

Famine and Death  
Revelation 6:5-8  
2/15/2015

Conquest and war bring famine and death. That is the connection that we can see between what we looked at last week and what we are looking at this week. Famine and death are aspects of God's judgment upon a world in sin. Now, when we first look at these things which are not especially attractive things to look at, we might be tempted to think that it is all doom and gloom. What we must remember here is that it is God who is using these things. When Christians face famine and death, they need to know that these things are under God's control, and that He is using them to accomplish His own good and perfect goals.

The first seal was about conquest. We looked at the first rider and decided that he was not Jesus Christ, but rather a counterfeit. The one who goes out seeking conquest will inevitably create wars whenever he runs across a people group that doesn't want him to be their ruler. So, the first seal leads to the second seal. Remember, however, that we have said that these seals are not limited to just one time period, but are rather descriptions of what happens during the entire time between Jesus' first and second comings. Still, there is a logical progression to these seals. Conquest leads to war. War, of course, leads to food shortages and death, seals three and four.

In the time of war, the invading soldiers would not only take all the food they could get as they rampaged across the country they were conquering; but they would also destroy all the food that they could not eat or carry. This was especially true of wheat and barley fields. Typically, soldiers would not harm the grapes or the olive trees. This could help explain the limitation on the rider's power at the end of verse 6: "do not harm the oil and the wine." Soldiers usually knew that oil and wine were not as essential for survival as the grains. So, they would typically leave the oil and wine alone. But this command also tells us that this famine is not as severe as it could be. It is not complete crop failure, for instance. As we will learn, even the grain still grew somewhat.

However, the fact that the oil and wine are spared from the ravages of the soldiers winds up being ironic in the rest of the book of Revelation. In chapter 14, Babylon must drink the wine of the wrath of God. So must all those who have the mark of the beast. People abuse wine in chapter 17, where they get drunk. So the wine is spared here, only to serve further purpose of judgment later on in the book.

The third rider is on a black horse, which is symbolic of famine. The rider carries a pair of scales, which is also symbolic of famine. The reason for the scales is quite simple: all the food had to be measured out, since there wasn't very much of it. You might remember that when Joseph stored up grain during the seven years of plenty, it got so plentiful that he stopped measuring it, because it was so much.

When there is too much grain, people don't always measure it all. However, when grain is scarce, every mouthful counts.

Don't miss the source of the pronouncement in verse 6. It comes from the midst of the four living creatures. Of course, God's throne is in the very midst of the four living creatures. So, this statement comes directly from God.

The statement itself is a bit puzzling, until we understand a little bit about ancient economics. The average day-laborer earned a denarius per day. So, anytime you see the term "denarius" in the New Testament, it refers to the amount of money an average man could earn in one day. The quart of wheat is about what one person ate in one day. Three quarts of barley could feed a family for one day. So, we are talking about what a man can earn in one day, and what a man or a man plus his family could eat in one day. What the statement tells us is what daily life looks like in a famine.

The price of one denarius for a quart of wheat was anywhere from 8 to 16 times what it normally cost. Normally, a man could buy between 8 and 16 quarts of wheat for a denarius. So, this price is very expensive. Of course, that is what we might expect in times of famine. It is a basic concept of supply and demand. If the demand for grain remains fairly constant, and yet the supply goes way down, the market will drive the price of grain up. This is especially true if people hoard grain for their own use, as was often done in those days. We can see the same principle at work today in oil prices. The demand for oil goes steadily up, which means that prices tend to go up. The reason gas prices have gone down recently is that the countries of the Middle East decided to keep their production high. That drops the price of oil. So the law of supply and demand is simple: whenever there is a lot of something, the price will be lower. Whenever something is rare, the price of it will go up. Similarly, if the demand for something goes way up, the price will go up. If the demand for something goes down, then the price will go down. Another example was the beanie baby craze that happened about ten years ago. The demand for them was through the roof. I actually saw grown adults lined up outside Cracker Barrel before the store opened, so that when the store opened, they could push and shove their way over to the beanie baby counter and fight over the beanie babies. These were (supposedly!) grown adults. When the craze died down, so did the price. At the height of the craze, though, a single rare beanie baby could sell for several hundred dollars on ebay. There are still a few that go for high prices. I saw one princess Diana beanie baby that was being auctioned for over 1500 dollars! The law of supply and demand. Here in Revelation, we see the demand being fairly constant. The demand for grain does not spike up and down like other things do. And yet the supply was low. Hence a very large price for one quart of grain. It meant that the worker would work all day, and the only things he could do with that money would be to buy food. He couldn't buy anything else. In today's terms, it would be similar if a loaf of bread cost around \$200. Every slice

would be worth about \$10! This is what happens when conquest and war leave the devastation behind.

The fourth rider is Death himself, pictured as a rider. The fourth horse is a very odd color. Literally, the color is a yellowish green. I know we have a number of people in our congregation who have horses. Have any of you ever seen a yellowish green horse? Didn't think so. But then, what would you expect of a horse that has to carry Death on his back? I'd be looking a little green myself if I had to carry Death on my shoulders! Of course, yellow-green or gray-green is often the color of corpses. The color symbolizes Death.

The rider has Hades following him. Hades is a personification of the place where the dead rest. Death and Hades are a pair in Revelation in several places. We know that they will both themselves be eliminated in the new heavens and the new earth, where, ironically, they themselves will be thrown into the lake of fire, to trouble the saints no more. Here, however, they really work like a summary of the previous three riders. Conquest, war and famine are all very common reasons for death to occur. Another two reasons are added in verse 8: pestilence and wild beasts. The NKJV translates the word "pestilence" by the word "death." It seems a bit redundant to say that the rider will kill someone by means of death. So, it is more likely that disease is meant here. Sword, famine, disease, and wild animals will kill 25% of the people of the earth. This is probably a good estimate of how many people have been killed in these ways since the first coming of Christ. Of course, the twentieth century was the single bloodiest century in the history of mankind.

So far, the picture here is very alarming, not to say scary. Pictures of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse are often used to scare little children into submission. We are looking at things that seem like the end of the world. Why are they recorded here? Are they recorded here to scare us silly? I would argue that the purpose here is exactly the opposite of fear. When God tells us that something is going to happen, and He tells us in advance, He tells us for a couple of reasons. The first is that we are then not surprised when it does happen. Oftentimes, the terror of an event consists in the fact that it is unexpected. The running game of "boo" that I have with certain children in the church works on this principle. If you can catch the person by surprise, you scare them, or at least you can make them jump. God tells us these things so that we will not be taken by surprise. The second reason God tells us these things is to make sure that we know that these events are all going to happen under God's control. He didn't suddenly slip up or lose control. Notice that God has these things under a leash, just like He has Satan on a leash. They can only go as far as God allows. The grain will be scarce, but the oil and wine will still be plentiful. Whenever we face trials, then, we can know that they are never, never, never, never, never more severe than God allows. If we are sometimes tempted to think that God has given us more pain than we can face,

then we are wrong, because with the pain, God always gives us the grace we need to endure.

It has been the history of the church to try to lessen the effects of these judgments on their fellow human beings. In Rome, for instance, it became almost proverbial that whenever a deadly disease came, it was always the Christians who stayed to help nurse the victims. Similarly with famine and drought. With regard to famine, of course, we have the great example of Joseph, who not only saved the Egyptians, but just might also have saved the entire world. Who would have lived in the world, if not for the wisdom that God gave Joseph? You and I would not even exist if not for that.

We need not fear to help others in times of famine and disease just because we also know that it is God's judgment on the world for sin. The reason why we need not fear is that judgment is not always tied directly to an individual person's sin. Remember what Jesus said about the tower that fell on people in Siloam? He said explicitly that it wasn't because they were more sinful than other people that the tower fell on them. And then He added that if we do not repent, we will likewise perish.

So there is definitely a message of repentance embedded in this text. This is true any time we read a text about judgment. The call is always there to repent, to turn away from sin. The call is to put our faith in the one person who can control all of this. For then, these events will hold no terror for us. For these events must be interpreted in the light of Romans 8, that all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose.

Lastly, we need to help those in need. We need to do so wisely. I know that there have been ideas floating around in the church about starting a community pantry. We have had people come to us who had no food to eat at all. This might be more common in the future, and we have a tremendous opportunity to help those people out and show them the love of Jesus Christ. In doing so, we look forward to the day when famine and death will be no more. Death will be cast into the lake of fire, and there will be the tree of life from which we may freely eat all the year round. I look forward to that. I hope you do too.