

SEALS OF SIGNIFICANCE

Scripture Lesson: Revelation 6

Text: Revelation 6:1ff

Songs: "Awesome God;" "Speak, O Lord;" R460; "I Give You My Heart"

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus Our Lord,

People wonder where we are in Revelation; not the chapter, but the time frame. Revelation does not define time sequence, but it doesn't really matter. There is a simple illustration that even the girls and boys can understand. You see your mother making sandwiches late at night. You say, "Mom, we already ate supper. Why are you making sandwiches just before bedtime?" Then your mother says, "Dad and I decided to take all you kids on a picnic tomorrow, a surprise fun day for our family." You are surprised and happy! Revelation is a lot like that. God's ultimate goal is give us a great picnic in heaven, a really happy time. Yet for the picnic to happen He first has to make all the preparations. Those preparations may not be in chronological order. Maybe they are: The picnic is planned, mother goes to the store, father packs the car, and you go on the picnic. Maybe father says, "I have the day off. Let's take the kids on a picnic. What do you have in the house to make for sandwiches?" The picnic is no different, but the order of preparation can be different. God's plan for us to have a great eternity with Him never changes, but how all the details leading up that happen are not always in strict chronological order. They are sometimes random, seemingly impulsive, and difficult to determine the order. That planning for the eternal picnic is what we have pictured in Revelation. Perhaps that helps you sort out the events that John's vision reveals to us. Now we are ready for "The Seals of Significance," chapter 6.

"V. 1." Remember, the Lamb alone was worthy to open the seals. He opens the first seal. When that seal is opened, one of the four living creatures says in a voice like thunder, "Come!" Earlier it was the angel inviting John to come and see, but now the living creature is calling to first of the "Four horsemen of the Apocalypse."

"V. 2." Let's pause to look more closely at this phenomenon of the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." So much has been written about them. Those of you who read Hal Lindsey books probably know that he asserts this first rider is Antichrist. Those of you who have dabbled in pre-millennialism know how significant these four horsemen are to all who follow that approach to interpreting the last book of the Bible. For them, these are key and critical creatures for understanding Revelation and the world in which we live.

What about the approach that we have been taking to Revelation, the approach that says Revelation is an extension of the first 65 books of the Bible and is tied closely to them? We see Habbakuk's prayer recorded in Habbakuk 3 as background to Revelation 6. We also see in the four horsemen of Revelation the imagery of Zechariah 6:1-7, which pictures the Four Winds as God's chariots driven by His agents who go back and forth patrolling the earth. We have seen that the Bible pictures the earth as God's four-cornered altar. We see the horsemen as God's way of controlling and bringing judgment upon the disobedient nation of Israel. These four horsemen picture what Christ talked about in Matthew 24:6,7, "Matthew 24:6,7." Like the four successive swarms of locusts in Joel 1, like the riders on different colored horses in Zechariah 1, like the four chariots drawn by four different colored horses in Zechariah 6, these four judgments of Jehovah move forward at the command of the living creatures. The writings of the secular historian, Josephus, describe in dramatic detail how the events pictured here happened in the bloody war of Rome against Jerusalem.

When you tie Revelation 6:2 with the rest of Scripture you discover that it is not Antichrist on the white horse, but Christ Himself. The white horse in Revelation always is the horse of victory. In Revelation 19:11 we read, "Revelation 19:11." By verse 16 this Rider on the white horse is called "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." In

Habbakuk's prayer the Warrior-King is carrying a bow, "Habbakuk 3:9,11." John also appeals to Psalm 45, "Psalm 45:3-5." Where did Christ get this bow? The boys and girls know. He got it from the most famous

1

bow we know, the rainbow. In Genesis 8 we read that after the flood, "Genesis 8:20,21." Then in Genesis 9 we read, "Genesis 9:12,13." Ezekiel saw that bow in the Throne Room of God right at the beginning of his vision. We read in the first chapter, "Ezekiel 1:26-28." Now John sees the bow again, the brilliance of the rainbow, as God's covenant sign. Notice how tightly Revelation is linked with the rest of the Bible.

In the Roman Empire the Emperor who conquered rode into the city on a white horse. Taking that picture from their culture, Christ is pictured riding victoriously. The Romans had one conquest after another. That is how they amassed the greatest empire the world has ever seen. So Christ is conquering and will conquer. In high school we used to sing the song based on Revelation 6:2, "Conquering now and still to conquer rides a king in his might." The Message translates this, "He rode off victorious, conquering right and left."

"V. 3." " Now the pageantry repeats itself.

"V. 4." The red horse goes across the earth and takes away peace. Flavius Josephus in his book The Jewish Wars, chapters 2,3, and 4 tells how the prophecies of Revelation and the Gospels parallel the events of Israel's last days leading up to Emperor Titus' siege of Jerusalem. The universal Roman peace was taken away.

"V. 5." Notice how the pattern continues. The scales picture a time of scarcity. In Ezekiel 4 we read how the inhabitants of Jerusalem had to weigh out their food very carefully because there was so little to eat.

"V. 6." This black horseman brings famine that leads to economic hardship. The prices mentioned in this verse represent a 1000% inflation of the basic necessities of life. What if you lost your job in an economic collapse and at the same time a loaf of bread cost \$1,000.00. That is what John speaks of in this verse. Hyper-inflation.

"V. 7." Here goes again.

"V. 8." This horse is the color of a person moments after death and the rider is called Death and Hades. This is a summary of the covenantal curses that God gives in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. They also parallel God's four categories of curses that Ezekiel writes about in Ezekiel 5 and 14. There we read, "Ezekiel 14:21." This concludes the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Christ or anti-Christ, war, famine, and death.

You say, "How can Christians read Revelation and come to opposite conclusions about the first rider?" How can Christians read any part of the Bible and come to opposite conclusions? How can some read it and say infants should be baptized and others say only adults should be? How can some read the Bible and say women may not serve in the church council, some say they may be deacons, and some say they may be deacons, elders, and pastors? It is the same Bible inspired by the same Holy Spirit. Obviously the difference comes because we are sinners grasping with truths that are far above us. John Calvin taught that as complex as the Bible is, the Bible is God speaking to us in His baby talk. John Calvin says just as the first noises we make to an infant are often not real words, but we bend our communication to their level, so God must bend His communication to us. Even though God bends His communication to us, we still have trouble grasping everything. The two opposite interpretations of the White horse are an example of our inability to grasp everything God has said. It should teach us patience with one another. It should teach us to welcome diverse points of view knowing that the best way to arrive at the truth is examine different perspectives.

Let me say why I see this as Christ as on the white horse. I know the seeming conflict of Christ both opening seals and being the rider at the same time. Yet Christ is everywhere present. I know the seeming conflict of having Christ associated with war, famine, and death. Yet we know that when Christ is in control these bad things turn into profitable things. We wring our hands over the two World Wars of the past century, yet out of those wars we have developed wonderful technology. Television was invented to help win the war, but now TV has changed our lives. Famine is no fun, but we learn then to lean on the Living Bread, the Lord Jesus.

Death

2

is our last enemy, yet Christ even conquers death. Christ takes everything and does what the baptismal form says, "He averts all evil or turns it to our profit." As the lead rider he is able to do that. Christ leading the way confirms our Reformed view of His sovereignty over all of life, even death and eternal life. Besides, the rider comes back in Revelation 19 where He is obviously Christ. Those are my reasons, but you may certainly follow others who have a contrasting point of view about the first rider on the white horse.

"V. 9." The church on earth would lose some of its best and most vocal members to persecution. John is able to see the heavenly result. Those people are now in heaven. The Bible often pictures heaven as a temple. We use that language when we begin morning worship, "Habakkuk 2:20." John was struck by the symbolism that these souls were "under the altar." That pictures persecution by the Jews. The very people entrusted with the covenant are the ones who now lead the charge against the church. That is something the church does not forget, and neither does God. That propels people into Jewish missions. As a denomination we have had specific Jewish missions to God's original covenant people, but today we partner with "Jews for Jesus."

"V. 10." These Christians want vengeance. Sounds strange to our ears, doesn't it? Yet that shows how far we have come with cultural Christianity. The original hymns of the church, the Psalms, often ask God to avenge evildoers, but we are conditioned by the softer evangelical hymns of today that mute the vengeance of God and magnify the love of God. Revelation reminds us that the true songs of the church are the Psalms. Psalms present us with a mix and balance that is inspired by the Holy Spirit that includes both vindication for God's justice and holiness as well as emphasis on His love and mercy.

"V. 11." In this verse we see the pattern of seven in Revelation. There were seven letters, now seven seals of significance. The first seal involves a white horse, the fifth seal white robes. Don't miss that symmetry! God is a God of order. God's answer is that they should wait until all the saints are gathered in. We are still waiting.

"V. 12." Now the moon turns red, same as the second horse, and the sun turns black, same as the third horse. What we see in verse 12 is the beginning of the de-creation. Biblical authors often write about the undoing of creation. There is a de-creation as our sinful world comes to a close leading to a re-creation in glory. The Old Testament follows a pattern of earth, sun, moon, stars, sky, land, and man. Here we see the first signs of that de-creation: People tremble as the earth shakes, the sun goes black, and the moon turns to blood red.

"V. 13." Now the stars fall. The picture of the fig tree reminds of Christ's curse of the fig tree.

"V. 14." Now the sky goes. It is rolled up like a scroll. Scroll reminds us that this is the document whose seals are being broken. When it speaks of mountains and islands being moved we see the destruction of the land. In the old Hebrew order only man is left. He was created last, and now only people remain.

"V. 15." Now the de-creation of the human race begins. It begins with kings and drifts down to the slaves and common people. Christ said the first would be last and the last would be first. Here is this reverse order again. Not amount of privilege or status allows one to escape. All are doomed.

“V. 16.” They ask the mountains and rocks to fall on them. General revelation is removed. People are now face to face with God. There is nowhere else to hide. It is over.

“V. 17.” The initial meaning of this was the destruction of Israel. That has happened. The end of the world is still coming. We Christians know there is just one way to face the end of life and the end of the world: With Christ. Are you ready to meet the Lord? Many say these are the last days. If they are or aren't, are you ready?