

The Seventh Vial Chapter IV. The Rider on the White Horse



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THE Apocalypse is the record of a great war. We may truly call this war great, for its rise, progress, and issues fill not the records of Time only, they constitute the annals of Eternity. At the rising of the curtain, on the opening of the first seal, we see the hosts mustering for the battle. Clad in the panoply of light the Leader of the armies of God rides forth upon the field, bearing his weapons of war, and displaying the insignia of his royal rank. Surely it was in anticipation of this event that the Church of old sang, "Gird thy sword on thy thigh, O most Mighty." "In thy majesty ride prosperously." "Thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things." From the days of David this prophecy had sent its echoes down the ages, and this day it begins to be fulfilled. The "Rider on the white horse," and none other, is the mighty conqueror and glorious king, whose advent the Church had hailed, while as yet the first seal was unopened.

There is given Him a crown, but why does He not put it on? He must first fight His battle and win the victory, and then He will put on His crown. His inheritance, meanwhile, is in the actual possession of his enemy, Satan. He must redeem it from the power of the usurper, and then He will reign over it. It is already His. It is His by purchase, for He has bought it with His blood, and it is His by the gift of the Father, for to the "Lamb slain " has the Father given the sealed roll, the charter of this inheritance; but though His by right, He must make it His in actual possession, by the redemption of it with his bow and sword. For this end, even the redemption of the purchased possession, for Himself and for His people is He now come forth.

But let us turn to the train by which the Rider on the white horse is followed. How ghastly and spectral and dismal! The Red horse, the Black horse, the Pale horse, follow each other in terrible procession! These are strange attendants to be found in the rear of one so noble of mien (bearing or manner), and encompassed by the halo of such resplendent majesty and grace. But let us not be startled at this. All the agencies of nature, the most terrible and destructive, all the elements of the political world, the most tempestuous and devastating, have been put in subjection to Christ, and are all wielded by Him for the overthrow of the empire of His great rival and adversary. War, famine, pestilence, earthquake, and death, are all at His command, and are all employed by Him in breaking in pieces the power of His

opponent, and rescuing His and His people's inheritance from his ruinous usurpation.

The red horse, and the black horse, and the pale horse are the Apocalyptic figurations of those dire and exterminating agencies. "Christ comes riding upon the whirlwinds. He comes shooting His lightnings, and discovering by the blast of His nostrils the foundations of the world?"

Having thus symbolically shown the champion's entrance on the field, in radiant armour and divine strength, the drama proceeds. The conflict was to know no pause till one or other of the combatants should be finally routed and overthrown. The pages that follow onward to the end of the Apocalypse are just the record of that great strife.

Fearfully the contest rages, and the issue for sometime seems doubtful. We watch, with intense anxiety, the ebb and flow of the battle for the fate of a universe hangs suspended on its issue. First, Satan's pagan empire sinks in ruin, crushed under the weight of terrible calamities. He is not at all dismayed, nor does his daring or his cunning forsake him, even in this terrible hour. He rises equal to the crisis. Suddenly he reconstructs his front, and anew urges the assault with even more envenomed malignity and rage, and backed by more numerous adherents. His pagan he has replaced by his papal kingdom: and the battle commences a second time. It is only now that the war reaches its terrible sublimity, and only now is it seen what the combatants can do when urged to their utmost strength. The day seems to be going in favour of Satan. The armies of the Lamb fall back. Their numbers are thinned. Seduction and terror, the dungeon and the stake seem to devour them. The whole world wonders after the beast. It is an hour of terrible uncertainty. Clouds and night descend upon the field, and all becomes shadowy and indistinct, and we feel as if summoned to assist at the entombment of Truth, and the inauguration of that eternal night of which the ancients dreamed.

But anon, seven thunders are heard uttering their voices. A great earthquake shakes the world: and, when the clouds clear away, there again is seen the glorious form of the Rider upon the white horse, while the hosts of darkness, smitten with confusion and terror, are fleeing from His presence.

As the sun, emerging from the clouds of storm, so once more, emerging from the thick of the fight, gloriously comes forth the Rider on the white horse. Rev. 19:11-16. He had appeared at the opening of the drama, and we had seen Him begin the battle: now again He appears at its close, and we see Him deal the final blow. What a grand unity does this give the drama. Let us mark Him as He comes up from the field, where He had fought and conquered. Arduous had the contest been, but His strength is unabated, and His glory undimmed; and although He bears upon His raiment the marks of the fight, for He is "clothed with a vesture dipped in blood," His appearance, more majestic than ever, lights up the scene, and fills it with splendour. Now He has put on His crown—nay "on His head are many crowns." We need no other assurance that the victory is His. And what a victory! For let us draw near, and read this inscription. "And he hath on His vesture and on His thigh a name written KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." He who died with the writing over His cross,

"This is the King of the Jews," now, in glorious contrast, wears this title of universal sovereignty, "King of kings and Lord of lords."

These few words open a vista of far extending empire, of dominion limitless and endless, and show us tribes and nations, princes and great monarchs, bowing down and doing homage to this Almighty King. We survey the Conqueror, and we exclaim with the ancient Church, "Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah? this that is glorious in His apparel, travelling in the greatness of His strength?" We hear Him reply, "I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save." Again we ask, "Why art thou red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the wine fat?" "I have trodden the winepress alone " is the response, "For the day of vengeance, is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come."

Let us mark how altered is now the guise of His followers. This mighty warrior is no longer attended by the spectral and ghastly train of the red horse, the black horse, and the pale horse; these have been dismissed, and behind Him come a shining band, who wear garlands of victory, and display symbols of gladness. "And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean." The ministry of destructive agents is no longer needed. Tempest and famine; war and political revolution have done their work; the empire of the devil has become as the chaff of the summer threshing floor, and the wind has carried it away; and now the ministers of peace, the missionaries of the Cross, go forth to proclaim to the ends of the earth the reign of the "Righteous King," and to summon all nations to gather themselves beneath His sceptre.

Such is the war, whose eventful progress and transcendently glorious issue stand symbolically recorded in the closing pages of the Bible. When the battles of earth shall be forgotten, and the empires which they helped to found, or to overthrow, shall be as if they never had existed, the story of this war will be read and the exploits done on this field will be had in everlasting remembrance. The victory won by Him who sat upon the White Horse, and whose name is the Word of God, the songs of eternity will scarce suffice adequately to celebrate.

Let us here pause. Read in the light of the Apocalypse, what a sublime scheme is Providence! How vast, yet simple, its plan! How complicated, yet harmonious, its movements! What an infinite variety of parts, yet what unity of action! How great the apparent risk of missing the end, yet with what completeness and certainty is the end attained! How amazing the regularity and exactness with which its great cycles are performed, so that no enemy is ever permitted to rise higher, or exist a moment longer, than infinite wisdom has ordained. And then, how surpassingly grand are its results! Let us lift up our eyes, and contemplate a scheme on which the power, wisdom, and goodness of God are so gloriously inscribed; and let us, with the Church, ascribe blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, unto the Lamb by whom it is administered.

It is but a troubled and gloomy light which history sheds upon the course of this world's affairs. If we look back upon the time which has elapsed since the ascension of Christ with this help only, we are altogether unable to

discover anything like order or progression among the events which fill up the period. One war has been ended only that another might be commenced. One empire has been overthrown, for no end, apparently, but that another, not less hostile to the liberties and the religion of the world, might take the place of its predecessor.

In vain we question history, what advantage or profit has the world reaped from the calamities it has endured, and the revolutions and changes it has undergone? It can tell us of nothing worthy of being set off against so great an amount of suffering. It exhibits the world moving on through ages of barbarism and bloodshed, yet never approximating an era of repose; and, for anything it can confidently affirm to the contrary, the world may have another eighteen hundred years of wars and convulsions, of secular and spiritual thralldom (slavery; bondage; state of servitude), before it, and even then be no better than it is at this hour. We begin to lose hope, and allow our despair to drive us to the conclusion, that its present most miserable state can be ended no otherwise than by its annihilation.

But when we avail ourselves of the aid of the Apocalypse, instantly a great light is shed upon the scene. We can discover the beautiful order and rapid progression of events. We can assign to every act in the long series its place, and can tell the special end it was designed to accomplish; and can measure the degree in which it contributed to the success of the whole. We can plainly see that, vast and complicated as is the scheme, there is not an act, from beginning to end, which has been in vain, or which could have been left out; and that, long as the time is since the first seal was opened—and to the Church, which has been a sufferer throughout the entire period almost, it has seemed long indeed; yet not a day, nay, not an hour, has been lost. Constant, rapid, irresistible, has been the march of events—onward, and ever onward. There has been no delay, no retrogression. There have been no mistakes to rectify—no unforeseen occurrences to provide against—no useless expenditure of power—no useless expenditure even of suffering. The heavens themselves do not present a spectacle of more perfect order or more harmonious movements. The cycles of the Apocalypse are performed with a regularity as exact as the cycles of the firmament; and the results of the one combine, in as high a degree as do those of the other, variety and unity, simplicity and grandeur.

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