

Revelation

*Part Eighteen
Behold, A White Horse
(Revelation 6:1-8)*

With Study Questions

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*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
212-6999
pastorpaul@branchofhope.org
www.branchofhope.org
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Behold, A White Horse

(Revelation 6:1-8)

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."

² 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.

³ When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come and see." ⁴ 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.

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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."

⁷ When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come and see." ⁸ 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 6:1-8).

Introduction

It would be an understatement to say that British writer, G. K. Chesterton (1874 - 1936) had a way with words. We are now entering the portion of the Revelation where a quotation from Chesterton is most suitable.

Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision. He saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.

A commentary is a book designed to help us understand what the Bible means. I am not entirely sure what Chesterton's view of the Revelation

actually was. But it is here where the serious Bible student must pursue a charitable and cautious disposition. But this also must be done with an uncompromising quest for the truth and fruit found in this final book in the Scriptures. There are consequences for error, even if unintentional.

It was in this neighborhood of Revelation that I, about thirty years ago, found all the commentaries immensely unhelpful. It just so happened that all of my commentaries were of a singular view of end times. I didn't even know there were other options. As I've explained before, it was then that I ended a sermon in midstream with the horrifying epiphany that I merely parroting a commentary and didn't really know what I was talking about. It is in chapter six that brothers and sisters in Christ bid a fond (hopefully amicable) eschatological farewell, only to meet again somewhere in chapter twenty.

You may wonder, 'What's the big deal? Many Christians have disagreements on what is meant by certain passages in the Bible.' But the differing views of the identity of who is on this "**white horse**" may be the mother of all disagreements. The range of conclusions of the rider of this horse extends from Christ Himself to the antichrist. We must acknowledge that an error of this magnitude has severe consequences.

Let us prayerfully approach the opening of these seals and what it means. This morning we will look at the first four. There may not be a portion of the Revelation that has made more appearances in western literature (also sports, films, music, etc.) than the opening of these four seals, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

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."² 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).

Before we get into the disagreements on who is sitting on the white horse, we need to (hopefully briefly) discuss the disagreements on the seals themselves. Here we have seven seals. Soon we'll read of seven trumpets then seven bowls. In all of these we will also see a similar pattern of four, then two, then one in terms emphasis and category. Again briefly, the views of the seven seals:

- A progressive opening of the contents. As if a seal is removed and a portion of the scroll is opened. The weakness of this view is that the seven seals, at least historically/contextually all must be removed before a scroll could be opened. Also, there is good reason to conclude that these events aren't chronological (seal six is judgment but seal seven, and chapter seven, shows the judgment withheld).
- An overview, or scan, of history from Christ's first coming to His second coming. The weakness of this is that there is nothing in these chapters (like, for example, the appeal to a thousand years, as in chapter twenty) to warrant such a conclusion.
- The preliminary events just prior to the Second Coming. The obvious difficulty with this (very popular) view is that there is little evidence that the original readers would draw this conclusion. Add to that that they've already been told, more than once, that they are being informed of events "**which must soon take place**" (**Revelation 1:1**).
- Forces in a general, ideological sense, which will be operative throughout the history of the New Testament age. This is a more popular view in today's Reformed community, but it fails to recognize clear, specific, historical references contained in the book.

How you determine the breaking of the seals determines how you interpret the rest of the book. From here on I'll operate on the assumption that there is a fifth view more naturally flowing from the context of the passage. Simply put, the opening of the seals is not progressive, not a span of history, not preliminary to the end of history and not merely ideals. The seals serve as a sort of book jacket highlighting what's in the book (or in the scroll). Once the final seal is opened, the events of the scroll begin to take place.

Perhaps more importantly is, who is doing all this? When does (or did) it happen and why? How is this ministerial? How does this give glory to God? How are the original recipients of this letter comforted and challenged to persevere and overcome as a result of the words we are now reading? What does it mean to us? Today's popular view, a view which is the source of numerous books and movies, asserts that this white horse is ridden by the antichrist. It is the antichrist who assumes power and control of history. In

his immensely popular book, *There's A New World Coming*, Hal Lindsey wrote:

Who is the white horse rider? It's the Antichrist himself! In the symbology of the ancient world a white steed stood for conquest...Eventually the whole world will claim him as its sovereign. It becomes obvious that the only person who could accomplish all of these feats at this particular stage of the seven-year Tribulation is the person called the Antichrist.¹

I am having a difficult time getting my arms around how one can exclude Christ from having the ability to “accomplish all of these feats,” but there are numerous reasons why this is a misguided, and harmful, conclusion.

The color white itself all through Revelation has to do with Christ. White hair (1:14), white stone (2:17), walk with Him in white (3:4), white garments (3:5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13, 14) a white cloud (14:14), white throne (20:11), not to mention another reference to a rider of a white horse in 19:11 who everyone acknowledges to be Christ.

Also, in chapter five, where we read that Christ has “**overcome**” *enikesen* to open the scroll, it is the same root word for “conquer” *nikon* in chapter six. Arguments go on and on which reveal how this language of conquering is used to depict what is done by God (see Psalm 45:3-5; Habakkuk 3:9, 13 and more).

Perhaps all of this is resisted because we don't feel comfortable with the image it gives of Jesus playing such an aggressive role in dethroning evil in history. But, and not to jump ahead, let us examine those on whom these judgments fall and their assessment of who is doing all of this, their cry is,

...hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb (Revelation 6:16)!

It is not the wrath of the antichrist. It is the “**wrath of the Lamb.**” One of the problems we have with the cultural presentation of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is that we tend to see them riding side by side, as if they are equals. But this is not the image of the vision. Jesus comes conquering.

¹ Lindsey, *A New World Coming*, p 103.

He, and He only, of the four has a crown. And in His train are the other three horses.

We needn't go into great detail on the three horses which follow. The message is obvious.

When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come and see." ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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."⁷ When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come and see." ⁸ 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 6:3-8).

What we will find as we examine this further is that even though all of this is from the Divine hand of the Lamb (we should never think of Christ as idle while evil prevails), the way it works itself out in history is from person to person.

The "red" horse is a symbol of blood where peace is taken from the earth. Warfare follows when Christ is rejected. The atheistic, communist leaders of the twentieth century bitterly proved that point. In the current historic context, the peace would be taken from Jerusalem (a name which, ironically, means "dwelling of peace.") by the Roman armies.

The promise in Isaiah is that the fruit of Christ in the world will be peace. But in order for this to be accomplished, evil must be deposed. In chapter nineteen, Christ on the white horse brings the gospel. Here Christ on the white horse takes rank against those who are committed to wickedness. It's been suggested, with some merit, that the taking of peace from the earth is not necessarily the same as inciting men to fight. He simply orders His angels to take away the conditions of peace. All that must happen in order for the rider of the red horse to succeed is to allow men to follow their own natures.

The “**black horse**” expresses the inevitable consequences of warfare. It amounts to a scarcity of food. The amounts given teach that people will work their entire day to simply eat. Not doing harm to the oil and wine means that the economic deprivation will not be enough, by itself, to destroy. At this juncture, God’s judgment will not be total.

The fourth horse has a color that translators have a difficult time with. It’s “**pale**” which is a greenish, greyish color. It’s been compared to a corpse. On this horse is “**Death and Hades**” meaning death and the place of death. Yet another argument for understanding Christ at the helm, since we learned in Revelation 1:18 that it is Christ who holds the keys of “**Death and Hades.**”

The killing we see with the red horse continues but added to this is “**famine...pestilence...wild beasts**” (ESV). All of these things recorded by the first century historian, Josephus, who did not have access to the Revelation, as happening to Jerusalem at the hand of the Romans and each other.

For the sake of understanding this kind of language, since so many view this as the Second Coming (which there will be a literal, physical Second Coming of Christ. Just not here), let us grasp how this language is used in the Bible. In Ezekiel we read,

For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast (Ezekiel 14:21)!

The above passage, utilizing very similar language found in Revelation 6, is referencing the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The current passage is referencing the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. This will become even clearer in the second half of the chapter.

Conclusion

Let us not conclude here by merely musing at these scriptural prophecies of cataclysm. This was not written for the amusement of the seven churches in Asia Minor. It was written, revealed, with a clear design. The recurring theme of chapters two and three is a call to faithfulness, to persevere, to overcome in the face of religious and political oppression. In the

face of what appeared to be overwhelming odds. These churches need to know that God would keep His promise.

God had promised to preserve His covenant people, to **“bless those”** who bless them and to **“curse”** those who curse them (Abraham 12:3). Samuel John Stone’s 19th century hymn, *The Church’s One Foundation*, which interestingly enough quotes Revelation 6:10 (“How long, O Lord”) contains the very biblical proposition that “The church shall never perish, her dear Lord to defend.”

These early churches, and all who find themselves in similar discouragements, needed to know that they were currently citizens of an **“everlasting kingdom” (Psalm 145:13)**. It is much easier to appear to be faithful when the strong current of social dynamics is supportive of Christian ethos. But there was no such ethos for these seven churches and, going back to Stone’s hymn, there were many false sons in her pale. Even today we see quislings (those who collaborate with, and embrace, worldliness for their churches) are on the rise. These things are written that we might see where that ends.

And this certainly was not written, as is so popular today, to somehow explain and justify how it is God’s plan for history to descend into spiritual, moral, economic and religious collapse. It should grieve us when we read of some grotesquely immoral conquest in our culture, only to be excitedly met by the words of our Christian friends saying, “It’s the last days,” as if it’s some silver lining to the advancement of evil.

No, in chapter nineteen, with the judgment of great early oppressors of the truth, we will see the advancement of the gospel with Christ on a white horse (Revelation 19:11) and a sword coming from His mouth (Revelation 19:15). Here, the same Christ on a white horse is watching over His bride.

The kingdoms of this world which, at very best, are houses divided (Matthew 12:25) which cannot stand. There is a God in heaven who deposes kings and puts an end to kingdoms when they defy that which is good, right and truth-when they defy the God of truth Himself. It is in light of this great promise that we are called to persevere.

Questions for Study

1. What is a commentary and how can they be helpful or unhelpful (pages 2, 3)?
2. What do we see at the opening of the first four seals (page 3)?
3. Discuss the merits of the various interpretations of the seven seals (pages, 3 4).
4. Who is on the white horse? What is He doing? Why is this important (pages 5, 6)?
5. How are we to understand the other three horsemen (pages 6, 7)?
6. How would the churches in Asia Minor have been encouraged by this type of vision? What is the encouragement for the church through the ages (pages 7, 8)?