

The Apocalypse | Finding Composure in the Unveiled Christ

“A Meditation on Suffering and Hope”

Revelation 6-7 (6.1-8; 7.9ff)

5.23.21

6.1 Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, "Come." 2 I looked, and behold, a white horse, and 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 broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come." 4 And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men would slay one another; and a great sword was given to him. 5 When He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, "Come." 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 something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine." 7 When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come." 8 I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him. Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.

7.9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; 10 and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen." 13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?" 14 I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 "For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. 16 "They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; 17 for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

We're looking at the Book of Revelation and now we enter the "heavy lifting" part of the Book. This is the start of the three cycles that, for a number of reasons, give us trouble: these judgments of the seals (not marine mammals – but a wax/lead stamp on a document or envelope) the SEVEN seals, SEVEN trumpets and the SEVEN bowls/plagues.

We will eventually see how these three sets of seven relate to one another (as soon as I figure it out – I'll pass it on to YOU!). Today, we'll concentrate on the first four SEALS and the fact that as each is opened a horse and rider are summoned. These are known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

I'll mention in a moment that this is where scholars begin to really disagree about the meaning of the symbols in this apocalyptic literature but amidst the controversy, I don't want to miss the BIG IDEA of this whole letter – this is the Revelation of Jesus Christ – an unveiling that's meant to bless all who read it and take it to heart AND meant to furnish the early Christian Church and all later generations with HOPE/COMPOSURE in the face of pain and loss and trouble. It's a book of pastoral concern.

So, let's see what HOPE we can find in these two chapters. Focusing on the start and finish of this unit, let's see how this unveiled view of the Lion/Lamb opening the frightful seals is actually good news and can furnish us with real poise and hope as we face often confusing and painful stuff in this world - especially the stuff that tempts us to doubt if this Christian message real and worth it:

Let's look at: 1) Debriding
2) Outpouring
3) Ingathering

I'll talk about that word – debriding (debridement) in a minute. (Warning: DO not look this up on the inter-webs!)

I want to take a really fast overview of these chapters. The breaking of the seals of the Book/scroll by the One worthy – the Lion who became great by becoming a Lamb and dying for His people (last week).

This week He (Jesus Christ) opens the seals. The first four introduce The Four Horsemen.

Then there are the 5th and 6th seals (lighter print – vv. 9-17) with the souls of the martyrs (crying out from under the altar – as if they'd been sacrificed and their blood cries out for justice). The sun is blotted out. The moon becomes like blood. The stars fall from the sky and the sky is opened. The mountains and islands are moved. People great and small go hiding from God and from the wrath of the Lamb.

Then there's the 144,000 who are sealed from every tribe in Israel... And as John had been told to look at the Lion but what he saw was a Lamb...So, now, he looks at the 144,000 and he sees instead a "great multitude that no one could count... from every tribe (not only the twelve tribes of Israel) but an innumerable crowd from every nation Jew and Gentile clothed in white, singing before the throne of God/the Lamb.

Now, what we had HOPED for and even expected after the Lamb came forward and was counted worthy to open the seals and initiate God's Plan – we anticipated the healing of the world. We expected something wonderful... What we got instead is the Four Horsemen and destruction.

The Conqueror (White Horse), the Red Horse/Rider who removes the superficial appearance of peace. The Black Horse who makes economic trouble and food becomes scarce (for the poor) but the rich can still find their comfort-foods (wine/oil). The scale is a symbol for scarcity/shortage.

And finally the Ashen Horse – green (chloros – like chlorophyll): the rider is death. The grave/hades sits on back and they take ¼ of the earth's population by all forms of "un-natural" death (caused by sword, famine, pestilence and wild animals).

Now – three notes here: 1) I did a lot of reading this week. In particular I read in two giant NT scholars (both wrote massive commentaries – one 1,000 pages and the other 1,300 pages). One said the white horse was Satan and the other said He was Jesus Christ. What's a pastor to DO?!

It would be so easy to fixate on that difference and yet we think of the student's verse: Ecclesiastes 12: "my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body." (v.12).

I'm not being anti-intellectual. I read both arguments but I had to come back to that main purpose of the Book: to help believers overcome and to bless those who read/heed this prophecy.

We have to read it that way.

2) This stuff already happens. Do we really need a REVELATION for this? There have been pandemics – plagues – black death – wild beasts (BTW – do you know the wild beast that has killed the most human beings? Bears? Sharks? Pitbulls? – NOPE! Mosquitos!) But the Revelation is NOT that these horrible things HAVE HAPPENED or DO HAPPEN or WILL HAPPEN – it's that the Lion/Lamb is IN CHARGE OF THEM AND IS UNLEASHING THEM. He's the One who opens the seals.

Whoever is riding the horse – that horse and its rider/results are all under the dominion of the Lion who became strong by becoming weak and dying in the place of His people.

That's the Revelation.

AND 3) that brings me to this wonderful and hideous word (title of our first point) *debridng*.

Debridement is the medical removal of dead, damaged, or infected tissue to improve the healing potential of the remaining healthy tissue. Removal may be surgical, mechanical, chemical, autolytic, or by biological therapy. (BTW biological debridement uses baby flies).

See, God railed against the false prophets in Jeremiah's day saying, "They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace,' But there is no peace." (6.14)

A doctor can't simply stitch up a diseased wound. It has to be deeply cleansed – debridement. And Jesus Christ will tear down before He builds up. He won't heal superficially or just sweep the yucky stuff under the carpet.

He will do ON A GRAND scale what a wound specialist has to do on a small scale. He will use the forces of nature and economics and war and human conflict to rock the world. Before the world becomes God's Temple – He must first tear down the Tower of Babel.

But the really comforting thing about that is that HE IS NOT A TAME LION – but HE IS GOOD!

On the Day of Pentecost – redemptive shame was unleashed on the world like fire falling from heaven. Peter used some of the very same language as is used in today's passage – vv 12-14 He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became dark ... and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places

Quoting the Prophet Joel, Peter said, "I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Act 2.19-21)

Some scholars from early Christianity saw last week's text as an upside-down view of Jesus Christ's Ascension and THIS WEEK'S PASSAGE as a view of what happened NEXT: Pentecost from the view of Heaven (behind-the-scenes).

In other words – because of the One worthy, who did all the will of God (like no human had ever done) and because He died in my place and took what I DESERVED – now He's able to pour out the Spirit on all flesh (Jew/Gentile alike).

And MAYBE that's what this passage is really about – take note of the rushing wind (as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind) and we'll see next week that after the Seventh Seal is opened the angel pours out hot coals and Pentecostal fire on the earth.

Hot coals are a symbol of redemptive shame ("But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he's thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." - Rom 12.20)

The Holy Spirit who comes as a mighty rushing wind, as tongues of fire as the One who works redemptive shame to convict the world of sin, judgment and righteousness (John 16.8) IS THE SPIRIT WHO COMES AT PENTECOST because a perfect Man obeyed and trusted God completely and is worthy – worthy to initiate the coming of the Kingdom to the whole world.

And that's what's happening here: using very powerful, evocative images, God is showing us how He will heal the world NOT SUPERFICIALLY but right down to its roots – deep healing.

He will bring about this healing by a Man – a perfect Adam who takes a Bride and brings to life a New People, an international Nation "a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"

God planted Israel like a seed. But the One (Gal 3.16) worthy, the "seed of Abraham", who did all that Israel failed to do – He obeyed with beauty and grace and joy and true integrity.

He's worthy to pour out the Holy Spirit, to shake things up in order to gather in the full number of His people – the 12 x 12 x 1,000 (144,000) – the maxed-out uber complete church from every skin color and economic level and culture and language and location – anyone who confesses his/her inadequacies and rebellion against God and comes to God through the Seed of Israel – the One worthy.

John sees the 144,000 and they become the multitude no one can count. This was God's plan that Jesus Christ alone could realize.

He pours out Pentecostal Fire on the earth...and the Spirit turns the fearful sheep (the cowering apostles) the Spirit turns lambs into lions.

And God is, even now, pulling into His tent – the dwelling of God – people who have been damaged and who have damaged others and have failed to do great things ("Doing great things is overrated") and failed to obey God and cried out... "called on the Name of the Lord" and have been, are being, will be saved: "and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb...'" These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in

the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

If you turn to Jesus Christ – He will swap clothes with you. He will take your soiled record of promises not kept – what you have done and what you have failed to do...He will take your guilt and drown it in a sea of forgetfulness and clothe you in beauty that no longer depends on YOUR performance. God will bring you home to the Church and to Him – into His own tent.

And God is calling us as a local church to be involved in this great Spirit-empowered ingathering. He's offering US boldness and love and all the fruit of His Spirit. He's offering us NEW eyes to see that great multitude.

He's giving us hearts that desire His fame – to reveal/unveil His glory to the world.

So...let's do it...let's participate in the ingathering by telling others who ask, "this is why we live differently... Come with us and enter this story, this destiny that ends in God, getting up from His seat and Himself wiping away our tears and housing us in His own house.

Let's tell them.