

Revelation 6:1-8 (NRSV)

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!”²I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

³When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!”⁴And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

⁵When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand,⁶and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!”

⁷When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, “Come!”⁸I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

1 Peter 1:1-12 (NRSV)

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,²who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,⁵who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.⁶In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,⁷so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.⁸Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,⁹for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹⁰Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry,¹¹inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory.¹²It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

*Times are tough for so many. Where can we turn to restore our hope?
To the living hope that is Jesus Christ, for the anchor holds.¹*

Well, that’s odd isn’t it. Here we have a series about restoring hope in tough times and the first Scripture passage is John’s terrifying vision of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. You might think that I’m using it just to help us realize that as bad as things are for so many people, it could be far worse for us all.

But that isn’t my point. Rather, the vision gets to the heart of John’s purpose in writing Revelation. It is a circulating letter² written to believers who are being variously persecuted and ostracized in Asia Minor. John intends the letter to be both

¹When preparing this study, I couldn’t get the Ray Boltz song, “The Anchor Holds” out of my head. It is based, I assume, on Hebrews 6:9: “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul . . .”

²A “circulating” letter is one that isn’t written to a specific place or person, but is meant to be circulated among the house churches across a large area. 1 Peter is also a circulating letter.

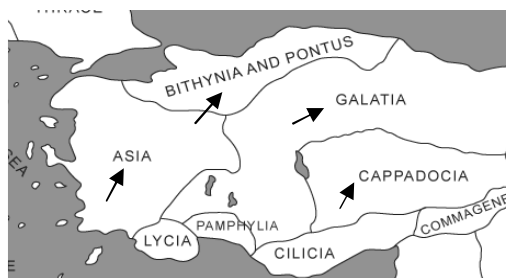
A New Series

This week, we embark on a six-part series: *Restoring Hope in Tough Times*. This series is drawn from 1 Peter.

encouraging and comforting. The four horsemen are meant as a boldly stark reminder that the Christians have done right in placing their hope and trust in God. Though many people may place their trust in their armies (the first horseman), their police (the second), and their economies (the third) . . . but none of these can provide genuine and everlasting peace and security. There are no doctors or healthcare systems that can give us eternal life (the fourth horsemen, death). There is only one who is worthy of our complete and unyielding trust: the LORD God. One or more horsemen may be riding across the landscape, but the believers are to be comforted in their knowledge that the anchor holds. God has not abandoned them even though it may seem that way at times. And it is to God, to Jesus Christ, that Peter points some first-century Christians who are also living through very tough times.

Introducing 1 Peter

1 Peter is another circulating letter, this one written by the apostle Peter. He writes from Rome (Peter refers to Rome as “Babylon” in 5:13) in the early 60’s AD, to encourage the Christians in central Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) who “have had to suffer various trials” (1:6) and are living as “aliens and exiles” (2:11). Peter lists five areas by name, which are illustrated on this map.



These Christians are not exiles in a literal sense; rather, as Achtemeier et al write, they are “people whose commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed attitudes and behaviors that place them on the margins of respectable society. They have become victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproach, scorn, vilification, and contempt.”³

As difficult as such ostracism might be in our world, it was much more powerful in the NT world, a social world driven by status and community. This ostracism created very serious economic problems for the believers, especially for those in urban setting. Former customers and employers might well want nothing to do with someone who would pledge allegiance to a man named Jesus and not to Caesar. In the face of these trials, Peter urges Christians to “rejoice insofar as you are sharing in Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed”(4:13).

How are these Christians to respond to their persecutors? “Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing.” (3:9). Peter goes so far as to instruct these believers to “Honor the Emperor” (2:17).

Despite increasing hostility toward Christianity in some portions of our culture, we are not suffering because we are being persecuted for our beliefs. Nonetheless, many of us are going through very tough times and all of us are surely uncertain and apprehensive about the future. The question for those believers in Asia Minor and for us is where we will turn to find a renewed hope. What, or better, *who* will be our anchor in the midst of such turbulence and fear?

A living hope

In the salutation of his letter, Peter reminds the Christians that they, despite all their difficulties, have been “chosen and destined by God the Father.” They have been

³ Achtemeier, P.J., Green, J.B., & Thompson, M.M. 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans

sanctified (set aside for God and strengthened for holiness) by the Spirit for the purpose of being obedient to Jesus,⁴ an obedience which is possible because they have been “sprinkled with his blood.”

Persecution of the Christian Church

Contrary to what many Christians believe, there was no empire-wide persecution of Christians until about 250AD. Instead, in the first centuries of the church’s life, persecutions were localized and varied in intensity from time and place to place. Even the horrific persecutions of Nero in the mid-60’s were limited to Rome.

Still, most Christians, at one time or another, were persecuted and ostracized (1) for their unwillingness to worship Caesar, and/or (2) their “anti-family” philosophy, and/or (3) their strange religious practices. Roman governors were focused on keeping the peace and because the Christians tended to stir things up, though it was not always of their own doing, they were often at odds with the authorities. Rumors and legends about the Christians’ weird practices, made them easy and tempting targets. For example, stories were told of the Christians’ cannibalistic practices, such as gathering to eat the body and blood of a man, a god(?), named Jesus. Think about it!

Then, Paul begins his pastoral letter by lifting up for these believers and for us all, the living hope that is Jesus Christ. We have been born anew⁵ into “a living hope” and the ground of our hope is the truth of the resurrection (v. 3). It is the proof that justifies our hope, our confidence that our trust in God is well-placed. As the children of God we have an inheritance that can never diminish nor be taken away. God protects our inheritance, our salvation, for us, locking it away in the vaults of heaven.

Peter wants us to rejoice in this knowledge, even though we are going through tough times (v. 6). A young woman in one of my classes told me of a saying that she learned a former pastor: “Christian belief is knowing that the worst thing is not the last thing.” This has quickly become one of my favorite one-sentence summaries of the Good News. Peter, you see, reminds the believers that even though they may be suffering in the present, God is protecting for them a glorious future when God’s “Last Thing” will be revealed to them for their everlasting joy.

Indeed, Peter writes, tough times test us,

they test our faith. Such times can be a trial by fire, revealing the genuineness of our faith (v. 7), just as fire proves the genuineness of gold. We may not have seen Jesus, but we love him. We have faith and we rejoice in it, for our very salvation is its end result (v. 9).

Finally, Peter tells the believers that though their lives are filled with troubles and difficulties, they are experiencing the climax of God’s work that all the prophets of Israel had long promised. They, and we, are the rescued in God’s great rescue plan that began with a promise to Abraham long before (Genesis 12:3). Indeed, the “exiles” have been given Good News at which even “the angels long to look!” (v. 12).

In a letter written to Christians who are suffering, Peter begins by reminding them who they are and whose they are. He helps them to focus on God’s assurance that the worst thing is not the last thing, that their salvation awaits them, a future far more precious than they can imagine. We’ll see next week that Peter then begins to help the believers understand what their part is in restoring hope in tough times.

⁴Notice that this salutation is “Trinitarian.” This is the work of the one God, in the persons of the Father, the Spirit, and Jesus.

⁵All Christians, all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, have been “born again”/ “born a second time”/“born from above.” See John 3 and elsewhere. Using the words “born again” to refer only to a subset of Christians is a mistaken use of the phrase and clouds one’s understanding of the New Testament.

More on the Four Horsemen

The book of Revelation has much to say about so many people's willingness to place their ultimate trust any place other than in God. The four horsemen is one of the most dramatic images in Scripture about such futility.

It is important to see that there is a pattern to these four horsemen. The first rider comes out on a white horse, carrying a bow, a weapon of war, and sets about conquering. It isn't hard to imagine the threat posed by this first rider. The second rider is on a bright red horse and carries a mighty sword. This rider goes across the planet setting people against one another (as if we needed help with that one!). The third rider, on a black horse, seems a bit more obscure. This rider carries a set of scales that would be used in commerce. The prices quoted by the rider for the basics of life, like wheat, are astronomically high. This rider brings famine and economic hardship. The final rider is on a pale green horse and bears the name, Death.

Conquest, violence, famine, and death. They are dressed up in dramatic imagery but they are certainly not new to us. Furthermore, though John's visions depict these as being inflicted by the heavens, we know that these are all self-inflicted, when we stop and think of humanity as one. It is we who make war on one another. It is we who take the peace away and stand by while others starve. Going back to the Garden of Eden, even death is the result of humanity's choice. The riders bring nothing that we haven't already brought on ourselves. Still, there is the clear sense in this vision that God is a threat.

So what's the point? Craig Koester suggests that this vision sets the stage for what follows, in that the riders are a call to repentance and faith.

Repentance: Will we turn 180° and walk toward God not away from him?
Faith: Will we trust God in all things and above all else?

Look again at each of the four riders. Can we build armies powerful enough to keep away all foreign conquerors? September 11 shattered that illusion for any who still held it. Can we build a large enough police force to stop all violence and return the peace? The proliferation of both prisons and crime answers that one for us. Can we have bank accounts large enough to shield us from any economic hardship? The depth of this latest recession is shattering many illusions about the inevitability of economic security. How about death? Do any of us know a doctor who can make us immortal. My doctor has gotten me this far in life, but he is only going to take me so far.

Stark images, such as these horsemen, are meant to be that proverbial wake-up call, the 2x4 upside the head. It's a bit like an "intervention," where loved ones gather to confront someone with the truth, to shock them into seeing that their life is a wreck and they need help.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. There's no question that we are living through tough times. Certainly, some of us have been hit harder than others, some much harder. Still, it can be hard for us all to remain optimistic under the endless onslaught of scary headlines. How has all this turmoil affected your own faith? What changes have you made in your life? Have you attended worship more regularly? Have you gotten more involved in the life of St. Andrew? Have you turned to family and friends? You might try making a list of some concrete steps that you think would help you become more hopeful in tough times.
2. You'll notice when reading today's passage from 1 Peter, that Peter isn't urging to believers to have faith and to rejoice. Instead, his approach is to lift up to them what he believes is true about them – they love Jesus, they rejoice, and so on. Do you see a value in this – taking the believers faith as a given – rather than exhorting them to faith? Peter can't possibly know all these people. What do you think is the source of his confidence?
3. We don't suffer for being Christians, though many Christians in other places do. How do you think your reading of 1 Peter would change if you and your family were being persecuted for your faith in Jesus Christ? How can we get emotionally closer to the suffering experienced by the believers to whom Peter writes?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings we are wrapping our journey through John's Gospel and taking a look at some passages that bear on this week's reading from 1 Peter.

<p>Monday, John 21:1-19 Why do you think the disciples returned to fishing? What could they be waiting for? Why does Jesus challenge Peter three times?</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 21:20-25 After having read through the entire gospel, who do you think is "the disciple whom Jesus loved?" What is the larger meaning of this final story?</p>
<p>Wednesday, John 3 Jesus tries to help Nicodemus, a Pharisee, understand Jesus' vocation and the new birth that Jesus offers.</p>	<p>Thursday, Colossians 3:1-17 Paul writes about living as those who "have been resurrected with Christ." Why do you think Paul would use the past tense in verse 1?</p>
<p>Friday, Malachi 2:17-3:5 & 3:16-18 A famous passage about God's refining fire and a promise that God will preserve a faithful remnant.</p>	<p>Saturday, Hebrews 6:13-20, esp. v.19. Jesus is our hope and our anchor!</p>

