Good morning!

Once again we’re going to continue our series in the book of Revelation, and we’ve now reached chapter 6.

In this morning’s sermon, we’re going to be delving into serious things. With the opening of the seals in Revelation 6, we reach the commencement of the Tribulation, and begin to witness the outpouring of God’s wrath upon a sinful, rebellious world. As always, when we look into God’s Word, we need to come to Him to ask Him to guide us in all truth, as He has promised, and to prepare our own hearts and minds for the things we’re about to see. With that in mind, let’s come before the Lord in prayer.

Let’s pray.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you this morning for the sure word of prophecy. We thank you that these things have been written down in advance, so that when they might occur, the world might see, and believe. We thank you that you are the God who makes the end known from the beginning, and we praise you as the orchestrator and author of all of history. Lord, all things are in your hand, and nothing, no matter how immense or awful or terrifying or glorious is out of your control.

Father, as we open your Word, give us eyes to see and ears to hear what you would have us understand this morning. Grant us the grace to leave this place this morning with your Word hidden in our hearts, and a love for the King of Kings shining from our lives.

We ask these things in and through the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, that you might be glorified.

Amen.

Before we begin this morning, I’d like to very briefly recap one of the points from my previous sermon. Last time I preached, I suggested to you that the purpose of the Tribulation’s is to allow for the outpouring of God’s wrath upon a sinful world, in judgment.

We can see this demonstrated clearly throughout the prophets. In one example, Jeremiah 30:24 states:
Behold, the whirlwind of the Lord
Goes forth with fury,
A continuing whirlwind;
It will fall violently on the head of the wicked.

24 The fierce anger of the Lord will not return until He has done it,
And until He has performed the intents of His heart.

Now, while that’s true, there are numerous points where Scripture takes a magnifying glass to this horrific period, and within that magnifying glass, we see another truth emerge. In fact, it’s even here in this same passage in Jeremiah. When I read this passage to you last week, I stopped at the end of chapter 30. But the story of God’s wrath doesn’t end here; the next passage continues to say:

“‘At the same time’, says the Lord,
‘I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.’”

What I’m going to show you today, once again, through the lens of prophecy, are these two aspects of the Tribulation timeline. Today’s sermon will still be something of a foundational study for the things that we’re about to see. We’ll be looking generally at the four horsemen, but specifically at the first of the four. I had intended this week to look at all four, but events that have unfolded even in just the past few days have meant that I felt it necessary to spend a little more time on the second horseman, which we’ll look at next time I preach. For today, however, though this study, we’ll see two things: God’s righteous wrath, poured out primarily on Israel, but generally on an unbelieving world, and His perfect redemption – again, expressed both generally, and specifically as it pertains to Israel.

So, those are my two points today: God’s Righteous Wrath, and His Perfect Redemption.

Now, I mentioned this also last week, but I’m going to say it again. You’ll be hearing things today that may challenge the beliefs you already hold. You’ll definitely be hearing things that are not your usual interpretation of this passage; and, while I’ve studied these things, there are good scholars that would disagree with me. As always, as Christians, we need to heed the Lord’s calling to be serious about spending time in His Word. Now, please don’t misunderstand me: I do not expect every Christian to be a great scholar, and you certainly don’t need a PhD in theology to understand God’s Word, much less come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ; but as believers, those of us who are Christians must take seriously the command to test all things. With that in mind, please do not take my preaching as gospel. Test what I say, put it under the scrutiny of Scripture, and see for yourself what the Word of God reveals.

Turn with me in your Bibles to Revelation chapter 6, beginning at verse 1. We’re only going to read the first four verses today, and we’ll really only be studying the first two; though I’ll refer generally to the first four seals throughout.

Revelation 6, verse 1.
First Seal: The Conqueror

6 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.

Second Seal: Conflict on Earth

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.

Let’s move on, and look at God’s righteous wrath, expressed through the first horseman.

God’s Righteous Wrath: The Rider on the White Horse

Revelation 6, verse 1.

“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.”

As in so many of the passages we’ve studied so far in this series, John immediately sets the context for us. The scene here is continued from chapter 5: we remain within the throne room of God, surrounded by angels, standing in the presence of the 24 elders, before the throne itself. In the midst of the throne stands the lamb, encircled by the four living creatures. This is our context. The perspective here is important too, however. “And I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, “come and see”. Remember when we looked at Revelation chapter 4 that we were explicitly shown that John was being transported from earth to heaven. We saw that perspective shift, and a very definite change of scenery take place.

What I want you to notice here is the complete absence of such a transition here. Now, this might seem like a minor point to stress, but it’s not without purpose. As we read of the unleashing of each of the four horsemen, the same phrase occurs each time. One of the living creatures calls John to “come and see”. The question we should ask here is “come where?”. The answer to this question is fairly straightforward, and in fact we’ve already seen it. We learned in our study of chapters 4 and 5 that the four living creatures were “in the midst of the throne, and around the throne” – that’s chapter 4, verse 6. Nothing in this passage, absolutely nothing, indicates that this has changed. So when each of the living creatures calls to John to “come and see”, they are encouraging him to come to where they are and to see what proceeds from there. Our context here shifts horizontally; this is not a heaven to earth transition.
What we see from here, from this horizontal perspective shift, is that Scripture tells us that the horsemen “went out”. You can see this in chapter 6 verse 2 – “…and he went out, conquering and to conquer”. Verse 3, “Another horse, fiery red, went out”, and so on. The same phrase – in fact, exactly the same phrase – was used in Zechariah chapter 6 and verse 5: “these are four spirits of heaven, who go out from their station before the Lord of all the earth.”

So if the context here remains heavenly, and the horsemen “go out”, there is only one logical conclusion: that here in chapter 6, the horsemen are already in heaven; in the presence of the Lamb, and are journeying outward to fulfil their responsibility on earth.

Now, you might wonder why I’m hammering this point home – but you’ll understand as we move on. Look at Revelation 6, verse 2.

“And I looked, and behold, a white horse.”

We’re going to start here by examining the most readily evident feature of the passage: the horse.

I’ve suggested to you already that these four horses are angelic beings; and we looked at this last time I preached. At that time, however, I put the weight of that argument on just two verses in the book of Zechariah. Now, in response to what we’ve seen already today, and in preparation for the other horsemen to come, I’d like to expound on that a little further.

You see, we’re quite familiar with the imagery of Angels as men – we see that in the instance of Abraham and Lot, for example, where Abraham entertains two Angels – and Jesus Christ Himself, preincarnate – prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. We’re also familiar with the image of Angels as stars. We’ll see that numerous times in Revelation, but we also see it in Job 38:7, wherein God asks “Where you when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”.

What we’re not so familiar with, however, is the image of angels as horses.

We’re going to look at two passages here. They’re both brief, so I’ll read them to you.

First, Zechariah, chapter 6, beginning at verse 1.

“And I turned, and lifted up mine eyes, and looked, and, behold, there came four chariots out from between two mountains; and the mountains were mountains of brass.

In the first chariot were red horses; and in the second chariot black horses;

And in the third chariot white horses; and in the fourth chariot grisled and bay horses.

Then I answered and said unto the angel that talked with me, What are these, my lord?”
And the angel answered and said unto me, These are the four spirits of the heavens, which go forth from standing before the Lord of all the earth.”

Now, that should sound familiar to you – and not just because we read it last time I preached. This passage sits hand-in-hand with Zechariah chapter 1 and Revelation 6. These are indeed the same horses; however, in this passage, the horses are not alone, but bearing chariots.

There’s another story in Scripture that demonstrates this in a truly vivid way. In 2 Kings chapter 6, we find the city of Dothan besieged by the Syrian Army, with the prophet Elisha and his servant standing on the battlements. Scripture tells us that,

"when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?”

So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, and said, “Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

What an amazing passage! Now, there are others that also use horses as being representative of angels – Psalm 104, for example, and Hebrews 1, or even those incredible verses in 2 Kings 2 wherein Elijah is taken up to heaven by a chariot and horses of fire.

What we see revealed here is that these horsemen are a particular class of angels, represented in Scripture by horses, or by chariots. Once we understand that, we can begin to understand Revelation 6 a little better.

Look at Revelation 6:2 again.

“And I looked, and behold, a white horse.”

Now, despite what I’ve just shown you from the Old Testament, these eight words that form the first half of verse 2, remain some of the most contentious words that scholars have ever stumbled over, and prove to us why the greater Biblical context is so very important. There are two common interpretations, and I’d like to address them both.

The most common interpretation you will find for the rider on the white horse is that it is Jesus Christ Himself.

Now, this is patently false, and we don’t even need the greater Biblical context to demonstrate that for us. We have already seen that the Lamb stands in the midst of the elders and the living creatures, while in chapter 6 and verse 1 we’ve seen Him open the scroll to loose this horseman. It stands to reason, then, that he cannot be this horseman.
himself. What confuses so many is the fact that Jesus Christ is indeed represented in Revelation 19 as riding on a white horse. That’s essentially where the similarities end, however, and of course the timing of it all, having Jesus Christ arrive in chapter 6, before the judgment of the world begins, is horribly wrong. In short, this view is so easily dismissed that I won’t even spend any more time on it today.

The second interpretation with some weight among scholars is that this is the Antichrist. This is also false, and again, we’ve already seen in part why that is. If, as I’ve argued for you, these four horses and their riders are spirit beings, then they can be neither Christ, nor Antichrist – for Christ is no mere angel, and Antichrist is not a spirit, but a man! You can see this in the numerous names and titles given to him throughout Scripture: the “Man of Sin” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, the “Bloody and Deceitful Man” in psalm 5:6, the “Man of the Earth” in psalm 10:18, and so on.

Even if we lay aside for a moment the evidence that suggests that the breaking of the seals unleashes angelic beings upon the earth, we can still see in the detail here in this passage that this horse and rider are neither Christ, nor Antichrist. I could seek to prove this to you by a comparative study between of characteristics of Jesus Christ, and the Antichrist, and the rider on the white horse. I could take you through, verse by verse, and show you that the descriptions simply don’t match. I’m not going to do that today, however. What I am going to ask you to do is to strip away your preconceptions about who this figure is, and to simply look at what the text says.

Look at verse 2. “He who sat on [the white horse] had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.”

We have several elements here. A white horse; a bow, a crown, and a mission.

Let’s look at each of these, briefly.

First, the white horse. Obviously the colouration of the horses is significant in this chapter. Our attention is drawn to it immediately, and it’s an extremely powerful visual image. We know what white signifies, because we’ve seen it over and over already in this book. The colour white, throughout the book of Revelation, is representative of is victory – the symbol of the overcomer. We saw this in the white hair of the King who overcame death in chapter 1 verse 14, on the white stones of those who overcame false teaching in Revelation 2:17, and in the white robes of the elders who overcame all things through Christ in chapter 4 verse 4. Note that in all of these instances, the power to overcome, and the accompanying symbol of white hair, white stones, white robes, proceeds from Christ, and in Christ.

We can see that this is exactly the case for this horseman, too. “…and a crown was given to him”.

It’s important that we note that this horseman is receiving his crown from the King of Kings – as he receives it before he goes out into the world. This is not an earthly crown! In fact, I’d suggest to you that we’ve seen this crown before in Scripture, and even in this series in the book of Revelation. The crown worn by this horseman is - in the Greek - a stephanos. We saw this crown mentioned in the letter to the church at Philadelphia, wherein the Lord called the
Philadelphians to “hold fast to what you have, that no one may take your crown” (stephanos). And to whom are these crowns promised? To those who overcome.

Now, there’s an interesting issue in this verse that ties in with the idea of ‘the overcomer’. My translation, the New King James, says in the latter half of this verse that the rider on the white horse “went out conquering, and to conquer”; but ‘conquer’ is not the word that is used here in the Greek. That word is ‘nikao’, and it means, and is consistently interpreted as, ‘overcome’ throughout the New Testament. This is an important distinction, and you’ll see why as we go along.

We can see from verse 2 that this horseman also carries a bow. Much has been made of his bow; whether it be those who argue that this horseman brings a covenant (as in the ‘rainbow’, the sign of God’s covenant with Noah), or those who argue that he brings a false peace, as the bow is not mentioned as having arrows. Neither of these interpretations are particularly convincing in the light of Scripture, however. Bows are mentioned 85 times in Scripture, and only 20 of those passages mention arrows; likewise the argument for a covenant falls flat when you realize that the word used to describe this bow is not the word for rainbow in Greek (which is ‘iris’), but the weapon (‘toxon’).

The symbolism here, and the distinction between the bow and any other weapon, is important: a bow cannot not useful as a weapon unless it is drawn.

Now, that might seem like an odd thing to latch on to, but I’d like to suggest to you that this is perhaps the single most important element of this rider in terms of understanding his mission on earth, and I’d like to demonstrate that to you. In order to do that, however, I need to side-step for a moment to look at another element contained within this passage.

You will have noted by now that each of the horsemen in this passage are called forth by one of the living creatures. These creatures are, in order, represented by the lion, the bull, the man, and the eagle. We saw this in Revelation 4 and verse 7.

What you may not realize is that there is a connection here between the living creatures, and the nation of Israel. You see, in ancient Israel, each of the tribes was represented by an insignia. The lion represents Judah, the bull, Ephraim, the man, Reuben, and the eagle, Dan. We’re all familiar, of course, with the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah”, but some of the other representations are less well known.

In the context of what we’re studying today, this means that the Rider on the White Horse has been called forth by the living creature that represents Judah: the lion, while the following rider, on the red horse, is called forth by Ephraim, the bull.

Now, listen to these verses from Zechariah chapter 9:
I have bent Judah, My bow,
Fitted the bow with Ephraim,
And raised up your sons, O Zion,
Against your sons, O Greece,
And made you like the sword of a mighty man.”

14 Then the Lord will be seen over them,
And His arrow will go forth like lightning.
The Lord God will blow the trumpet,
And go with whirlwinds from the south.

What I would suggest to you this morning is that the responsibility of the rider on the white horse is to “bend the bow”. I would suggest to you that the primary function of the Rider on the White Horse is to drive Israel herself into a state of preparedness for war.

The names of these two tribes, Ephraim and Judah, are used figuratively in Scripture to refer to both the northern and southern Kingdoms, and that’s exactly the context being used here. We can see this picture repeated in Isaiah 7, 9, and 11, in Hosea 5, 6, 10 and 11, in Ezekiel 37, and in Zechariah, as we’ve seen.

What I would suggest to you here is that the Scripture implies that Israel will be overcome by a threat from within, and will respond by mobilizing her military strength. The bow will be strung tight; and when the second horseman rides the earth, “granted power to take peace from the earth”, a nation now poised and prepared for war will be let loose, and plunged into unimaginable conflict – and we’ll look more intently at that in two weeks’ time.

So we see here that Israel is being drawn out in readiness for conflict, and in conflict, toward judgment; and we should remember here that is the Lamb Himself who is causing these things to occur. We need to realize that this indicates to us just how seriously God takes sin. It should also remind us of just how fleeting and brief our own lives are. We’ve seen in Scripture before that the King of Heaven is so filled with wrath against sin that He would take the life of every firstborn child in Egypt, and slay 185,000 Syrians to protect Israel. How much more, than, should we expect the judgment of God at a time when His own have been raptured out of his earth?

This is what Jeremiah was saying, in the passage that I read to you earlier.

“Behold, the whirlwind of the Lord goes forth with fury,
A continuing whirlwind;
It will fall violently on the head of the wicked.
The fierce anger of the Lord will not return until He has done it,
And until He has performed the intents of His heart.”
This is our God, pouring out His righteous wrath upon a world steeped in sin. ...and while we live in a world growing increasingly comfortable with sin; while we ourselves grow tired and weary of pursuing holiness, and the church waxes ever more toward worldliness and decay, God is storing up wrath to pour out on a people who live in direct opposition to His will. You see, grace doesn’t reject judgment; rather, it requires it. The debt must be paid. For the Christian, this is a glorious truth – because the price is paid, through the blood of Jesus Christ... but for the world?

...for the world, this is a thing of terror, because The fierce anger of the Lord will not return until the righteous demands of His wrath have been exacted from a fallen world. This is the point of such terrible judgment; this is the Tribulation.

We need so desperately in these Last Days to understand what God’s will is for His people, and for His creation. Find grace in Christ, or remain in judgment. “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”... and in Christ or in wrath, “every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” That’s the end-game here; that’s the penultimate confession of all mankind. Love Him or loathe Him, you will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord; and you’ll either spend eternity in heaven praising Him for it, or eternity in hell cursing yourself for rejecting Him while you still had breath to speak His name.

God’s Perfect Redemption: The Promise of a Son

These are dark things, and painful realities. ...but when I began this sermon, I promised you a reminder of God’s Perfect Redemption, and it is here, hidden in this passage like a pearl of great price just waiting to be discovered.

I mentioned to you a moment ago that each of the living creatures calls out one of these angelic avengers in sequence. Likewise, each living creature corresponds to one of the tribes of Israel. They also correspond, each to one of the cardinal points of the compass. Each of these creatures represents a tribe immediately adjacent to the tribe of Benjamin, in which Jerusalem is located: Judah the Lion to the South; Ephraim the Bull to the North, Reuben the Man to the East, and Dan the Eagle to the West. Now, take note of that, because if you were to look at each of these tribes on a map, and draw in the points of the compass, each one points to Jerusalem; and we know from Scripture that Jerusalem itself is the city over which the battles of the Last Days will be fought. There is more than that here, however; a hidden truth behind the divine order of this passage.

We have seen already in the book of Revelation that names, titles and typology are not used lightly. Each has its own significance, and reveals something about the nature of those being depicted. In this passage, the name of each tribe, when taken in sequence, according to the call of the living creatures and the unveiling of the seals, tells the story of Israel’s judgment and redemption in the Last Days.

Let’s follow this thread.
The first seal corresponds with the first of the living creatures: Judah, the lion.
When Judah was born to Leah, Genesis 29:35 tells us that she conceived again, and bore a son, and said: “Now I will praise the Lord.”

The second seal corresponds with the second of the living creatures: Ephraim the Bull.
In Genesis 41:52, Joseph named his second-born Ephraim, “God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction.”

The third seal corresponds to the third of the living creatures: Reuben, the man.
In Genesis 29:32, Leah conceived and bore a son, and said: “the Lord has surely looked upon my affliction.”

The fourth seal corresponds to the fourth of the living creatures: Dan, the eagle.
...and in Genesis 30:6, Rachel, Jacob’s beloved wife, said “God has judged me; and He has also heard my voice, and given me a son.”

These four names, together, tell the story of Israel’s redemption through the Tribulation; and this will be her song when all is said and done.

“Now I will praise the Lord.
God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction;
He has judged me; but He has also heard my voice, and given me a Son.”

That Son, of course, is Jesus Christ. He is Israel’s hope and her salvation. Zechariah puts it like this:

“I will pour out on the house of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. In that day, there will be a great mourning in Jerusalem.”

And again, he says, that:

“in that day, it shall be that living waters shall flow from Jerusalem... in both summer and winter it shall occur. And the Lord shall be King over all the earth.”

Understand here that the purpose of Israel’s affliction in Tribulation is to cause them to see that Jesus Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. They will look on the One they have pierced, and mourn as one mourns for an only child; and only then will restoration come.
This is a wonderful thing, of course, but even in these verses there is sorrow... for even now, Israel lives in unbelief. She has rejected her God and her King, and judgment bears down on her, even today. Listen to these words from Matthew 23. This is Matthew 23, verses 37 to 39:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! 38 See! Your house is left to you desolate; 39 for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

There is an application here for us, too.

If you’re in Christ... then the joy this morning is that you’ve already been counted worthy to escape all these things. We saw that in chapter 4; that in Christ, the overcomers will be seated in the heavenly realms, wearing the crown of victory and robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb. There is no fear in this for you. Your life is in Christ; and you are saved not only from the things that are to come upon this world, but from the wrath of a righteous God. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

...but if you’re not in Christ this morning, if you’ve never cried out to the One who gave His life for you, “God have mercy on me, a sinner!”, then this stands for you as a warning.

What will it take for you to see that you are a sinner? What will it take to see that the blood of Jesus Christ alone washes you from all sin and presents you holy and faultless before the throne of God? What will it take for you to bow your knee and call Him Lord and King?

Do you not realize how much He has longed to gather you to Himself, how He has wept over you and your stubborn refusal to call upon His name? ...and yet here you remain, unwilling, unwashed, unsaved... and the King of Kings stands willing to make you clean.

Well, for you... if you will not cry out to God, if you will not be washed in the blood of the Lamb... there is no hope. There is only judgment. ...and do not think that this judgment is stored up for Tribulation, that you still have time. Nothing is promised to us; it may be this very night that our lives are demanded of us, and as God has told us in advance, “it is determined to man once to die, and after that, judgment”.

Without Christ, without hope, without refuge... Your house will be left to you desolate, and the King will come with righteous wrath, stored up in heaven against you, a sinner. And on that day, you may stand before the throne of Heaven, you may look on the One you have pierced, and you may mourn... but it will all be a loss to you.

The time for your decision is now. “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.”
“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

Let’s pray.