

Where Did We Go Wrong?!

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

Sunday, 22 October, 2023

Children's Talk: The Four Horsemen

In the Book of Revelation, John saw four horses. Each of these horses tells us something about how goodness and truth work together in different combinations.

You might think that you just have to love, and everything will work out. Or that if you just know what is right you can't go wrong. But that is not exactly true. You need both together. That is what the white horse stands for. He is the victorious one:

Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, "Come and see." And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. (Revelation 6:1-2)

When we put good and truth together we are powerful like this rider. For example, if you love your brother, and so you treat him the way you would want to be treated, you have combined love with doing the right thing.

The second horse shows what happens if you just have truth and no goodness. He is the violent rider:

When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come and see." Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword. (Revelation 6:3-4)

When all we have is the truth, we use it as a weapon to hurt other people. For example, you might know that it is right not to lie; and so when you catch your brother lying, you make him feel terrible and get him in trouble. That is using truth violently, like a sword.

The third horse shows what happens when we stop caring about the truth. This rider has contempt: contempt is when you do not value something important or see it as worthless:

When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. (Revelation 6:5-6)

Notice the scales he carries: that is because he stands for people who measure the truth and decide it is not worthwhile. For example, you might know that it is right to tell the truth. But that also would mean getting in trouble, so you decide it is not worth it to tell the truth. You let someone else take the blame for something you did.

The last horse shows what it is feels like when we don't have love or truth: he is deathly.

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

When we don't love others and don't care what is right, it feels terrible on the inside. For example, a brother who doesn't care and only uses the truth to hurt will lose his friendship with his brother.

On the other hand, when we combine love and truth together it feels powerful and strong, like that victorious white horse we started with. So don't just rely on goodness by itself or truth by itself. Love others by treating them rightly. Then you will be strong in the Lord. *Amen.*

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We sometimes look around and wonder how things got to where they are today. Where did we all go wrong? This is not just true of the world at large but of us as individuals. We have high points when we feel like we can conquer the world; and yet a short while later we find ourselves unable to even muster a kind word. We might think this pattern happens randomly: some days we just happen to have more kindness to give and other days we're stuck wishing everyone would disappear forever. On some level that might even be true, but for the bigger things this pattern is not random: we can recognize the signs and avoid the pain that lies at the end. This is our topic for today.

Take a father who feels that he is in a good place parentingwise: he's made it through the first few years of having no idea what he was doing and gotten to the point of really feeling success as a father. He knows just how to support his kids. He feels immense pride. But slowly the feeling wears off. He starts feeling irritable around his kids. He starts to lose his patience more and winds up yelling. He doesn't notice the change much, until one night when he just blows up at his family. When he wakes up the next day he lies there in a stupor and just wonders, "how on earth did this happen? I used to have so much patience. I used to be so good at dealing with my kids charitably. Now I barely even know how to not yell at them. Where did I go wrong?"

You may notice in this example that it is not about how his situation changed. That's a topic for another day. The focus today is on the times when we notice that we ourselves have seemingly gone backwards in our spiritual progress. We are worse at being good people than we used to be. This is a disheartening place to find

ourselves: it is one thing to start out selfish and slowly improve. It is another thing entirely to realize that you have seemingly wiped out all the progress you had made and are back to square one.

The Word lays out how this happens to us and how it happens to society at large. It is laid out for us symbolically in the book of Revelation, which makes some sense: the book of Revelation is a cosmic description of how the Christian church went from being pure to being unspeakably corrupt, and how it would then climb out of that state. The part we will focus on is probably at least somewhat familiar to you: the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

These four horsemen each symbolize one step or stage as we go from being pure to losing our way. I'll read the descriptions of each one (which are admittedly obscure) and then we will dive into what they symbolize for us. The first horseman rides a white horse, and could be called the victorious one:

Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, "Come and see." And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. (Revelation 6:1-2)

This rider stands for us at our best, when we know what we stand for and know how to put it into practice. The shining white of the horse stands for the truth itself, and the bow for how we take that truth and fight against evil with it. The teachings of the New Church inform us that what brings us into this victorious state is love or goodness. Goodness loves truth, so much so that if we have a desire to do what is good we will know and understand the truth that will help us achieve that goodness. (*Doctrine of Life* §39). If we go back to a father (or mother) who loves his kids, that love will give him or her an insight into how best to serve them that mere knowledge

could never convey. When our hearts are focused on love and we turn our minds to wisdom, we can overcome any challenge with victory.

The second horse on the other hand stands for the first step in a downward spiral. The second rider had a fiery red horse, and he could be called the violent one:

When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come and see." Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword. (Revelation 6:3-4)

This rider takes peace from the earth and leads to people killing each other. In short, he is an embodiment of hatred. Hatred, which comes from the love of self, robs us of peace, security, and charity (*Apocalypse Revealed* §307). When selfishness replaces our inner love that is what occurs. Now at first, we will still be able to know and understand truth, but as we slip into selfishness we twist the truth to serve us rather than others. The truth becomes a tool.

Consider the example of the father: what starts as a love for his children could easily turn into pride in himself, a love of looking like he has it together, and the peace that comes from acting as a wise parent rather than the wellbeing of his children. He has gotten so focused on pride in being a good dad that he forgot the real reason to be doing all of this hard work. When the pride evaporated, he no longer had anything to sustain himself. While his actions may be wise, if they are for selfish ends they are not in themselves wise. Listen to what the Teachings of the New Church say about this situation, even in regard to truths taken directly from the Lord's Word:

Nor do those truths have the Lord within them which are taken from the Word, in particular from the sense of the letter there, and interpreted in favour of personal dominion and personal gain. In themselves these are truths because they come from the Word yet they are not truths because they are interpreted wrongly and thereby perverted. (*Secrets of Heaven* §8868)

When we lose our sense of purpose, of why we do what we do, we might continue for a time to do them, but they will have lost their heart and their life. If we find ourselves here on the first step of the downward spiral, we need to return to our first love and remember *why* it matters that we act wisely. For the father, he could return to his love for his children and his wife and work on putting aside his love purely for himself.

However, if his slide continues, he will not only lose his purpose, he will also start to have contempt for truths that he used to hold dear. That is what the third horseman represents, which we could call the contemptuous one:

When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." So 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)

Blackness is the absence of light. Symbolically it means the absence of truth. That is what happens when we see truth as a means to an end. We start to devalue it, which is why this horseman held a scale in his hands. Picture someone who only has himself in mind: at first the truth serves him, and so he values it. But as the truth becomes a liability it loses its value. The truth that makes you look good also requires work; it requires sacrifice; it requires giving up desires; and slowly, over time, the costs outweigh the benefits and so the truth is disdained and rejected as naïve.

It is easy to see how this might play out in the life of a father who has forgotten his first love and has slipped into selfishness: as his peace of mind rises in value he starts letting go of the things that stand in its way: patience, selfless love, forgiveness, and letting go of anger in the name of a greater good. His wise insights into fatherhood will fade and fall by the wayside as they no longer serve his true

desires. The antidote is again to return to our first love. It is to remember that truth is not a tool to serve us. Truth has been given to us so that we can serve the Lord and those around us. The value of truth does not come from how happy it makes us; the value of truth comes from how well it enables us to serve the Lord.

If we cannot pull out, then we move further down, to the fourth step symbolized by the fourth rider. The fourth rider rode a pale or sickly green horse, and he could be called the deathly one, or even just death:

When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come and see." So 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 symbolism of this horseman is obvious: if we continue through life with selfishness as our focus, and lose sight of the truth, then we will end in spiritual death. We will feel hollow and empty inside and will have no sense of conscience, of what is right and wrong. Even if we do turn to religion or spirituality, or even the Word itself, we won't be able to feel any life in it. The Teachings of the New Church have this to say about us when we reach this point:

The Word lacks vitality for people who are without goods of life in accordance with doctrinal truths. For the Word in the sense of the letter is not understood apart from doctrine, and doctrine is not seen without a life in accordance with it. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §320)

If we do not live what we love, we will not understand what is right; if we do not understand what is right, we can see no life in the Word.

Consider the father of our example. He has let pride in himself twist what he loves most of all and he has become selfish. In his selfishness, he has used the truth as a tool and devalued it. In the end, he will have no sense of real love for his family and no concept of how to treat them right. This is the point when he wakes up and realizes how far he has fallen. Imagine the hurt and confusion. He might realize that

he does not love his family, and yet at the same time hate himself for that feeling. He might remember a time when he was sure of himself and his decisions but now wonder how he could do anything right. This is spiritual death. We have all probably experienced some flavour of it. The natural result is that you will feel dead towards the Lord and dead towards the things that you used to love. It is important to bear in mind that does not mean that if you feel dead towards the Lord or dead towards the things you love that you have come down this path. Hell attacks us in many ways, and selfishness that we take in is only one way to arrive at this destination.

If we find ourselves in this dead place then, we need to ask ourselves if we had a part in getting here: have you lost sight of what is truly important? Have you forgotten what your goals were? Do you no longer feel that the things you love matter? Have you prioritized yourself over others and the Lord? Do you put value in truth for truth's sake or only to the extent that it serves you? Hopefully you will have seen the signs before you go all the way down this path and you can reorient yourself to love the things that matter. But if not, if you do find yourself hopeless and dead on the inside, that is still not the end. When the Lord addressed the church of Ephesus he pointed out that they too had left their first love. He urged them to repent, and return to a life of charity, and that if they did so, if they fought against evil and falsity in their lives, they would eat of the tree of life (Revelation 2:1-7). The promise of the whole book of Revelation is that no matter how far we have fallen, no matter how dead towards the Lord we feel, He offers us a path back to life. It takes time and struggle and effort, but through repentance we can be brought back to life in the Lord.

Turn one last time back to that father who hates himself for how far he has fallen. If he prioritizes the Lord, and His love, and does the work of living for his

family, slowly but surely his faith and wisdom will be built back up. He will regain his insights into fatherhood, and will in time feel a love for his family that is greater than ever before. Life is not about how far we have fallen but about what we do next to get back up again. Now throughout this sermon I have used the example of a father. My hope is that if you are that father that you not feel condemned. My hope is that all of us can see ourselves in that father, regardless of the details of our situations. We all have times of victory, like that victorious rider on the white horse, times when we know the truth and lovingly apply it. We all have times when we forget our first love and wield truth like a tool, like the violent rider on the red horse. We all have times when we develop resentment towards the truth and reject it, like the contemptuous rider on the black horse. And we all have times when we wake up and realize that spiritual life is dead within us and we feel no love and understand no truth. Yet the Lord is greater than even this death: in the end of Revelation death is cast into hell, and the Lord brings His people into the Holy City New Jerusalem, filled with the warmth of love and the light of wisdom. *Amen.*