

REVELATION 19:11-16.

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

He was known as the Gray Ghost of Sagamore. And he was one fast ghost. Native Dancer won his first eleven races before arriving at Churchill Downs for the 1953 Kentucky Derby, where he finished in a position other than first for the only time in his career.

He finished second.

Beginning with his next start in the Preakness Stakes, Native Dancer would come home first in his remaining 10 races and establish himself as one of the greatest equine athletes of all time.

But what made Native Dancer truly memorable, even into the present, wasn't just his talent. In the age of black and white television, viewers often had trouble picking out their favorite horse in a race. They all looked alike. Not Native Dancer. As the Gray Ghost came flying around the track and entered the homestretch, his dappled gray coat and blotchy white face held millions of viewers entranced and captivated their imagination. Perhaps some of you who are more venerable still remember watching Native Dancer run.

But who was Native Dancer's rider? Few people remember him. His name was Eric Guerin and, if anyone does remember him, it's usually for giving his mount a horrible trip in the Derby and ruining what could have been a perfect record. Native Dancer's rider didn't hold anyone entranced or captivate their imagination. The horse he was riding did.

This evening God gives us a glimpse into heaven through his apostle John. And immediately we are held entranced and captivated by the sight of a white horse. Not a relatively small, speedy, and skittish animal bred for sport or recreation, like Native Dancer. No, this is a strong, sturdy, well built animal bred for battle and war.

But John the viewer doesn't linger at the white horse for long. He quickly shifts his attention to the Rider, and once he does he struggles to portray him for us. Here is a rider completely *beyond* all reproach and ridicule. A rider who leads the charge, not of racehorses, but of the armies of heaven. A rider whose record is *unblemished* by *any* loss into all eternity. A rider who is our ascended Jesus himself.

So tonight, with John, let's be entranced and captivated not by the horse, but by his Rider. Tonight, with John, behold the ascended Rider of the white horse! He battles many powerful enemies for us. And he conquers them all for us.

John makes it clear from the onset of his vision that the Jesus he is seeing is perhaps not the Jesus we are used to thinking about. "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns."

To understand the many crowns that Jesus is wearing here, we have to go back to Revelation chapter 6. There John also saw Jesus on a white horse, but Jesus was only wearing *one* crown, the crown of victory. John said he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest. That was at the beginning of the New Testament era, the time of his ascension into heaven.

Now John sees him again at the end of time, and he is wearing *many* crowns, indicating that, between his ascension and the Last Day, he has faced *many* enemies.

John himself describes many of Christ's enemies in Revelation, which are also the enemies of the Church, our enemies. He describes the devil and his many allies. He describes physical hardships that the devil uses to get the Church to question God's existence and goodness - war, famine, disease and plague, and natural disasters, to name a few. He describes the government, an institution of God, but an institution that often abuses its God-given power by persecuting Christians in one way or another. He describes false teachers that come from both outside and inside the Church, including the premiere false teacher, the Antichrist.

We are familiar with these enemies, aren't we? We have endured attacks from the outside, haven't we? In John's day, governments pressured Christians to give up their faith by executing or exiling them. Today our government is more subtle. With the support of the nation it governs, it pressures us to give up our faith by preaching that sincerity and tolerance is what matters, not truth. If we maintain that we teach the truth, they say that we are arrogant.

And we've seen the rise of religions like Islam, Mormonism, Scientology, and Buddhism, which all revolve around man helping himself out instead of around God and his grace.

And we've endured the devil's attacks from inside the Church too. The Antichrist often appears to be fighting on our side as he has many wonderful things to say about the Trinity, Jesus, baptism, and other scriptural truths. Yet it is this same false teacher who turns around and shoots his poisoned arrows at Jesus' heart by *condemning* the teaching of salvation by God's grace in Christ alone, apart from our works. And he uses his earthly authority and alliances, glitz and glamor, showiness and success to coax those in the kingdom of God to defect to the kingdom of the devil.

But the devil has allies inside our own church body too - each one of us. Our sinful nature agrees with the lies of the world and the lies of false teachers. People were already complaining to the editors of *Forward in Christ* magazine back in the 1860s when it was still the German *Gemeinde-Blatt*, saying that they wanted a paper that preached peace, not one that rejected and condemned the teachings of other Christian church bodies. This same attitude continues today. Who of us wants to ruffle feathers in our family and community? We like our church and want everyone else to like theirs too, no matter what the teachings. Fighting for the truth is too exhausting. This attitude downplays the importance of the truth, and so it downplays God's goodness revealed in that truth.

And perhaps we downplay God's goodness because we look around ourselves and are simply overwhelmed by the number of the Church's enemies. We think, "Can God really be that great when the Church's enemies are so many and so vile?" Moral laxity is encouraged in every

avenue of media, especially television where it seems that almost every movie and every other commercial is encouraging elicit sex and lying to us about its consequences. The family unit is rapidly deteriorating. Divorce rates are leveling off, but that's because more and more couples are simply living together outside of marriage. Parents want to be their children's buddies instead of their parents, so that they don't have to discipline them. We also see financial problems within our own church body. You're probably aware of the severe financial strain NELHS (Nebraska Evangelical Lutheran High School) is in, which is really just a trickle-down effect from the problems individual congregations are having and our synod as a whole is having.

We see all these arrows landing all around us, and sometimes we look down at our hands in horror to find that *we* just fired some of them *ourselves*, at ourselves and at our fellow believers, and we sigh, "Jesus, are you watching up there? Just who or what is really in charge here? Is the world more powerful than you? Is the government more powerful than you? Is my own sinful flesh more powerful than you? Just who or what has the victory?"

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That is why today Jesus invites us to behold him upon his white horse. Today he invites us to draw ourselves above the realm of what we can see and perceive and catch a glimpse of him in heaven, at work and at war behind these depressing earthly scenes. And winning.

Jesus is conquering all these enemies because he is the perfect general. "He is called Faithful and True." What is the highest praise that an earthly general can receive? If he is faithful to his word and trustworthy to his superiors and those in his command, he is worthy of the highest honor. Those under Jesus command and in his kingdom can place their full confidence in him.

"With justice he judges and makes war." If we didn't know this Rider any better, this description would terrify us, but we do know him. We know that he, who was without sin, was made to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. If we are the righteousness of God, then we are the citizens whom his Son protects. We know that Jesus always judges and makes war on our behalf.

And if we are ever in doubt whether Jesus knows what is going on and is paying attention to our plight, we are told, "His eyes are like blazing fire." Nothing escapes him. He sees into our hearts. He knows all our doubts and fears. He knows them to forgive them. He knows how to allay them with words of comfort, such as those we are meditating on right now. And he sees into the enemies' camp. Satan cannot carry out any *hidden* counsel. The world cannot entice us to defect *in secret*. Our flesh cannot entertain any temptations *outside of* Christ's periphery. He sees *all* these plots and plans in order to strike them down and destroy them.

Jesus is conquering all these enemies because, as many and powerful as the devil and his forces seem to be, Jesus' forces are even greater. "The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean." Jesus is the Lord of hosts. The numerous angel armies of heaven follow him. And they too ride white horses and are dressed in white, symbolizing their holiness. A man can be the greatest tactical general on earth, but if no one is willing to follow his plans, his greatness will have no effect. The angel armies of heaven are perfectly united in purpose with their General and Lord. They carry out his will swiftly and perfectly and they guard us in all our ways.

Above all, Jesus' weapons are more powerful. On his robe, which identifies him as a king, and on his thigh, where his weapon should be, "he has this name written: King of kings and Lord of lords." Earlier we heard that his name was Faithful and True. John also tells us that his name is the Word of God. But John also says that "he has a name written on him which no one knows but he himself." How is Jesus' name a weapon? And how is it powerful if no one knows it?

We must remember that Jesus' name isn't just his titles, like my name is "Tutor" or "Pastor" or "Nathaniel." No, Jesus' name encompasses all that he is, has, and does. And no one - not you, not I - can fully grasp that with our mind or through experience. Jesus' name is sublime. We have experienced the concepts of his name in part and we can grasp them in part through illustrations, but we are unable to wrap our minds around the fullness of Jesus' name.

For example, Jesus is "Faithful and True." People have shown faithfulness and trustworthiness to us, but never so much as to earn our unquestioning trust. Nowadays we are more apt to use the terms faithful and true of a dog than a human.

We can understand well enough that Jesus is called "the Word of God" because he makes God known to us, just like our words make us known to others. And if *words* are the overflow of the *heart*, then we could rightly call Jesus, the *Word* of God, the *heart* of God. We can assent to that and even take a good amount of comfort in it. But who of us fully understands how the Word made flesh is at the same time one with God so that he is both true God and true Man? Who of us can peer at God in the manger at Bethlehem or stare at God on the cross on Golgotha and say, "That makes perfect sense"?

And we can certainly imagine someone who is a king over other kings. A world history filled with ambitious generals and dictators has probably made us *too* familiar with the concept, and perhaps even turns us off to it. But this King *only* judges and makes war *in righteousness*. This King *always* wins; that's why he has many crowns. This King exercises *absolute* power over the *whole* world, and he does so *only* on behalf of his people. This King does *only* what is supremely good *at all times*. Who can fathom this?

Do you see how Jesus' unknowable name is not only a powerful weapon against his enemies but also an immense comfort to his believers? What we do not know has the power both to afford the utmost terror and the utmost comfort. It is as though the devil and his allies are asking Jesus, "Are you angry at us?" And Jesus responds, "You have no idea." It is as though we and all Jesus' followers are asking Jesus, "Do you love us? Will you take care of us and protect us?" And he responds, "You have no idea." Oh, the depth of Jesus' name!

And we only know his name because of his single greatest weapon. "Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations." The writer to the Hebrews tell us that this sharp sword is the word of God. We are acquainted with that word as the word that saves us. But for unbelievers, the Word of God cuts down and destroys.

Friends, as you gaze in wonder at this Rider sitting atop his powerful and brilliant steed, come to the awesome realization that we have this Rider's single greatest weapon right at our fingertips every day. Every time you open your Bibles to read, the Rider charges forth into the fray. Every time your pastors lead you in Bible study, Satan sustains blow after blow. Every time you fathers lead your families in devotions around the dinner table, every time you forgive your repentant neighbor and he in turn forgives you, the sinful flesh sustains heavy damage. Every

time baptism is administered and remembered, the Lord's Supper is served, the Word is preached, taught, and read, some from the world are won to our side and the rest are forced to retreat.

For here in the Bible stands Christ, whose blood was shed, but who in doing so also spilled the blood of his enemies. He rose. They didn't. Here in the Bible stands Christ, who reappeared on the battle scene victorious and stronger than ever after it appeared that all was lost. Here in the Word stands your ascended King, mounted upon his white steed, at the head of his holy army. Here he stands, surveying each and every one of your lives, armed and ready to fight his battles, to fight them only for you, and who is going to stop someone who cannot die anymore?

Friends, we know that Jesus conquers all our enemies, because he has *already* secured the victory. He *already* won the war on the cross. "It is finished," he said. In the midst of this warfare, we have peace with God now and always. Jesus wins. John shows us that victory here. "He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood." Do you think this is *Jesus'* blood? No, it is the blood of his enemies. Jesus has dipped his robe in their blood to show us that he already holds the field forever. He has paid for our sins. He has won our salvation. The devil, the world, false teachers, our own sinful flesh - they cannot harm us! No ruler or power, outside of us or inside of us, can undo Jesus' work or rob us of the spoils that Christ gives us. Their time is short. Hear the thunder of Jesus and his troops bearing down on them.

In the book of Job, God describes the warhorse: "The majesty of his snorting is a terror. They stamp about in the valley. He prides in his power. He goes out to meet weapons. He laughs at dread and has no fear. He does not retreat from the face of the sword. Against his side clatters the quiver, the flashing lance and javelin. With quaking and violence he swallows the ground. He cannot stand still at the sound of the horn. As often as it sounds he says, 'Aha!'"

If this is true of Jesus' horse, how much more is it true of the horse's rider, the Son of God. True, the ascended rider of the white horse has to fight many powerful enemies for us. But behold! He conquers them all!

Let that sight hold you entranced and captivate your imagination - here on earth and forever alongside him in heaven.