

# The Four Horsemen and Finding Hope in Apocalyptic Times

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 12 October 2025

Preacher: Daniel Dixon

[ 0 : 00 ] I believe in living. I believe that seeds grow into sprouts, and sprouts grow into trees.! I believe in life. I have seen the death parade march through the torso of the earth, sculpting mud bodies in its path.

I have seen the destruction of the daylight, and seen bloodthirsty maggots prayed to and saluted. I believe in living. I believe in the sweat of love and in the fire of truth.

And I believe that a lost ship, steered by tired, seasick sailors, can still be guided home to port. It is true. We do all need to recharge once in a while.

And hopefully that once in a while is right now. Good morning, everyone. My name is Daniel. I'm an elder here at the Table Church. And that poem comes from Asada Shakur, a leader from the Black Liberation Movement in the 70s, whose teachings and life heavily inspired the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement.

Asada passed away a few weeks ago. And you may have heard her famous quote, It is our duty to fight for freedom. It is our duty to win protests throughout the years.

[ 1 : 27 ] The poem that I just read, Affirmation, comes from the beginning of her autobiography. Throughout the book, Asada delivers scathing critiques of America.

And even of movements for justice, even her own movements. But more than that, Asada's writings shine with an audacious hope.

She describes the death parade that she's seen, the bloodthirsty maggots, as she calls them. But also her belief in the power of love and of truth.

Asada was a bold witness of injustice, and yet held on to hope just as strongly, if not even more so. And I found myself wondering recently, if that's something that I can do.

If I actually have hope. We sing about hope, we pray about it, but I've often wondered, do I actually have that? Do I really believe that seeds can grow into trees?

[ 2 : 38 ] That lost ships can find their way home? Between the struggle to stop a genocide in Gaza, the challenges facing D.C. with a government shutdown, the ICE agents that roam my neighborhood on a daily basis, or just the discontent that I feel with my own life.

That kind of hope feels far away for me right now, if I'm being honest with you. We're in a series right now on the book of Revelation, and for me, that series has come at a perfect time.

Because Revelation is a book full of scathing critiques and audacious hope. Written to communities that were all too familiar with the death parade, Revelation is about the seeds that turn into trees.

About the tired and the seasick sailors who find their way back home. And I need that reminder right now. So I love the book of Revelation.

Not everyone does. I understand why. But one reason why I like it so much is because, to be a little bit of a nerd, fantasy and science fiction are two of my favorite genres, both in books, in TV shows, movies, especially when they creatively critique the world that I live in.

[ 4 : 07 ] A favorite trope of mine in those genres is the parallel universe, where characters find themselves in a world that is both familiar and different. It's fun because you get to see new size of characters.

The kind one becomes cruel. The fearful one becomes brave. And usually through some combination of self-exploration and communal help, the main character returns back to their own timeline, their home, experiencing transformation.

With a new perspective. A new way of living. One example of this is the movie Everything, Everywhere, All at Once. Love the enthusiasm there.

It tells the story of Evelyn, a Chinese immigrant who runs a laundromat with her husband, Weyman, and their teenage daughter, Joy. When we meet Evelyn, her life is not what she wanted it to be. Weyman is trying to serve her divorce papers. The IRS is auditing her. Her relationship with her daughter, Joy, is strained and challenging, partly because Joy is dating a woman, and partly because Evelyn doesn't know how to respond to Joy's depression.

[ 5 : 24 ] Let's be honest, the movie is just weird. There's no other way to describe it. There are parallel universes, one where Evelyn and Joy are, rocks. There's one with a raccoon chef called Rackacuni.

And there's one where Evelyn doesn't marry Weyman, but they share a tender moment with the quote, And another life would have really loved doing laundry and taxes with you.

There's also a giant everything bagel that threatens to destroy, well, everything. And through it all, Evelyn reconciles with Joy, she falls back in love with Weyman, and she chooses to live her life differently, more lovingly, in her own world.

When I first saw the film, I left dazed, confused, and also deeply moved. And to me, that film is a great example of what Revelation is.

It is weird. It is chaotic. And it is ultimately about love and connection. We can think of Revelation's genre, apocalyptic literature, as similar to sci-fi or fantasy.

[ 6 : 42 ] Through vivid imagery, through storytelling, John, the author, shows his audience realities that are both different and familiar, offering a guide for how to live in an unjust world, how to be dissident disciples.

Revelation is meant to move us emotionally, to inspire our imagination. Now, so far in our series on Revelation, we are, I think, five sermons in, and it hasn't gotten too strange quite yet.

Now, there have been some oddities, like the creatures that look like different animals, they have six wings and eyes all over. But it hasn't been too trippy quite yet. I am here to change that today.

Moving forward, we're going to see death riding a horse, fire-breathing prophets, monsters that come out of the ocean, and giant locusts that torture people.

Which, in my opinion, was a prediction of red lanternflies. To name just a few of the images that Revelation will throw at us in the coming weeks. And today, I'm not going to go too much in depth with history, context, or the various interpretations of the scripture.

[ 8 : 03 ] But I'm going to sprinkle in some keys to reading Revelation. Someday, you're going to be at trivia at a bar, the category will be apocalyptic literature, and thanks to today, thanks to the series, you're going to win.

You're going to impress all of your friends, I guarantee it. The first key to reading Revelation is to think of it as sequential, not chronological.

It's like a kaleidoscope. Each sequence gives you a fresh perspective. It's like a series of short stories connected by a common theme.

And today's sequence starts in Revelation 6. Last week, and the previous sequence, Revelation 5, we saw heaven's throne room, the Lamb of God.

It's a scene that has inspired worship leaders for generations. As creation, night and day, worships God. In the midst of this, there's a scroll given to the Lamb of God, and the scroll has seven seals on it.

[ 9 : 10 ] To help paint that picture, this is what I think those seals look like. There are so many wild interpretations of Revelation out there, I'm going to make it my own.

It's called the calf version. Cute animals live forever. Okay, so that's probably not what it looked like, and that's also a little bit of why context matters.

You can't just read one part of Revelation literally, then all of a sudden change your mind and say that that part's figurative. It's more likely that this was referring to a scroll with seals as an announcement from someone in power, a royal announcement.

And so Revelation 5 has this crescendo moment where the Lamb of God, who all of creation worships, is given the power to make a royal announcement.

I feel pretty good about that. The Lamb of God who has been slain has conquered. We have seen creation worship this Lamb, and now the Lamb is going to say something to us. I think something good is going to happen next.

[ 10 : 24 ] So we're going to go in our Bibles, if you have either on your phone or a physical Bible, we're going to go to Revelation 6 and also be up on the screen and see what happens next.

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, Come.

I looked, and there before me was a white horse. Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror, bent on conquest.

Then the Lamb opened the second seal, and I heard the second living creature say, Come. Another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other.

To him was given a large sword. When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, Come. I looked, and there before me was a black horse.

[ 11 : 30 ] Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. I heard what sounded like a voice crying out, Two pounds of wheat for a day's wage and six pounds of barley for a day's wage, but do not damage the oil and the wine.

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, Come. I looked, and there before me was a pale horse. Its rider was named Death, and the grave was following close behind him.

They were given power over the fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, and plague by the wild beasts of the earth. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

They called out in a loud voice, How long, holy and true Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood? Each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little while longer until the complete number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed, just as they had been.

I watched as he opened the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake. The sun turned black, the moon turned blood red, the stars in the sky fell to the earth like figs dropped from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.

[ 13 : 06 ] The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. And then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.

They called to the mountains and the rocks, Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of the Lamb's wrath has come, and who can withstand it?

Well, that was depressing. We go straight from continuous worship to four riders on horseback who bring violence and equality, sickness, and finally, death.

So who are these four riders on horseback? Quite simply, they're a summary of the evils that plague humanity, a description of the spiritual forces that oppress John's audience.

It's not just the Roman Empire, which John's audience was suffering under, or any human empire, but violence done in the name of progress. It's when the cost of a staple good, like bread or eggs, becomes unaffordable, but luxury items are protected at all costs.

[ 14 : 32 ] It's the death parade and the bloodthirsty maggots being prayed to and saluted, as Asada said. It's what Martin Luther King Jr.

called the triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism. John is simply doing here what a good doctor would do.

As an example, over the past few years I've had a on- and off-again habit of running. I start running, I injure myself, I stop running.

The cycle continues. And last year, instead of just icing my legs on the couch again, I finally went to go see a doctor. It turns out my hips are slightly crooked, a little bit imbalanced, and that's why I kept having the same injuries.

I needed physical therapy. I needed workouts to strengthen some muscles. That doctor pointed me towards the root cause for my injuries.

[ 15 : 36 ] The writers might seem confusing, but that's simply what John is doing, showing his audience the root cause behind their suffering. He focuses their attention beyond Rome, beyond human powers, to give them a different perspective.

Then in the fifth seal, John sees martyrs, witnesses, who are crying out for judgment, for God to avenge their death. There's this odd scene where they're given white robes and told to be patient a little bit longer, until even more have been killed.

That's cheerful. It feels unfinished. We're just told that there needs to be a complete number of martyrs. And John's audience would have seen themselves here.

These were their friends. These were their family members who had been killed for being faithful to the dissident gospel of Jesus. And then we move on to the sixth seal, which paints a cataclysmic picture.

The sun has turned black. The moon has turned red. The stars fall from the sky and the whole earth shakes as everyone, rich and poor, hides from the wrath of the Lamb.

[16:57] Now these are standard symbols within apocalyptic literature that are not meant to be literal, but they describe an upheaval so vast and so widespread that it shakes everything.

And at the end, we're left with a question. Who can stand when the day of the Lamb's wrath comes? With only one seal left, I would assume that the seventh seal will answer that question for us.

But then, there's a pause. The vision changes in Revelation 7. Another key to reading Revelation is to notice the pauses, the breaks and patterns.

Just like the bridge in a song, these moments pull us in closer to listen carefully to what's coming next. So I'm not going to read all of Revelation 7, but to summarize, after the earth-shattering scene of the sixth seal, John sees angels.

He sees them speaking and hears them say that those who have been sealed by God should not be harmed. He then hears a number, 144,000, and then the number, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel.

[18:16] Next, John sees a great multitude from every tribe, nation, and language, so many that they can't be counted, wearing white robes standing before the Lamb of God saying, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Who are these people? How did they get there? Revelation 7, 14 through 17 answers that for us saying, they are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple. And he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst nor thirst anymore. The sun shall not strike them nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Revelation 7 can be confusing. Some interpretations say that the great tribulation is an actual period of time where God will cause catastrophic global suffering and that the 144,000 is an actual number of people from the nation of Israel who will follow Jesus.

[19:47] But rather than predicting a future event, I think that this scene is actually an incredibly moving message of hope for anyone experiencing suffering at any point in human history.

history. Here's why. First, John hears the number 144,000 but John looks and sees a great multitude from every tribe, people, and language.

There's a difference between what John hears and then what John sees. This is another key to reading Revelation. Pay attention to verbs. Welcome back to English class.

Another key is that 12 is not usually a literal number in apocalyptic literature, but it stands for completion. Now, I'm bad at math.

I got like D's and C's at math at school, but if 12 stands for completion, 12,000 is probably even more complete, and 144,000 is even more so complete.

[20:48] Think back to the unfinished scene in the fifth seal. The witnesses are told to wait until the number of those killed is complete.

Revelation 7 is that moment, the moment the witnesses have been waiting for, where God has heard their cry for vengeance and has arrived to comfort them.

The fifth seal is not about a magic number of people being killed before God will take action. It is a message of hold on just a little while longer because God will be faithful and true.

And then Revelation 7 shows that moment when God does comfort all of his people. So instead of predicting the future, in Revelation 6 and 7, John is telling his community a story.

He's showing them an alternate timeline, a parallel universe that starts off by acknowledging their suffering and their bold witness, that promises that God will act in judgment, and that offers the hope of comfort through each other and through God's presence.

[ 22 : 05 ] John is saying, I believe that the seeds of your faithfulness will grow into trees. John is saying, I believe that even though you feel lost right now, you will find your way home.

And after this vision of hope, we finally arrive at the seventh seal in Revelation chapter 8. So that reads, then, when the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

I saw the seven angels who stand before God and seven trumpets were given to them. Another angel came and stood at the altar and he held a gold bowl for burning incense.

He was given a large amount of incense in order to offer it on behalf of the prayers of all the saints. and the smoke of the incense offered for the prayers of the saints rose up before God.

When that seventh seal is opened, there is just silence in heaven. The people's prayers are offered to God and then we move on to the next sequence.

[ 23 : 21 ] This honestly feels kind of anticlimactic to me. The seals have all been broken. We'd expect to see what's in the scroll. But we don't. There is just silence and prayer.

And in fact, we never hear what was written on that scroll. Other parts of revelation allude to it, but it's never read out loud. One way of thinking about this is that the scenes from each seal are the scroll's message.

It's like a seven-episode TV show. And in the grand finale, we see the endless worship in heaven pause to hear the prayers of God's people.

And the silence John's message of hope brings out. Keep witnessing. Keep crying out how long. Keep being faithful.

Heaven hears you. Revelation, at its core, gives people who are suffering with no end in sight a glimpse of their own survival.

[ 24 : 34 ] I imagine that the silence and that seventh seal is where they settle back into their own reality. One, where it seems like the riders of death, that death parade, has trampled all over them.

hope. But they would have hope again. They have seen their seeds grow into trees. They were hopeful witnesses.

now, Revelation certainly critiques the church in some places. But this sequence is adamant that God's people will endure until the very end.

We've talked a lot about hope at the table this year. And I would not say that I'm a hopeful person if I'm being very honest with all of you. Whether it's been my lifelong struggle with depression or the organizing work I do that often feels like we're always losing hope is not something that I feel very comfortable with.

I feel like I don't even know what hope is. Is it a feeling? Is it a perspective? Is it, like Pastor Anthony has described before, the work that we do, like lowly sewer rats, to go on in life?

[ 25 : 49 ] life. And here at the table, we also often talk about being witnesses, about speaking truth to power, about seeing injustice and naming it.

And that's something that I feel much more comfortable doing. But combining them, becoming a hopeful witness, is much more difficult for me. But I am grateful that I have been blessed with so many hopeful witnesses around me who have shown me what that can look like.

And so with tomorrow being Indigenous People's Day, I want to recognize the ways that Indigenous people have been hopeful witnesses. So I had the honor of attending an Indigenous-led seminary, and I've seen this hopeful witness in so many ways, including how my classmates and my professors navigated judgment and comfort, calling out the sins of America boldly, well-creating space for all people to come and be part of restoration.

And I think we'll find some parallels with the book of Revelation there. So I'm going to show a painting on the slides now. This painting is called American Progress.

You may have seen it before, and it depicts manifest destiny, the belief that American settlers were destined by God to expand across the U.S.

[ 27 : 16 ] land, led by the Lady Columbia, the trains and the soldiers head west, ready to conquer people and land in the name of peace and progress.

This image came back into relevancy recently when the Department of Homeland Security tweeted it alongside a caption that said, a heritage to be proud of, a homeland worth defending.

But whenever I see that image now, I also think of another image. I think of this artwork by Klee Benali, an indigenous author and artist from the Diné people who tells a different story, clearly calling Lady Columbia a rider of death.

A hopeful witness is, well, they're a witness. They name the root causes of suffering and they cry out to God, how long? A witness does not accept the death parade with an indifferent shrug but looks straight at it and calls out to God.

How long until what is broken is healed? And a hopeful witness guards against despair and bitterness by holding on to the belief that things can be made right.

[ 28 : 42 ] Revelation 6 hints at this with the wrath of the Lamb, a wrath that is a protective anger against everything that prevents people from finding love, belonging, and connection.

Judgment and revelation can be tricky if we think of judgment as being punitive, as being primarily about punishment. Indigenous Christians have taught me that judgment is restorative.

Charles Hilliard points towards this with his reinterpretation of the progress painting. In this twist on the original image, we see an Indigenous woman restoring the land, leading people and animals back to where they belong.

Behind her are clear skies, purified by her presence, and ahead of her smog and pollution-filled skies that will soon be purified as well.

It's easy through Western eyes to look at this image and think that it's a role reversal, that it's just this Indigenous woman doing the same thing that Lady Columbia did, but the difference is that she is not a rider of death.

[ 29 : 59 ] She is a bringer of life. And restorative judgment does not mean that it won't be painful, that it won't come at a cost, that some things won't be destroyed.

Restorative judgment means that the goal of God's judgment and wrath is to restore life. Hopeful witnesses! Hopeful witnesses call out death because they believe in life.

We know that we will witness the riders of death, death. We see them every day. We see them around us. But do we also believe that we will witness life?

This isn't about ignoring harm or using spiritual language to say that everything will be okay. I know that there is real suffering happening in my life and your life and the lives of our neighbors.

But like Asada, can we say in the same sentence, we have seen the death parade and yet we still believe in living? Like John, can we see the riders of death for what they are and still say, God will wipe every tear from our eyes?

[ 31 : 19 ] The Church of Revelation knew suffering and they were bold witnesses against injustice. But they also knew life.

They built mutual aid networks that undermined imperial power. They held dinner parties with radical equity and hospitality, shattering the social structures of the time.

Through small communities and small acts of faithfulness, they planted seeds. they were hopeful witnesses.

John's audience didn't just come to this hope on their own. They needed John's visions and they needed each other. The same is true today.

We need each other so that we can imagine our way back to hope when we lose sight of it. we need each other to plant seeds when it feels fruitless.

[ 32 : 25 ] We need each other to take over at the oars when we are exhausted. We need each other to become hopeful witnesses, to believe in life.

I'm going to close by going back to those words of Asada Shakur. I believe in living. I believe that seeds grow into sprouts and sprouts grow into trees.

I believe in life. And I have seen the death parade march through the torso of the earth, sculpting mud bodies in its path. I have seen the destruction of the daylight, and I have seen bloodthirsty maggots prayed to and saluted.

But I believe in living. I believe in the sweat of love and in the fire of truth.

And I believe that a lost ship steered by tired, seasick sailors can still be guided home to port. work.

[ 33 : 39 ] And I