

Revelation 19:11-16 “The Rider on the White Horse”

Dr. Jeffery L. Hamm, PhD

ChristChurch Presbyterian, Atlanta

16th century Europe was a revolutionary time. Dangerous ideas rocked the Holy Roman Empire to its foundation. Ideas such as “justification by faith alone,” “sola Scriptura,” “the priesthood of every believer.” Dangerous ideas which questioned the very legitimacy of the papacy. So people anxiously gathered to discuss these ideas sweeping the land. One such gathering place was a tavern in Cambridge from where the Protestant Reformation spread to the English countryside. The name of the tavern was the White Horse Inn. Indeed, one of the best theological podcasts today is hosted by Dr. Michael Horton and named after this tavern, the White Horse Inn.

In our text today, we don’t see the tavern, but we do see the White Horse and its rider. When we examine the text, we learn that *because Christ shall come to conquer, then you should believe in Him that you might not perish but have everlasting life.*

Context

The *Apocalypse* is a series of seven progressively parallel visions spanning the time from the 1st coming of Christ until the Second Coming. The pivotal point in the narrative is chapter 12. We move from what is taking place on earth—war, famine, natural disaster—to peer behind the scenes of world history, to see a cosmic conflict in the unseen spiritual realm. There we see a Dragon, enormous, ferociously standing before this beautiful pregnant woman in order to devour her Child as soon as He is born. The woman is the Messianic community, the Church of the Old Testament which is about to give birth to the Messiah. The Dragon, the serpent of old, Satan, is unable to abort the birth of the Male-Child. Consequently, is conquered by Christ’s death, burial, descent into hell, resurrection, ascension into heaven and session at the right hand of God the Father. Enraged at his defeat, the furious Dragon turns all of his hatred, malice, and wrath against the Church with the intention of wiping the Church from the face of the earth.

To that diabolical end, the Dragon recruits the aid of two villains. The Beast and the False Prophet. The Beast is a dictator state, anti-God government hell bent on persecuting the followers of Christ. Popularized by the False Prophet who prophesies falsely. He propagates a false news narrative, propaganda from the state news network, in order to delude those who dwell on the earth. To further strengthen the Beast’s sinister strategy, a convenient marriage is arranged. A political marriage to strengthen the Beast’s regime. The bride of the Beast is Babylon, the prostitute of the earth, the great whore who symbolizes the materialism of the city of Rome that empowers the government which sustains a pleasure-addicted culture, thereby seducing the inhabitants of the earth away from the God Who Is There to the idols of the age. In chapter 18, Babylon the prostitute is murdered, dead and gone. Now we reach the climax of the plot in which her comrades in crime are destroyed. They exit the stage in reverse order of their entrance. This literary structure forms a chiasm. 1, 2, 3—3, 2, 1 designed for emphasis, stress. Now we are poised to watch the destruction of the False Prophet and the Beast at the very end of time via the last battle. Which raises the exact question that was put the very moment the Beast gained international fame. *Who is like the beast and who is able to wage war against him?* (13:4). The suspense has hung in the air since chapter 13. Finally this text provides the answer.

The Ultimate Warrior-King

Verse 11, *Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.* Out of the mist of the ethereal world John sees looming before him, a white *horse*. Perhaps disappointing for modern sci-fi fans. But thrilling for the original readers of the first century. In the ancient world, a white horse is a symbol of military conquest. When Julius Caesar victoriously returns to Rome, he does so in a chariot drawn by *white* horses. Thereafter, it becomes tradition for the triumphant general to return to glamorous Rome on a white horse. What for the veterans of Second World War is a white ticker tape parade is for the Romans a victory parade on a *white* horse. The Rider on the White Horse symbolizes military conquest. Alluded to in the last phrase, *...in righteousness he judges and makes war* (v. 11). The White Rider makes war. He is a warrior, a warmonger. That is his job. That He rides a *White* Horse displays His triumph on the field of battle—the battle yet to be waged. His victory is assured even before the battle begins. The triumphant achievements yet future shall stunningly reveal His awe-inspiring power.

Notice His exploits on the battlefield listed as three distinct medals of honor. Verse 15, *From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.* This verse is a blend of three different references to the Old Testament. Each is cited as a Medal of Honor awarded to the White Rider. The reason is because He fulfills the promises contained in each prophecy. They are all Messianic prophecies. Who is the Messiah? The Ultimate Warrior-King of earth. First medal. *From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.* A direct reference to Isaiah's prophecy of the Warrior-King. Who shall "strike the earth with the rod of His mouth" (Isa. 11:4). Here we are not to imagine a literal sword. But the sword symbolizes the lethal power of His word of justice. A death-dealing pronouncement that goes forth from the mouth of Warrior-King like a sharp blade.

Second medal, *he will rule them with a rod of iron.* The rod is that of a shepherd. *The Lord is my shepherd. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... Your rod and your staff, they comfort me* (Ps. 23). The sight of the shepherd's rod is a comfort to the sheep. With the rod, He defends His flock from attacking wild beasts. With his rod, he shatters the skull of the wolf. More, the Messiah's rod is not made of wood, but iron; unyielding, invincible. To rule with an iron rod doesn't mean that He governs sternly, but destroys completely. This rod of iron is a direct reference to Psalm 2. ⁸ *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, the ends of the earth your possession.* ⁹ *You shall break them with a **rod of iron**; and dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel* (Ps. 2:8-9). In Hebrew poetry, the second phrase modifies the first. To rule with a rod of iron symbolizes total destruction. Third medal of honor. *He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.* A reference to Isaiah 63 to which we'll return in moment. In the ancient world, to extract the grape juice needed to make wine, grapes are thrown into a winepress. A massive vat, trough, that has holes in the bottom allowing the juice to pass through and collect into a lower basin. The whole family participates in making the wine. The children take off their shoes, climb into the wine press and tread on the grapes until the juice stops flowing. That chore is known as "treading the winepress." A familiar image portraying the judgment of God. What aspect? The extent? The violence. The vintage tastes of violence. Conveyed in double words translated as the *fury* of the *wrath*. Furious wrath, fierce.

Such are the military exploits of the Ultimate Warrior-King. For which He is awarded three medals of honor for judging nations, destroying nations, and executing violent furious wrath. The Rider on the White Horse comes to unquestionably conquer on the field of battle.

What battle is this? When is it? The Last Battle to end the world which we have seen before in the previous parallel visions. At the end of chapter 14 at the harvest of the earth. *The blood flowed ... as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia* (14:20). Then at the end of chapter 16 when all the nations *assembled for battle on the great day of God the Almighty...at a place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon* (16:14, 16). Here we see the same battle. This is a recapitulating vision, a replay from a different angle of the camera. Now we learn that just when the conflict is most grave and dire, just when it seems that His people are about to be slaughtered, the Warrior-King shall return on a White Horse to deliver them by spectacularly crushing their enemies in a stunning display of might and power. It is like the scene depicted in the *Lord of the Rings*, at the battle of Helm's Deep. The men of the Riddermark are surrounded, overwhelmed by evil gruesome Urak-Hai of Isengard. In the face of such reckless hatred there is no escape, only certain agony and death. Just when it seems that all hope has vanished, after they have so bravely fought through the bitter watches of the night, just as they are sure to meet their doom, the dawn breaks. There on the mountaintop overlooking the bloody battlefield, is the Rider on the White Horse, Gandalf, who descends from above, behind whom follows blinding light. Radiant, brilliant light penetrating the darkness of shadow that hovers over Middle Earth. That incredibly powerful scene portrays this biblical truth.

The Identity of the Ultimate Warrior-King

Which raises the question, who is the White Rider? Not Gandalf. Notice the appearance of the Mysterious Horseman so as to positively identify Him. Verse 12, *His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and He has a name written that no one knows but himself*. First, notice his eyes. *blazing fire*. His stare is burning, penetrating. The blazing fire of His eyes is like a laser beam scanning into the deepest recesses of the conscience. Probing the secret thoughts of one's mind, the hidden desires of the heart. Indicating the divine attribute of omniscience. From these penetrating eyes, no sin remains unseen. No racism concealed. No hatred hidden. Second, on his head are *many diadems*. A diadem is not to be confused with the garland wreath given to the winner of the games in the coliseum. This is the regal headband embedded with jewels to indicate nobility, royalty, majesty. In chapter 12, the Red Dragon emerges wearing seven crowns, after him the Beast wears ten. Counterfeit claims to majesty. But the White Rider far excels them with His *many diadems*. The Greek word means, "pertaining to being a large number. A great number of." Uncounted crowns symbolize unlimited sovereignty, infinite authority and dominion. Reflected in the title given to Him in the last Verse 16, *...King of kings and Lord of lords*. Universal realm and Lordship. There is not a prince, prime minister, dictator or despot to whom He cannot issue the command, "Kneel!" The White Rider is the Supreme Ruler of the universe, the ultimate Sovereign.

The White Rider also bears a name. Verse 12, *... He has a name written that no one knows but himself*. A secret name of which the meaning is obscured from all created beings. Expressing the mystery of His person. Like in the encounter that Samson's parents have with the angel of the LORD. The mysterious man of God informs the childless couple that a son shall be born unto them. So they ask, "*What is your name...that we may honor you?*" *And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why do you ask my name seeing the it is wonderful?"* (Judg. 13:17-18).

Full of wonder. Literally, *incomprehensible* (NAS note). That is what we have here with the name of the White Rider. His name is incomprehensible because it expresses the incomprehensibility of His Being, His essence. He cannot be comprehended. Apprehended—we see Him—but not comprehended. He cannot be categorized by human criteria because he dwells in a realm *which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined* (1 Cor. 2:9). He dwells in a realm which lies beyond the limits of human knowledge. This means that the scientific method is totally invalid when dealing with Him. The scientific method does apply to One who cannot be scientifically proven. Not because He is unreal, but because He Himself is the upholder of reality. He cannot be found in the world because He holds the world in His hand. Therefore incomprehensible to us.

The incomprehensibility of His secret name might leave us depressed thinking that we can never discover His identity. But the White Rider is known by another name that leaves no ambiguity as to His identity. Verse 13, ... *and the name by which He is called is the Word of God*. A very unique name that totally reveals the identity of the Rider. There is but one biblical writer who refers to anyone's name as the "Word of God." That is the author of this book, *Revelation*, the apostle John. Also, the author of the Gospel according to *John*. Who writes in the prologue, *In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, the Word was God... The Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (Jn. 1:1, 14). The most incredible event in the history of this universe. The Word is the eternal, pre-existent Son of God, who in the fullness of time puts on human flesh. He becomes man and enters the human race by being born of a virgin, known in history as none other than Jesus of Nazareth. God in the flesh, here on earth. This is who John sees riding the White Horse, the Nazarene, although not as He appeared on earth as an obscure wandering Rabbi, despised and forsaken. But as the all-glorious God-Man.

The Bloody Clothes of the Warrior-King

Indeed, the appearance of Jesus in this vision confronts many with an existential challenge. For it is disturbing. Notice His clothing. Verse 13, *He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood*... Literally, sprinkled with blood. Stained with blood. The New Testament speaks a lot about blood. Christ's blood, shed on the cross. *In Him we have redemption through His blood*... (Eph. 1:7). ⁹ *Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!* (Rom 5:9). The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin. But the blood here in view, is not the blood of Jesus. It is that of someone else.

Whose blood? Throughout the *Apocalypse* we have seen the blood of other people. Whose? Believers. *I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus* (17:6 NIV). *In her was found the blood of prophets and of saints* (18:24). This brings us back to the context. First century Christians living in the Roman Empire. Under which totalitarian terror state they are bitterly persecuted. Antipas slain in Pergamum (2:13). Others thrown to wild beasts in the arena for the viewing pleasure of the entertainment-addicted sports fans. Believers burned at the stake by Emperor Nero. It is precisely because of the spilled blood of Christians that the *Revelation* is given. To unveil hope to those experiencing a faith-crisis because of the persecution in which they find themselves. With that said, the shed blood of believers is not that blood sprinkled all over on Christ's clothes.

Then whose blood is it? Whose could it be? Again the key to understanding the *Apocalypse* is the Old Testament. Our text is a reference to Isaiah, the oracle of vengeance. A sobering vision of God Almighty coming to dispense wrath and execute infinite justice. *Who is*

this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? "It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save." ² Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? ³ "I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood splattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing." (Isa 63:1-3 NIV). God is described as wearing crimson garments like those treading the winepress, their clothes stained red from exploding grapes squirting juice on them. Then Isaiah asks the Lord, "Why are your garments red?" God answers, "I trampled them, trod them down, their blood splattered my garments." Now this Old Testament image of God coming in judgment is applied to Christ. The blood that stains the robe of Jesus is not His own. Not the blood of believers. But the blood of His enemies, splattered upon Him as He fiercely slays them in brutal battle. That is the picture. It reminds me of a scene in the movie *Patriot*, starring Mel Gibson. The British soldiers arrive at this house and unlawfully arrest his son. So the *Patriot* rescues his son by using the tactics of Indian warfare. Hand to hand combat, stabbing with knife. Chopping with axe. He is left covered in the blood of British soldiers splattered all over him. You remember the reaction of his young son when he sees his father covered in blood. Traumatized.

So this is not the picture of Jesus that find in a children's Bible. Nor is it though an image of Jesus that adults wish to consider. It is offensive, disturbing. So many reject it outright. For it doesn't fit their preconceived ideas of Jesus. Those influenced by the Enlightenment conception of Jesus which reinterprets Christ as mere mortal who never claimed divine status. The doctrine of a God-Man and the supernatural and miraculous don't square with modernity. Discounted as myth. "Demythologize" the Bible. So what kind of Jesus do you have according to Enlightenment ideology? A wonderful man to be sure. Indeed, the flower of humanity. One of the greatest of philosophers of time, the leader of a world religion. Who left this incredible moral example of self-sacrifice, selflessness. The cross reduces to a moral example of self-sacrifice. Yet the Enlightenment Jesus of love and tolerance doesn't fit the picture here of a Jesus of justice and judgment covered with the blood of His enemies. Therefore it is rejected as unloving and intolerant. To this objection, responds Yale theologian Miroslav Volf. A Croatian, who watched his people suffer bitterly at the hands of Serbian aggressors. "It takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die..." (Keller, *Reason for God*, 74). For people living in a war zone, who have seen their homes plundered and burned, sisters raped, brothers murdered, the secular virtue of nonviolence is naïve.

Such are the people to whom John is writing. Early Christians who have either suffered or are about to suffer the worst atrocities of which human depravity is capable. What keeps them from despairing? What keeps them from giving-in to the world and giving-up the faith? How can they be assured that Christ actually cares about their grief and will vindicate their suffering? What keeps them believing? This vision of Jesus. The Ultimate Divine Warrior-King of the cosmos who comes to conquer and punish those who persecute His Church. That is the difference this vision of Christ makes. John doesn't see the Jesus of the American church. Gentle Jesus meek and mild. The effeminate metro-man with manicured hands sporting skinny jeans. John sees the Rider on the White Horse who *with righteousness judges and makes war*. The sovereign Ruler of every square inch of the universe who holds the universe together. The Pre-Existent Word of God. Who omnisciently searches the cosmos with His blazing eyes. Who

rules the nations with a rod of iron. Who treads the winepress of the fierce wrath of God. Whose clothes are dyed red with the splattered blood of His enemies.

A picture is worth a thousand words. This is the advantage of the *Revelation*. We can state truth in propositions all day long. Propositional truth can be very persuasive. But nowhere in the Bible is the victorious Christ described in way more likely to convince believers that in spite of all the armies of hell arrayed against the Church, Christ shall emerge triumphant in the end. Nowhere more than this picture of the Rider on the White Horse whose clothes are soaked in the blood of His enemies. There is not a more convincing argument that Christ shall indeed emerge victorious, unvanquished. “Jesus’ appearance...call(s) believers to rest our hope confidently and completely in His almighty power to vindicate his saints and eradicate His enemies” (Johnson, 270). That’s why it is here. To unveil hope. Take hope from this vision. Which means we must think of Jesus accurately. He is the Lamb of God who is the Lion of Judah. The unconquerable champion of the Church. Worthy of worship because He is able to wage war against the Beast. *Who is like the beast and who is able to wage war against him?* (13:4). Christ the cosmic conqueror coming on the White Horse. Amen.