



DISCOVERING REVELATION

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

It's an incredible vision: four cryptic horsemen galloping across the sky. What does it mean? For centuries, Bible scholars understood this passage to be historical in its fulfillment—it covers the broad stretch of history from the early apostolic church to the Second Coming of Christ.

Revelation 6:2, 3 — The first horse is white, a biblical symbol for purity. (See, for example, **Isaiah 1:18**; **Psalms 51:7**.) This horse represents the early Christian church in its original purity. The first Christians, unencumbered by many of the problems that would plague the church in coming years, set out to conquer the hearts of the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. By the year 62 A.D., the Apostle Paul was able to say that the gospel had been “preached to every creature under heaven” (**Colossians 1:23**). Some have estimated that within one generation, as many as one in three people living in the Roman Empire professed some form of Christianity.

Revelation 6:4, 5 — The second horse is red, symbolic of bloodshed, persecution and destruction. The early Christian church was not at first tolerated by the pagan Roman Empire, and faced periods of severe persecution during which Rome tried to obliterate them from the face of the earth. This strategy, however, backfired. Intensified persecution only served to give the Christians greater courage. Tertullian, an early church father said, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Revelation 6:5, 6 — When persecution failed to destroy Christianity, the devil tried a new tactic. “If you can't beat them,” he mused, “then join them.” The black horse represents the period of church history during which Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Emperor after the supposed conversion of Constantine to the Christian faith. Constantine, just prior to an important battle that secured the Roman Empire under his control, allegedly received a vision that told him to conquer in the name of the cross rather than in the name of his pagan gods. He became convinced that his victory at the battle of Milvian bridge was a sign that he needed to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity. He “baptized” the empire and declared it to be Christian. Unfortunately, Christianity doesn't quite work that way. You cannot make a decision for Christ on behalf of someone else. Constantine only succeeded in Christianizing paganism. When Christianity became the favored religion of the empire, pagans joined the Christian church by the thousands without actually relinquishing their pagan beliefs. The result was disastrous for the church. The political intrigue and control of the Roman government was married to Christian beliefs, and pagan practices made their way into Christianity. The marriage of church and state eventually led to practices contrary to biblical Christianity, such as religion for profit and the persecution of non-Christians.

Revelation 6:7, 8 — The final horse is pale—the color of death. Once Christianity became popular and comfortable, it moved into a period of history in which it lost its love and fervor for the spreading of the gospel. It became ritualistic and sometimes meaningless as tradition began to replace Scripture as a

foundation for Christian practice. Perhaps most tragically, the church also began to demand strict conformity with the backing of secular governments. Christians began to persecute not only non-Christians, but also other Christians who chose to live their lives by the Bible rather than by the church's traditions.

Revelation 6:9-11— Persecution reached its apex during the Dark Ages, and here John is shown those who lost their lives for matters of conscience. As when Abel's spilled blood cried out to God, God takes note of what has happened to His people as they suffer for His sake. How much longer will it go on? Not for long. God next gives us some striking clues as to when the tribulation of the Dark Ages would end and earth would move into its final judgment hour.

Revelation 6:12-13— John gives us three major signs to watch for at the close of the Dark Ages:

1. A great earthquake. This took place right on time, when the Lisbon earthquake of November 1, 1755 arrested the attention of the whole world. It is still on record as one of the most most significant earthquakes of all time. Its effects were felt from Scandinavia in the north to Africa in the south; from Europe to the Caribbean ... and even Newfoundland!

2. The sun darkens and the moon turns to blood. The great Dark Day in 1780 shocked those who witnessed it. The sky suddenly turned black in the middle of the day, and it became so dark that animals returned home and people were forced to suspend their regular business. Many, having read of such things in Bible prophecy, feared that the day of the Lord was at hand. Those present observed that the moon was blood red the following night.

3. The stars fall from heaven. The Leonid meteor shower made its most spectacular showing in history on November 13, 1833. Contemporary astronomers compared the frequency of falling stars to that of a terrible snowstorm. As many as 200,000 falling stars *per hour* shot across the sky, creating such a terrible disturbance that by 2 a.m., people were getting out of bed to see where all the light was coming from. Even Abraham Lincoln's landlord at the time woke him up to announce the day of judgment!

These three events are significant for several reasons. First of all, **they were of an incredible magnitude** that commanded a great deal of attention. They made a very deep impression on those who saw them, even resulting in conversions. Secondly, **they took place in precisely the place where people would notice them** for what they were: over Europe and North America. It was in these places that people had begun studying Bible prophecy in earnest as the Dark Ages concluded and a new era of religious liberty was underway. Had these events taken place elsewhere, their significance would have been lost on people who had not been studying the Scriptures. Thirdly, **these events took place at the right time in exactly the order they are mentioned in Bible prophecy:** first an earthquake, then a dark day, then a blood-red moon, and finally the falling of the stars.

These events were God's way of reassuring us that history is progressing according to schedule. The next event we can expect, in the list of events given in Revelation 6, is the day of the Lord and the return of Jesus Christ. We are now living between the 13th and 14th verses of this incredible prophecy!

Revelation 6:14-17; 8:1 — Make no mistake about it: Jesus really *will* return. One day, heaven really will fall silent as Jesus returns with all of His angels (compare with **Matthew 25:31**). On that day, only one question will be important: "Who shall be able to stand?" You have a choice. Nobody has to be caught unprepared when Christ comes. You don't have to dread the day He comes back. You can be ready—you can greet Him like you would a longtime friend. All you need to do is begin building that friendship now!