

“The Return of the King”

“Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse. Its rider is called Faithful and True, and with justice he judges and makes war. . . . He has a name written on his robe and on his thigh:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Revelation 19:11, 16).

Revelation 19:11-16 ¹

This morning we’re examining our second text from the book of Revelation, and we also come to the end of our Journey through the Bible, a Journey we began in April of last year. Next Sunday begins Thanksgiving week, and then Advent begins. Wow. What a ride!

I’ve told you before that I’ve long been a fan of J.R.R. Tolkien’s trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. I first read the books in the mid-sixties—all of them in one marathon weekend—and I’ve read them again several times since. I’ve seen all the movies three or four times.

I recognize that everyone doesn’t find these stories as fascinating as I do, but I like the stories for many reasons. For one thing, *The Hobbit*, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King* are fantastic, epic stories on a cosmic scale. But there’s more to these stories than just fantasy.

The Lord of the Rings trilogy tells a story of ancient powers that began well, but that have been long corrupted by the temptations of power. These tales portray superhuman spiritual forces that are engaged in a cosmic conflict, the outcome of which will determine the fate of all who live in Middle Earth.

These corrupt and rebellious superhuman spiritual forces lend their power to lesser creatures, but for a price. Those who agree to cooperate with the corrupt powers discover too late the horrible twistedness that evil sows in their minds and hearts and builds into their very bodies and faces.

On the other hand, *The Lord of the Rings* also tells of a fellowship of the faithful, a small band committed to undoing the onslaught of evil that threatens to overwhelm their world. We see their courage and their faithfulness in the face of great danger and pain. We experience the sacrifices that love leads them to make for each other.

In the final story, *The Return of the King*, an apocalyptic battle takes place on the plain in front of the White City, Minas Tirith, which some of you have recognized as the background to this week’s *PowerPoint*. In this battle, evil’s victory seems assured, and those who fight for that which is good and right march into battle to meet a certain death. Yet, in an amazing turn of events, the apparently invincible evil is overthrown by the courage and faithfulness of creatures so small and pitiful as to seem of no consequence whatever, after which the rightful king assumes his throne and ushers in a New Age of Peace.

Does any of that sound familiar? I hope it does, because in these few sentences I’ve described, not just *The Lord of the Rings*, but the entire panorama of human history as God has revealed it to us in the Bible. It’s basically the same Story. Keep that in mind as we turn to Revelation 19. I’m going to try to give a bird’s-eye view of the whole chapter, though our focus is on the verses Andrew read earlier.

John’s apocalyptic vision is symbolic at a number of levels, and discussing all the possible nuances is complex. At the same time, as I’ve told you before, the essential message of Revelation can be summarized in four words: **Be Faithful. God Wins.** Chapter 19 begins John’s final summary of God’s Great Story, and those four words certainly fit here.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 15, 2020.

- 1** After this I heard something like the loud voice of a vast multitude in heaven, saying, **Hallelujah!** Salvation, glory, and power belong to our God,
2 because his judgments are true and righteous, because he has judged the notorious prostitute who corrupted the earth with her sexual immorality; and he has avenged the blood of his servants that was on her hands.
3 A second time they said, **Hallelujah!** Her smoke ascends forever and ever!

As John's vision moves toward its climax, he hears a roar like the roar of the crowd at the Super Bowl, and the crowd is shouting, "Hallelujah! Salvation, glory, and power belong to our God!" As you probably know, "Hallelujah" is a word that means "Praise Yahweh." It occurs often in the psalms, but only in this chapter in the New Testament, where it appears four times.

The "great prostitute," also called "Babylon," refers specifically to the Roman Empire, which was the source of the persecution happening when John had this vision; but it also applies symbolically to all the forces of all time that array themselves over against the Reign of God.

- 4** Then the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who is seated on the throne, saying, Amen! **Hallelujah!**
5 A voice came from the throne, saying, Praise our God, all his servants, and the ones who fear him, both small and great!

The twenty-four elders probably represent the Twelve Tribes of Israel, entrusted with the Law of Moses, and the Twelve Apostles, entrusted with the Gospel of Jesus. The four living creatures probably represent the four Gospels themselves, which give witness to Who Jesus is. All of Sacred History, then, is giving praise to God for the righteousness of His judgment on the forces of evil.

- 6** Then I heard something like the voice of a vast multitude, like the sound of cascading waters, and like the rumbling of loud thunder, saying, **Hallelujah**, because our Lord God, the Almighty, reigns!
7 Let us be glad, rejoice, and give him glory, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has prepared herself.
8 She was given fine linen to wear, bright and pure. For the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints.

The Hosts of Heaven roar once more and offer the New Testament's final *Hallelujah*, announcing the Inauguration of God's Promised Kingdom, present to us today in somewhat hidden form, but seen in this future Day in all its radiance and splendor. The Lamb, of course, is Jesus, the Lamb of God, sacrificed for the Sin of the world, and His bride is the Church, the Company of the Redeemed.

- 9** Then he said to me, "Write: Blessed are those invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb!" He also said to me, "These words of God are true."
10 Then I fell at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers and sisters who hold firmly to the testimony of Jesus. Worship **God**, because it is the **Spirit** of prophecy who bears testimony to **Jesus**."

Notice here that, as in many places in the New Testament, Father, Son, and Spirit occur together in the same verse, the Mystery of the Trinity: Three-in-One and One-in-Three.

11 *Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse.*

Its rider is called Faithful and True, and with justice he judges and makes war.

12 *His eyes were like a fiery flame, and many crowns were on his head.*

He had a name written that no one knows except himself.

13 *He wore a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called the Word of God.*

As we come to our focus text, we find here the most detailed description the New Testament gives us of Jesus' Return. This, then, is **The Return of the King**.

In this vision, John saw Jesus, the Risen and Reigning Lord Christ, in heaven, on a white horse, the kind of horse earthly kings used in John's time to enter capital cities they had conquered. Jesus is named as "Faithful," absolutely to be trusted, and "True," fully genuine, truthful, and Real. These names are in stark contrast to the enemies of God, both human and superhuman, who are masters of deceit, deception, and lies.

Whereas in His First Advent in Bethlehem, Jesus came as a human baby to enter into life as we live it, in His Second Advent, Jesus will come as a conquering King to take us into Life as He lives it (!). He comes to execute the Final Judgment in which God puts Right all that has been made Wrong in our world through the unrepentant Rebellion of both humans and demons.

Jesus' eyes appear to be blazing fire, which symbolizes both His judgment on all that harms us and the radiant Glory that is His Eternal Nature. When Jesus walked among us, He veiled that Glory; but now, it is revealed for all to see.

I think there's something else to note about this fire. Just as ordinary fire on earth consumes anything that will burn, so God's Glory consumes anything that is not covered by the Blood of Jesus. Fire doesn't have to "do anything" in order to consume things that are flammable. That destruction happens simply by fire being true to its own nature. So it is with the "consuming fire" of the Glory of God,² as we will see shortly.

The "many crowns" on Jesus' head symbolize His sovereignty over every other power in the universe; and His unrevealed Name signifies that nothing in the universe has power over Him. The blood on Jesus' robe is His own blood, freely given for us and worn as the Sign of His Victory: "*It. Is. Finished!*"

With respect to Jesus as "The Word of God," John has already told us in the opening verses of His gospel that "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God.***" In the Bible, the spoken word is not merely audible sound. The spoken word *does things*.

The Spoken Word is charged with power to bless or to destroy, most especially when that Word is God's Word. In the Beginning, God spoke all that is into existence (Genesis 1:1-2:3). When Jesus walked on earth, He simply spoke, and the demons fled, the storms were stilled, and the dead were raised. And now He is about to speak once more.

14 *The armies that were in heaven followed him on white horses, wearing pure white linen.*

15 *A sharp sword came from his mouth, so that he might strike the nations with it. He will rule them with an iron rod. He will also trample the winepress of the fierce anger of God, the Almighty.*

16 *And he has a name written on his robe and on his thigh:*

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

² Hebrews 12:29

The “armies of heaven” following Jesus are also on white horses, signifying victory, and they, too, are wearing white linen robes, signifying righteousness. Notice that neither they nor their Captain are wearing anything resembling normal “battle dress”—soldiers do not wear white linen into battle—but they are dressed for battle nonetheless.

The only offensive weapon to be seen is the sword in Jesus’ mouth, symbolizing the all-powerful Word of God. And remember that fire doesn’t have to do anything except to be true to its nature in order to consume anything in its presence that will burn. That’s what the “wrath” of God is, I think—a Holy Righteousness that consumes anything in its presence that will “burn”—anything that has not been covered and purified by the Blood of Jesus.

The phrase “*rule them with an iron rod*” is a little puzzling in English, but perhaps not so much in Greek. The word “rule” is the same word elsewhere used for “shepherd,” and so the “iron rod” may refer to an invincible shepherd’s staff, a symbol of protection of God’s Flock.

The remainder of chapter 19 gives us everything we know about Armageddon.³ It will perhaps be something of a disappointment when compared with the images Hollywood has supplied.

17 *Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and he called out in a loud voice, saying to all the birds flying high overhead, “Come, gather together for the great supper of God,*

18 *so that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of military commanders, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and of their riders, and the flesh of everyone, both free and slave, small and great.”*

Remember that this is a symbolic vision, using images with which John and his readers would have been familiar. The point is that the forces that have arrayed themselves over against the Word of God are about to be destroyed.

19 *Then I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and against his army.*

20 *But the beast was taken prisoner, and along with it the false prophet, who had performed the signs in its presence. He deceived those who accepted the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image with these signs. Both of them were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.*

21 *The rest were killed with the sword that came from the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds ate their fill of their flesh.*

That was Armageddon. Did you see it? Rather like the stoplight in a one-stoplight village, if you blink, you’ll miss it. The Great Battle of Armageddon happened between verses 19 and 20, when the Glory of God simply consumed “all that would burn” as soon as they came near. There is no cataclysm. There is no nuclear war. The King Returns, and the Rebellion is over.

Chapter 20 tells about God’s Judgment of Satan and the supernatural forces allied with him, and about the Judgment of humanity through the records found in God’s Book of Life. Chapter 21 tells about God’s inauguration of the “New Heaven and New Earth,” and chapter 22 tells about the wonderful restoration of Eden in that New Creation:

1 *Then he showed me the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb*

³ See also Revelation 16:16

- 2** *down the middle of the city's main street. The tree of life was on each side of the river, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree are for healing the nations,*
- 3** *and there will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will worship him.*
- 4** *They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.*
- 5** *Night will be no more; people will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, because the Lord God will give them light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

That, my friends, is **The Return of the King**, and everything I've said or made reference to so far this morning can still be summarized in just four words: **Be Faithful. God Wins.**

Well, so what? What might we remember from all this? I suggest three things.

In the first place, **we need to remember who our real enemy is.** Our Real Enemy is not al Qaida or QAnon. Our real enemies are not other people. Our enemies are never other people.

The Bible reminds us that *"We are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms"* (Ephesians 6:12).

Our Real Enemies usually don't look like enemies. Satan is a master of disguise and deceit. *"Be careful!"* Peter warned. *"Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour"* (1 Peter 5:8).

Second, **we need to remember the True Source of our strength**, who is Jesus, God's Eternal Son and our Eternal Savior: *"Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before God made anything at all and is supreme over all creation. Christ is the one through whom God created everything in heaven and earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—kings, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities. Everything has been created through him and for him. He existed before everything else began, and he holds all creation together.*

"Christ is the head of the church, which is his body. He is the first of all who will rise from the dead, so he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and by him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of his blood on the cross" (Colossians 1:15-20).

"There is salvation in no one else! There is no other name in all of heaven for people to call on to save them" (Acts 4:12). Jesus, before whom the demons flee, is the True Source of our Strength, and *we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure!* (Hebrews 6:19).

Yes, we need to remember who our real enemy is. We need to remember the True Source of our strength, and finally, **we need to remember what our Lord Christ has given us to do.** You and I need not rant about evildoers and about the sorry state of our world. We need to remember that Darkness exists only where there is no Light.

Our civilization is in tatters in large degree because we who have been called to be "salt and light" in a dark and perishing world (Matthew 5:13-16) have not focused our lives sufficiently on the Business of the Master. We have not understood what is really happening on this planet. We have not focused our energies fully and completely on **Pushing Back the Darkness**; but we can re-focus!

We need to remember that human History is His Story, and that HisStory has both a Destination and a Goal! The Kingdom is coming . . . and it is nearer now than when we first believed!

My friends, although the season of Advent will soon begin, as it does every year, we need to remember that neither human history nor the Gospel itself is a cyclical story. Jesus is not born every winter to die and rise again every spring. Just as Jesus' death on the Cross was a once-and-for-all event, so, too, was the manger of Bethlehem.

We don't look forward to another Christ-child. We look forward to the end of history, to Christ's return as the **King of Kings and the Lord of Lords**, at whose Name "*every knee will bow, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father!*" (Philippians 2:10-11).

My friends, the Good News is that no matter how things look this morning, this is how the Story ends: '*Look, I see a great white horse. And there is a rider on that horse whose name is Faithful and True, and there are many crowns upon his head . . . [He is] King of kings and Lord of lords*' (Revelation 19:11-16).⁴

As there was a first Advent, so there will be a Second.
Let us prepare our hearts and lives for *The Return of the King!*

⁴ R. Geoffrey Brown, "Look! A Great White Horse!," *Preaching Today*, tape no. 111.