

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who is worthy of our honor and praise, Jesus Christ our Lamb and our Lord, amen.

Finally, we're getting to the good part of The Revelation of Jesus Christ! What I mean by the good part is the scary part. Tribulation has begun! For the first five Chapters we've been dealing with letters admonishing the Church to be a better Church... This is followed by two fantastic scenes of heavenly worship. Finally, we're getting to see some action. The one who is worthy, who has both the power and the legal right to open the sealed scroll has had enough. The slaughtered Lamb takes the scroll from the one seated on the throne and begins to unleash God's judgment. Jesus opens the seals one at a time so that John and by extension all of us can see what happens next. The first four seals unleash what we call the four horsemen of the apocalypse. They stand for human conquest, violence, natural and economic disasters, and finally death itself. We Christians have tried for a couple of millennia now to affix a timeline to the four horses and the rest of the tribulation released by opening the scroll. The truth about what John of Patmos was trying to convey is that these are the trials and tribulations Christians had been facing and continue to face since Christianity began.

Let's review... We all remember reading about the first Martyr, Stephen. His crime deserving of death was proclaiming Jesus as his Lord and not Caesar. The history of Christian martyrs doesn't end with Stephen's death. James, the

brother of John and a member of the inner circle of Jesus' closest disciples was executed by the sword, ordered by the emperor. Peter was crucified in the city of Rome upside down on a hill we call the Vatican... Paul was beheaded on a hill outside of Rome because he was a Roman citizen and Roman law prohibited execution of its citizens within the city limits. During the first century after Jesus' death nearly all of his disciples suffered martyrdom for His sake. Matthew was killed with a halberd, an ax-like weapon, in 60 A.D. James, who is thought to be the brother of Jesus, was beaten to death, Matthias was beheaded, Andrew was crucified, Mark was torn to pieces... Other early apostles Luke, Barnabas, Timothy, and Simon were also killed for the sake of Christ. The history of Christian martyrs does not end with the death of the disciples or those recorded in the Bible. Thousands willingly gave their lives under Roman persecution by the emperors Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Maximus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian. The Roman persecution lasted well into the fourth century A.D. and didn't end until Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of his empire. Unfortunately, the history of Christian martyrs didn't end with Constantine. Throughout the following centuries and up until present time, Christians have, and continue to, suffer martyrdom. This persecution has come by means of other Christians, other faiths, and political powers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and shot in 1945. Rachel Scott, a devout Christian

teen, active in her youth group at Orchard Road Christian Church, was the first student killed in the Columbine High School Massacre, April 20th 1999.

Another new and probably unfamiliar name, Pastor Bae Hyung-Kyu. Pastor Bae led a medical team from South Korea to Afghanistan. The plan was to alleviate physical and spiritual suffering, but the Taliban terrorists had another agenda. In 2007 radical Islamic insurgents kidnapped the team of 27 souls. The Taliban tried to convert the Christian hostages, but Pastor Bae refused. He was shot ten times, in the head, chest and stomach. Another hostage was also murdered. The others were released after a 20-million-dollar ransom was paid.

Today we have untold numbers of American citizens and our allies behind enemy lines in Afghanistan. Who knows what their fate will be? Even as we pray for their safe return, they are facing another choice. If they continue to exercise their faith the Taliban will attempt to force their conversion at the point of a sword, gun, or bomb. What would you do under those circumstances? Would you deny Jesus to save your earthly life? What I do know is that if they perish with their faith intact, they too will be counted among the martyrs at the altar of God and will be honored with a shiny white robe and a special place in the heart of God. All of this is attributed to the first horseman and is caused by human desire for conquest.

What about the other horsemen of the apocalypse? John's vision of the red rider taking away our peace seems to be unfolding right before our eyes. We're more divided as a nation than I've seen since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Take a look at all the violence in the streets of our cities. Lest you think this is something new, let me assure you this kind of division and violence has been going on since the fall of humans into sin. In the last century we fought in not one, but two World Wars. Before that our own Civil War and before that the War of 1812 and our Revolutionary War. I remember when I had to take history classes in school, I thought they only taught history from one war to the next... In John's time and before there was no difference. Only our war making machine has gotten more advanced and sophisticated. Once again, John's vision perfectly describes the human condition when it comes to war and peace...

The third horseman brings about economic woes. Back in John's time all people had to confess their allegiance to the emperor. Those who did were given a mark and allowed full access to the markets of the day. Tradesmen couldn't work if they didn't have the Caesar approved mark. I don't know what form that mark was. It might have been a piece of pottery with an official seal or signature. Those who refused to take the oath to the emperor couldn't buy or sell their goods or services. The early Christians certainly experienced economic woes like we've never known. Many starved to death because they refused to take Caesar as their

lord over Jesus Christ. Today, we're debating requiring a vaccine passport in order to gain access to the good things our society has to offer. Those who refuse to take the vaccine may face that same kind of oppression and persecution. Yes, I believe John hit the nail on the head with the opening of this seal.

Finally, we come to death itself as the fourth horseman. Death is and has been inevitable since the serpent introduced sin into the world. Only a great and mighty savior could overcome this plague on humankind. The good news is that we have such a savior, and he looks a lot like a lamb that has been slaughtered. His name is Jesus Christ, and he now reigns with God and has been given all authority over the entire creation.

The disasters described as the seals of the scroll are opened were not intended to strike fear into our hearts over what is to come, but to strike fear into our hearts over what is happening at the current time. They were meant to describe the current state of affairs in the world at the time John wrote them, but they all continue to plague us in some form or another still today and will continue until the day of salvation when Jesus returns in glory. If all you read are the accounts of devastation caused when the seals are broken who wouldn't be terrified?

Thankfully we all know the rest of the story as Paul Harvey used to say. We know these descriptions of empire building, natural and manmade disasters, famines and economic woes, violence, and death are not the end of our story. The promises of

our God are still faithful and true. Those who have already reached heaven's shores know this firsthand. Even after the four horsemen of the Apocalypse are released upon the world, those uncountable multitudes in heaven bow down in worship to the one on the throne and to the Lamb. They do so because they know firsthand God is gracious and merciful. There is a time when tears will be shed now, but on that great day of salvation God will wipe away those tears forever. That's some pretty good news for those who are suffering in this present age.

I pray that none of you would ever have to face the kind of persecution the martyrs of old faced, or for that matter the kind of persecution and oppression of Christian siblings are facing right now in anti-Christian hot spots around the world. I pray none of you will ever go through the economic woes, or face a natural disaster. I know we will all face the fourth rider at some point. When we come face to face with that pale green horse, look to Jesus and to the Lamb who suffered for you and won the final victory for you so you could take your place and be counted among those robed in white and taking your special place in the heart of God. May our God give us the courage to stand until we are called to join the rest of the witnesses to our Savior Jesus Christ and along with Peter, and James, Stephen, and all the rest who now worship God in heaven forever and ever. Amen.