

Sermon 26: Revelation 6: The 7 Seals (part 1)

OUTLINE

The four horsemen

The martyrs

INTRODUCTION

In all 7 letters in Revelation there is a promise to the one who conquers. John was writing at a time of great trial and the people of God were being called upon to be holy and true in the midst of suffering. The book of Revelation cannot be understood unless seen as a book written to a situation where the church is harassed. Many times in the first three chapters we hear about the tribulation that the church was experiencing and the need for endurance. We noted how the church and the world are thrown into tribulation together but God has separate purposes for each. For the church He seeks holiness but against the seeks He is pouring out judgement. Having reminded these struggling churches of the fact of the resurrected Christ who has all authority to rule showing all of history to be an outworking of Him breaking the seals upon the scroll of God's purposes chapter 6 describes the outpouring of Christ's judgements, the suffering of the church and the final resolution on Judgement Day. We see the description of the hour of trial going to be poured out upon the whole world (3:10) and the way in which the church goes through it but is also preserved at the same time. This chapter is intended to comfort suffering Christians showing that Christ is in control, faithful Christians are protected and that evil is finally punished.

The Four Horsemen

Christ's reign in history relevant for this suffering church is set in motion with the opening of the first seal. V1, 'Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!"' Christ breaks the seal and we hear one of the four living creatures cry out 'Come.' There is a real tension in the air as one sits on edge waiting to see what God's plan holds. The Cherubim calls out come. There are 3 differing views on the significance of the angels cry. Some think that it is a call for John to come and see. Others think that it is the Cherubim calling forth the rider, connecting the four riders with God's angels as in Zechariah. Others combine this cry from the angels with the cry of the martyrs 'how long' to indicate creations longing for the Second Coming of Christ; a type of answering moan to the terrible judgements being poured out. The second view of seeing the riders come as a response to angelic summons seems to fit better with the overarching theme of Christ's control and sovereignty. It must not be forgotten that whatever the seals hold they are from the throne of Christ's authority and the irresistible plan of God.

V2, 'And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.' In our last message I tried to outline the ways in which some have identified the white rider. For some it is Christ, for

others it is the antichrist, for others it is the Roman emperor. I believe that any specific identification is forced and misses the general effect intended by the four horsemen. If any identification must be made we would have to say that the rider is related to the angelic as the four horsemen in Zechariah's prophecy are.

We also want to reject any attempts to make pronouncements about which time the riders represent. Some see the horses as representing the period of about 100 years others see the horsemen as representing periods of Rome's attack against Jerusalem. I take the four horsemen as a whole. There is an obvious logical connection between the four, and if these horsemen are borrowed from Zechariah we see in Zechariah that the four horsemen were sent out simultaneously not with long gaps between them.

Notice the logic in the four horsemen. First there is conquest. White horses were used by Julius Caesar, and white robes given to victors in the games. Bows and crowns are obvious symbols of war and authority. Naturally joined to this would be second red horse, red related to blood, anger and war. And so we peace being taken from the earth, v4, 'And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.' Christ Himself used the picture of a sword when speaking of conflict and division, Matt. 10:34, 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.' The third horse is black and speaks of economic hardship, v5-6, 'When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. 6 And I heard what seemed to be 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 wine!"' Scales are used for measuring products for sale. And the price of the wheat indicates a day's worth of wheat for a day's worth of labour. In other words, living from hand to mouth, the lower quality barley would have to be the main source of food at inflated prices. Meanwhile the luxury items of oil and wine would be untouched. The idea of the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer would not be far off the mark here. Conquest followed by wars and divisions followed by economic hardship, there is an obvious flow of logic here. Then we have the fourth horse, the pale horse the colour of a dead corpse, v8, 'And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.' The conditions of death are taken from Ezekiel 14:21, "'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!'

There are some similarities to the fall of Jerusalem and Rome but this is not because these verses are detailing the specifics of future events, but rather they are speaking in terms of the common principles of how God judges. This chapter has been favourably compared with Matthew 24. Matthew 24 you will remember is Jesus response to three questions prompted by His comments about the destruction of the temple. The questions were about the fall of Jerusalem, the sign of Christ's coming and the close of the age (v3). After the warning of false Christ's Christ mentions events known as the 'birth pains'. We would understand the birth pains to be the preamble to the end, which so far has lasted nearly

2000 years. These birth pains sound just like the four horsemen, v6-8, 'And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.' Wars, divisions, and famines, all of it resulting in death. It is as if Christ is saying to His suffering Church, 'Do you see, there is nothing new here, this was all foretold and is to be expected.'

At the time of writing the Roman Empire would have been the instruments and the target of God's judgement, but we do not see the text's meaning exhausted by Rome merely demonstrated. The satanic forces to be revealed later in the book remind us that the real enemy is not merely Rome but spiritual in nature and can have many manifestations in history. The tribulation in the form of persecution is not yet revealed in the book of Revelation but it is implied throughout. The fifth seal is a perfect example of the undercurrent of persecution in this chapter. Before the powers of this world are portrayed as persecutors of God's people they are revealed as puppets fulfilling God's purposes. Before the devil is revealed to be the real enemy guiding the nations to fight against the church, the nations are seen to be fulfilling God's purposes of a more general conquest affecting all as Christ unseals the seals. We are being introduced to a general description of events which later will be revealed to be a church centred purpose. Here we are being taught an important philosophy of history. What might appear as the arbitrary rise and fall of nations with the church as marginal is in fact a spiritual war with the church as central.

The unsealing of the seals bringing about the birth pains assures the Church of Christ's control; and the fact that they come in the form of the four horsemen show God's purpose of judgement against the nations in these actions. These two chapters of 6-7 have strong undercurrents of God preserving His people. The four horsemen in Zechariah were instruments of judgement against those who had done injustice to God's people; the fifth seal shows us how God's people are martyred but are victorious in their white robes and at rest in God's presence; and chapter 7 uses the OT idea of sealing to show how God preserves His people.

These are the lessons of the four horsemen. They are not hooks upon which we can attach specific persons, places or events in order to know exact details. No they are conveying theological lessons and principles. They communicate Christ's rule behind the chaos of the birth pains; they tell us of trials foreordained and controlled by our loving Saviour who has already done so much for us; and they tell us of a God active in judgement. It may seem cold comfort to us that God is in control and active against the world in judgement, but this is the well-worn way in which God comforted His people in the OT. It signifies His covenant loyalty and faithfulness; it indicates a Husband active on our behalf.

The Martyrs

Before we see a mention of persecution we see the comfort of the saints, v9-11, 'When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the

word of God and for the witness they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" 11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.' The fifth seal reminds us that the 7 seals are not concerned to chronicle a series of events but to make a theological point. We see the fifth seal answering the question, but what about the church?

A pervasive theme in Revelation is one of God's presence as the heavenly temple. In the place of the Ark of the Covenant we have God's throne; in the place of the laver we have the sea like glass; the place of an altar we have the altar mentioned here, and chapter 8:1-5 continues this picture of God's presence as a heavenly temple with incense and a golden censure. In these verses we see the saints offered as a type of sacrifice. Their souls like blood under an altar are said to cry out. This is not to indicate that they somehow obtain any forgiveness for our sins but rather speak of their lives offered to God in death. We are told that they were slain for the word of God, because of their witness for Him. Here is a graphic portrayal of exactly what God expects of His people, that they would gladly give their lives in the spiritual battle dying for the truth that He is God and Saviour.

We see that God puts some words in their mouths, these are deliberate and communicate some very important ideas, 'They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"' Notice that although they have died in the Lord's service they do not doubt His power, He is called 'Sovereign', nor do they doubt His faithfulness, they call Him 'true'. They cry out to God for vengeance for their blood. This might surprise us, but we need to remember that these perfected spirits are not indulging in sin but viewing the wrongness of the world waging war against the saints and calling out for God to right the wrongs. This cry equates to, 'Thy Kingdom come.' This cry would resonate with those on earth who are still suffering. V11 is intended to be a reminder and a balm for those still in the battle field who may be struggling with all the apparent losses the church is taking. 'Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.' The white robe indicates victory and purity. They are told to 'rest' a little longer indicating the nature of their heavenly existence, their work is over and the pain is ended. And an explanation of God's patience is given. God is not indifferent against the church but is in fact working for the church by being patient. God is waiting for the church to be made whole, for every number of the elect to come in. Time will end when God's plan for the church is fulfilled. The church is the apple of God's eye and the centre of what is driving His plan in history. We are not neglected or forgotten, the church is the very reason why the suffering endures. The words of Peter are very relevant here, 2 Pet. 3:8-10, 'But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens

will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.'

We see that the saints are not exempt from suffering but called to faithful witness through it. That glory awaits the faithful and all the apparent failure is in fact all under God's supervision as He fulfils to the nth degree His plan for the church. The apparent disregard of God as measured by the suffering of the church which would have been extreme in the first century is in fact deliberate and the means by which God is progressing His purposes. In fact we could argue as many have before that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church and that it is a suffering church which is God's tool for converting the powerful.

In 320 AD, 'The Roman governor stood resolutely before the forty Roman soldiers of the Thundering Legion. 'I command you to make an offering to the Roman gods. If you will not, you will be stripped of your military status.'

The forty soldiers all believed firmly in the Lord Jesus. They knew they must not deny Him or sacrifice to the Roman idols, no matter what the Roman governor would do to them. Candidus spoke for the Legion, 'Nothing is dearer or of greater honour to us than Christ our God.'

The governor then tried other tactics to get them to deny their faith. First he offered them money and imperial honours. Then he threatened them with torments and torture with the rack and with fire. Candidus replied, 'You offer us money that remains behind and glory that fades away. You seek to make us friends of the Emperor, but alienate us from the true King. We desire one gift, the crown of righteousness. We are anxious for one glory, the glory of the heavenly kingdom. We love honours, those of heaven. You threaten fearful torments and call our godliness a crime, but you will not find us fainthearted or attached to this life or easily stricken with terror. For the love of God, we are prepared to endure any kind of torture.'

The governor was enraged. Now he wanted them to die a slow, painful death. They were stripped naked and herded to the middle of a frozen lake. He set soldiers to guard them to prevent any from coming to shore and escaping. The forty encouraged each other as though they were going to battle. 'How many of our companions in arms fell on the battle front, showing themselves loyal to an earthly king? Is it possible for us to fail to sacrifice our lives in faithfulness to the true King? Let us not turn aside, O warriors, let us not turn our backs in flight from the devil.' They spent the night courageously bearing their pain and rejoicing in the hope of soon being with the Lord.

To torment the Christians, baths of hot water were put around the lake. With these the governor hoped to weaken the firm resolve of the freezing men. He told them, 'You may come ashore when you are ready to deny your faith.' In the end, one of them did weaken, came off the ice, and got into a warm bath.

When one of the guards on the shore saw him desert, he himself took the place of the traitor. Surprising everyone with the suddenness of his conversion, he threw off his clothes, and ran to join the naked ones on the ice, crying out loudly, 'I am a Christian.'¹

1 Jesus Freaks, p96-97.

