four Horsemen are similar warnings or reminders that He is still on His throne, judging mankind for his sins.

See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven. . . . Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:25, 28-29)