

THERE'S A GREAT DAY COMING!

Since I was out of town last Lord's Day morning, I sort of dodged the bullet on needing to prepare a lesson out of text we had for NTS that week. That was Revelation 1-4. Now I'm thinking about being gone for the next three weeks!

If you do not know what I'm talking about, just take a look at this week's reading taken from chapters 5-9. We have been dealing with a scroll with seven seals, a lion that looks like a lamb that has been slain, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, the sealing of the 144,000 and an innumerable multitude who have come out of the great tribulation, and the sounding of six of the seven trumpets. In the process of reading about those things we have seen a rider with a bow and a crown, another with a great sword, and another with a pair of scales. We saw a rider named Death being followed by Hades, and a fourth of the earth being killed with the sword, famine, pestilence and wild beasts.

There were four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth; and a casting down upon the earth of hail and fire and blood, with a third of the earth being burned up. There was a mountain that gets thrown into the sea resulting in turning one-third of the sea into blood, killing one-third of the creatures in the sea as well as a third of all ships being destroyed. We saw a star fall from heaven named Wormwood that causes a third of the waters on the earth to become bitter and killing many people. We saw the sun and the moon and the stars being struck so that a third of each source of light was lost.

When we got to chapter 9, we saw another star falling from heaven, and this one was given a key to the bottomless pit, and after he had opened it, out came smoky plumes and out of the smoky plumes came locusts with the power of scorpions, and they were allowed to torment some people for five months.

So, tell me which of those texts you would choose to preach a message on! I am being facetious, of course, but I've said all of that to say that trying to decide on what to preach this morning was not easy.

First of all there is the fact that the book of Revelation is a book that employs a great deal of symbolism and scholars are not fully sure of just what all of those symbols represent. As a matter of fact, scholars appear to be all over the map on how to even approach the book of Revelation!

Secondly, I am sure that this is by design but almost any part of the text in this book makes sense only when you can fit it into the overall picture. In other words, Revelation is not quite like something from the gospel of John, or Paul's letter to the Romans. In those books, you can easily take a given set of verses, quickly grasp the context, then parse out what it is saying and finally make some application. With Revelation, the context for any given set of verses is almost the entire book which means it is hard to bring any kind of meaningful message out of Revelation in just 20-30 minutes.

Even so, today and the next couple of Sunday mornings, we are going to give it a good old college try! If you will, please open your Bibles to **Revelation, chapter 6**, and we will be drawing our lesson from **verses 12-17**.

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13) and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. 14) The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 15) Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16) calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17) for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

You who have been staying up with our New Testament Studies will no doubt recognize this is the chapter where six of the seven seals were opened. I want to try to give you just a little bit of the context for what is found in these verses.

The book of Revelation is a book of prophecy, which means that it is telling of things that are to come. We know that from what is said in **chapter 1, verse 1**: *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.* In **verse 3**, John writes: *"Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near."* In **verse 19**, we read, *"Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this."*

So, it is a book of prophecy but it is prophecy given to us through the use of symbols. Symbols are pictures or images of things that convey an idea or message. The pink ribbon, for example, has become a symbol for the fight against breast cancer. A light bulb has become a symbol for a bright idea. In the Bible, one of the first symbols we find is the rainbow. Following the flood that destroyed the earth in the days of Noah, God gave the rainbow and said when we see that rainbow we are to remember his promise that he will never again destroy the earth in that way.

In Revelation 6 you have the symbol of a scroll that is sealed with seven seals, and the opening of six of those seven seals. Now, it is important to keep in mind that the opening of the seals does not mean that John or the reader gains an insight into what was written on both sides of the scroll. The contents of the scroll would not be able to be seen until all seven seals were opened. Insofar as what the scroll revealed, we are never told in the book of Revelation. I suspect whatever the scroll contained is something that is reserved for us when we gather with the saints on the other side of death.

Nevertheless, as each seal was opened, John did see something. In fact, he saw a great deal that he describes to us, and we don't have time in this morning's lesson to take a close look at

everything that is pointed out to us. I want to quickly present what I believe is at least one reasonable explanation for what John saw. With the opening of the first four seals you see a symbolic representation of the world as it was at that time and as it is even to today.

As the first four seals are opened, John sees four horsemen; often called the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. The first one comes out riding on a white horse, carrying a bow, and notice that a crown was given to him. He comes conquering and to conquer, verse 2 tells us. I am fairly confident that this symbolizes goodness and righteousness and truth and the fact that these things are going to have a struggle in this world. The white symbolizes purity and goodness, while horses and bows are symbols associated with war or armies. The struggle is real but so also is the outcome. Notice, the rider is “given” a crown. This is the same *stephanos*, the crown of victory that the 24 elders cast before the throne in chapter 4. Brother Coffman believes this rider symbolizes Christ or at least the cause of Christ. That may be correct, but either way, the outcome is the same. Although at times, Christians might think they are the ones who are losing in the great struggle against all of the ungodly forces at work in the world, that isn’t the case. That which is right will always ultimately triumph over that which is evil.

But there is evil in the world and that is what is symbolized in the next three horsemen who are called out, introduced if you will. The second rider came out riding on a red horse, and he is given a sword. Please note the word “given.” That suggests someone is in control, and of course we know who that Someone is. This rider comes out on a red horse, and perhaps that symbolizes bloodshed but more likely it is just a general symbol for conflict. Its rider is permitted to take peace from the earth, and that people should slay one another. The world almost from the beginning has been a place where hatred and selfishness and evil have made the world a place where peace is very hard to find. In **John 16:33**, Jesus said, *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*

The next rider symbolizes the economic disparity that exists in the world. The rider comes out on a black horse and he is carrying a pair of scales in his hand. A voice is heard declaring an unreasonable price for the basic essentials of living (well, we can identify with that, can’t we?). *“A quart of wheat or three quarts of barley for a day’s wage!”* A plea is made not to deal wickedly with oil and wine—meaning olive oil, of course. The world is a difficult place in which to live, and it is a place where it seems the wicked rich get richer and the unrighteous poor get poorer.

When the fourth seal is opened, John sees a pale horse. The one who rides that horse has a name, so we know what this symbolizes. This is death. Death is said to be followed by Hades, the place where the soul goes following death; the place where sinful souls await their judgment. Notice that Death and Hades are only permitted to take a fourth of the earth, which means again life and death remains under God’s control. But death does happen. People die from the sword, they die from hunger, and they die from disease and terrible natural tragedies.

That's the world, isn't it? It was the world back then, and it is the world today. But where is the fairness and victory in all of that? Why struggle for righteousness if everyone ends up dying anyway? The answer to that question is symbolized for us when the fifth and sixth seals are opened.

The fifth seal is opened, and instead of being in hades, John sees an altar and beneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God. This applies to the righteous and faithful souls of all ages, but it was particularly applicable to those saints living at the time of John who were suffering and being put to death. And for what were they being put to death? They were being killed because of their faith and because they wanted nothing more than to tell the world about the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Such people are heard speaking. They are crying out to God, saying "*O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?*" They are given a white robe to wear and told to rest a little longer until the full number of their company is complete.

And that is where we come to our text for this morning in **chapter 6. It is a symbolic way of describing the end of all those who do not follow after the way of goodness, righteousness and truth.** It is not a pretty picture, and like a song in our hymnbook, it says "There's a Great Day Coming."

We do not learn, and nowhere, either in the book of Revelation or anywhere else the Bible, just when this day is going to come. I take note of the fact that in **Matthew 24:36**, when asked about this very thing, Jesus said, "*But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.*" You can be sure of this: If anyone is telling you they know; if they are telling you that there are certain signs in the Bible that essentially tell you when it is going to happen, they are false teachers! Don't pay them any attention and don't give them any money! If the angels of heaven do not know, and if the Lord Himself, at least while he was on the earth did not know, you can be sure no ordinary man on earth today can figure it out. If someone tells you that they are getting messages from the Lord and that is how he or she knows when the end is coming, run fast the other way!

Incidentally, some authors and scholars would disagree with this interpretation because it suggests the end of the world here at the end of chapter 6, and yet there are 16 more chapters to go in the book of Revelation. What they fail to understand is that Revelation is a series of symbols and each series reflects the same struggle and history using different symbols, but they all end in the same way, with God's judgment coming upon the evil men and the forces of evil that are behind them.

But there is a great day coming. For those who are Christians and trying to do what is right, it is going to be a great day of victory; a day of celebration and joy! For those who are evil and ungodly, for the devil and his cohort, it is going to be a day of unspeakable terror and horrors!

Here in the book of Revelation, in places such as here in chapter 6, or again in chapter 14, and chapter 19, and again in chapter 20, that great day is pictured for us symbolically. In other places in the NT, the same thing is presented without the use of symbols. For example, in **Matthew 24**, (the passage I referred to a few moments ago) Jesus pictured it like this:

"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. 37) For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38) For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, 39) and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40) Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. 41) Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. 42) Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43) But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44) Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. 45) "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? 46) Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. 47) Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. 48) But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' 49) and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, 50) the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know 51) and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In two places, **1 Thessalonians 5:2** and in **2 Peter 3:10**, both apostles speak about *"the day of the Lord coming like a thief in the night."* Concerning that day, the apostle Paul had earlier written,

"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17) Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."

The apostle Peter had a few more things to say about that day. After saying, the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, he goes on to say,

"...and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up." He then says, "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!"

Let me draw your attention to a couple things in those passages and then we will bring our lesson to a close.

Number one, we do not have any idea when that day is coming. A thief in the night does not tell you in advance that he is coming. There will be no tell-tale signs that it is about to happen. Jesus said it will be as it was in the days of Noah. Well, how was it in Noah's day? Jesus said life was going on as usual. People were marrying and working in the fields, and carrying on in their day's work. He said "they knew not until the flood came."

Number two, we have no idea when that day and moment is coming, but we do know this, it will be impossible to miss it. We will not be asleep somewhere, or out of the country, or underneath the polar ice cap in a nuclear submarine and not be aware that that fateful moment has come. **Revelation 1:5** tells us that when that day comes, every eye will see him. And in that instant, the graves of ten thousand years shall give up the dust in them, bodies and souls will once again be joined together. Jesus said, "*...for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice 29) and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*" (John 5:28,29)

The noise will be deafening. Not only will we hear the Lord's shout, the archangel's voice, and the sound of God's trumpet, but we will hear a noise unlike anything we have ever heard in our life! Peter said, the heavens will pass away with a great noise. John said he saw the sky like a huge scroll being rolled up. Literally the universe as we know it with its seemingly infinite light years of distance, and billions and billions of stars and planets will begin to pass away before our very eyes in a demonstration of God's infinite power that will figuratively melt every defiant heart!

Number three, and with this I will close. There is a great day coming but whether or not that fact scares you or excites you all depends on whether or not you are right with God right now. Those of you who do not want to hear about that day; who find talk about such things troubling and frightening, it is because you suspect in your heart of hearts that you are not ready for that day. You have put off your obedience to God. You know you have not been seeking Him with all of your heart. You know that you have been too careless, or maybe just downright foolish with the thoughts of your heart, and the words of your mouth, and the things you have been doing with your life.

My dear friends, if you are one of those people, you are going to be like the people John saw trying to hide themselves from the coming of the Lord. But hide you will not be able to do, and when that moment comes, you will find yourself totally unable to do anything other than what the Lord tells you to do. When Jesus says come, you will come, and then you are going to know that you believed and lived a lie.

I am not trying to scare you into doing anything, but neither do I want you to leave here today without knowing, really knowing that there is a great day coming! Are you ready for that day to

come? If not, please come as together we stand and sing our song of encouragement this morning!

(Delivered 10/27/2013 at the Hartford Avenue Church of Christ, Ponca City, OK)