



One of the most difficult issues that Christian thinkers have had to deal with over the past 2,000 years is the problem of evil. This can be summed by the following statement made by a college student named Hillary, "I just don't believe the God of Christianity exists. God allows terrible suffering in the world. So he might be either all-powerful but not good enough to end evil and suffering, or else he might be all-good but not powerful enough to end evil and suffering. Either way, the all-good, all-powerful God of the Bible couldn't exist."

Her boyfriend Rob then chimed in, "This isn't a philosophical issue to me. This is personal. I won't believe in a God who allows suffering, even if he, she, or it exists. Maybe God exists. Maybe not. But if he does, he can't be trusted."

Just a few months ago a massive earthquake killed over 200,000 Haitians. People wondered, "Where was God?" The same question was asked in 2004 after a giant tsunami killed more than 250,000 people. One reporter wrote, "If God is God, he's not good. If God is good, he's not God. You can't have it both ways..."

That's the problem of evil. What does the Christian faith say to these very real questions? The Christian faith says with the Apostle John, "**Behold, a white horse!**" There are many things that are difficult to comprehend in Revelation. But there are also many things that are very clear. When we read here of the overthrow of the beast and the false prophet; when we behold the great white horse and a glorious rider with his robe dipped in blood, and a name on his thigh which reads, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords;" when we see all of this, there can be no doubt. What we're seeing is nothing less than the great triumph of Jesus Christ over the powers of evil.

No one put it better than the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky: "I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened."

John's vision shows us that what Dostoevsky called "the world's finale," this triumph over evil, will come at the moment in time

when Jesus Christ returns. This morning I want to ask a few questions of this event: Why will he triumph? What will happen? And how will it happen?

### **Why does he win? He wins because of who he is.**

First, why? Why will the appearance of Jesus riding this great white horse bring about the end of all evil and suffering? Why will he win this battle? The answer is simply because of who he is. Jesus will conquer evil because of who he is. John identifies Jesus with four names in this vision.

### **He's called Faithful and True**

In chapter 1 John called Jesus "*the faithful witness.*" He was faithful to his Father from start to finish. He was committed to his Father's will. He said, "*I have come to do the will of him who sent me.*" He did that. He stayed faithful all the way to the cross. He is also true. The word means "reliable, trustworthy." The idea is Jesus can in fact act as judge of all humanity because he alone has what it takes to judge righteously. It's like no one has anything on him. There are no skeletons in his closet. Nothing can be brought out at a press conference to discredit him. At his trial before Pilate, they tried to do that but failed. They had to hire people to make stuff up. Why did they fail? Because he alone is Faithful and True!

### **He has a name no one knows**

John says it's "*a name written on him which no one knows except himself.*" What is this? It's funny how many scholars try to suggest what that name is, but it says right here no one knows except him. A couple of ideas may be at work here. In ancient times it was thought if you knew someone's name you could control them. It's like when you see someone walking down the street and you yell out their name they stop and turn around. Or when my mom wanted to get my full attention she would say, "Mark Stewart Mitchell," and I'd listen up. But Jesus has a name no one knows so he's under no one's control.

It was also true in ancient times that a person's name revealed something about their nature and character. If you knew their name you knew something about them. That's why Jesus gave Simon a new name—Peter. Peter means "rock." Jesus was saying something about Peter's new character. But Jesus has a name no one knows. We know a lot about Jesus. We know that he's the Lord, Savior, Bread of Life, Light of the World, Son of Man. All these names tell us something about him. But did you know

there is still more to learn about him? There is still an element of mystery. We don't have him all figured out and nailed down. There is more to him than we can ever imagine! He has a name no one knows except himself.

### **His name is called the Word of God**

It's no surprise John sees this name. It was in John's Gospel that the Spirit of God inspired him to write, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"* (Jn 1:1, 14). As the Word of God, the speech of God, he's the perfect expression of God. Of this Word, John also said, *"all things came into being through him, and apart from him nothing came into being..."* (Jn 1:3). Jesus wins because he's God and he's the One who created all things. Who is going to be able to overcome the Creator of the universe? Evil is bad, really bad. Evil is strong, really strong. But evil is no match for the Word of God.

### **A name written on his thigh: "King of Kings and Lord of Lords"**

This meant a lot more in John's day than in ours. When Caesar entered into the Roman Senate, everyone would shout the words, "You are king of Kings and Lord of Lords." In this vision, John sees the reality, "Sorry Caesar, they're wrong! You may be the emperor of Rome, but you're not the King of Kings. You have a King, you have a Lord, his name is Jesus. He'll be around long after you're gone." Many of us operate under the same illusion as Caesar. We think at the very least we can be our own king and our own lord. We want to run our own lives; be the captain of our own ship. But even here we're deceived. It doesn't take much to see that our crowns are made of paper. A car accident. An earthquake. A test result. We're not in control. But he is. He is King and Lord of all.

Why does he win? He wins because of who he is. He's Faithful and True. He has a name no one knows but himself. He's the Word of God. He's King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

### **What is he doing? He is judging the powers of evil.**

I said earlier that in this vision we have the answer to the problem of evil. To see that we have to answer another question: What is he doing? It's really not hard to figure out. All the imagery in this vision suggests he's going to war. He's going to war against evil.

### **He rides a white horse**

Back then when a king rode a horse, he was riding to war. If he rode on a donkey, he was riding to peace. On Palm Sunday Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem, but now he rides on a horse. He's riding to what many have called the final battle; the battle of Armageddon. He's waging war against the enemies of God—the beast, the false prophet and all who follow them.

This isn't an act of personal vindictiveness or some arbitrary show of divine strength. It says *"in righteousness he judges and*

*wages war."* This is an act of righteousness; it's the right thing to do. This is for the defeat of all that oppresses and dehumanizes. This is an act of war in keeping with the goodness, love and justice of God. He does this as one who sees and searches all things. Nothing is hidden from his gaze. This is why it says *"His eyes are a flame of fire."* You can't pull the wool over his eyes. You can't fool him. He sees through us.

### **On his head are many diadems**

These are crowns—symbols of victory. It sounds strange to us for a king to wear many crowns, but in John's day kings would do this to show they were king of more than one country. Back in chapter 12 we saw the dragon had seven crowns on seven heads and in chapter 13 the beast had ten crowns on seven heads. But Jesus has an unlimited number of crowns on one head because he alone is king over all. His sovereignty is unlimited.

### **His robe is dipped in blood**

The blood on his robe is the blood of his enemies. The imagery comes from the prophet Isaiah. He had a similar vision and asked, *"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?"* God responded and said, *"It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save."* So Isaiah asked, *"Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress?"* The Lord said, *"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 spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing."*

This also helps us understand what he says in v.15, *"He treads the winepress of the fierce wrath of God."* Make no mistake, God's wrath is real. The idea of God's wrath is found 13 times in chapters 6-19 of Revelation. His wrath is expressed towards sin and injustice. We can't forget, of course, that this One who treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God is also the one who offered himself. He absorbed the wrath of God in our place. He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf. The blood on his robe is also his own blood that was shed for you and me.

### **The armies of heaven follow Him**

Perhaps this explains why *"the armies which are in heaven"* follow Jesus on their own white horses and are *"clothed in fine linen, white and clean."* These aren't only angels but believers who have died and gone to heaven. Now they return with Jesus. Earlier in v.8 when we read of the marriage supper of the lamb it was said of the bride *"It was given her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean..."* Because of what Jesus did on the cross we're given a righteous standing before God; we're made clean and so we get to participate in his victory over evil.

Some of us may be offended by a God so fierce. But listen to the wise words of N.T. Wright, "The word 'judgment' carries

negative overtones for a good many people in our liberal and post liberal world. We need to remind ourselves that throughout the Bible God's coming judgment is a good thing, something to be celebrated, longed for, yearned over. It causes people to shout for joy and the trees of the field to clap their hands. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God must be a God of judgment."

### **How does he win? By the sword of his mouth.**

Why will this happen? Because of who he is. What will happen? He will make war against and judge all that is evil. But how will this happen? How will he win this victory?

It starts with an invitation. Earlier in chapter 19 we read, *"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the lamb."* That's an invitation you love to receive because this is a feast of great joy and victory and it goes on and on. But here we read of another invitation to another feast; a gruesome feast. The birds of the air are invited to this feast. The enemies of God provide the meal; the enemies of God are the meal. Two feasts: The saints, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, are the guests at the one feast. God's enemies are the food at the other. It's almost as if John is asking, "Do you want to be the ones who are eating or the ones who are eaten?"

After this invitation is sent out something else happens: *"The beast and the kings of the earth and their armies assembled to make war against him who sat on the horse and against his army."* This is the third time John has seen a great battle. In each vision the forces of evil gather together to war against God's people. These are all different depictions of the same battle. And in each case evil is overcome. Here the rider on the white horse, the Lord Jesus Christ, seizes the beast and false prophet and throws them into the lake of fire. Then all those who were aligned with them are killed with the sword and left as food for the birds.

But **how** does he do it? Don't miss this. In this vision of Jesus the warrior we only see one weapon. What is it? It said in v.15, *"From his mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it he may strike the nations..."* And then here in v.21 it says, *"And the rest were killed with the sword which came from his mouth..."* What is this sword? The sword is his Word, the word that proceeds from his mouth. Jesus wins simply by speaking!

This is nothing new. *"In the beginning was the Word."* In Genesis we saw how powerful God's Word is. He said, *"Let there be light"* and there was light. He said "Let there be birds and fish and Zebras and Gorillas" and there was. He simply spoke into the nothingness and all that we know came into being.

When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us we saw the same thing. He saw someone who was sick and with a word he healed them. He cast out demons with a word from his mouth. No fancy tricks. No abracadabra. No physical show of force. On the sea of Galilee, in a storm so great his disciples thought it was all over, Jesus woke up and just spoke, *"Hush, be still!"* And it was. Even at the tomb of Lazarus, a dead man, four days in the tomb, Jesus spoke, *"Lazarus, come forth!"* and he did. And he does. His word is powerful.

Those who were Christians when John wrote Revelation were facing a great crisis of conviction. Who is going to win? Caesar with all his military power? Or Jesus with the sword from his mouth? If it's Caesar, then we may as well cave into him now. You see, this book was written to a first century church on the brink of compromise; a compromise born out of fear and a lack of faith that Jesus and His Word is bigger and stronger and more enduring than anything this world can put up. Don't we face the same questions they did?

A mother is panicked about her son entering college. She calls and says, "It's dark out there. There are terrible, godless things happening out there. There are things being taught that could ruin his faith." I say, "You've done a great job raising your son. He knows Jesus. He wants to follow Jesus. You've prayed for him. You've bathed him in the Word. You've placed him in Jesus' care. Now let go. Trust Jesus. Trust his Word." She spends another ten minutes telling me how evil it is out there. Finally, I say, "You think the evil is greater than Jesus, don't you?" I know she does because I so often do, too!

A husband and father is petrified when he hears the news he's being laid off. What will he do? How will he support his family? Will he lose his house? Will he even be able to keep food on the table? How could God allow this to happen? He feels abandoned. He's always put God first. He's been faithful to give and to serve. But where is God now? The world around him says, "You're a loser. You'd better figure out something fast or you're going to lose it all." But God's Word says, *"I will never leave you or forsake you."* God's Word says, *"Do not be anxious then, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we clothe ourselves?' But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you" (Mt 6:31,33).* What's true? What the world says or what the Word says?

I started by asking the question, What does the Christian faith say to the problem of evil? This isn't just some question for academics sitting in a classroom at Stanford. This is a personal question for all of us. At some point all of us will ask, How could a God who is both good and powerful allow this to happen to me? To that question the Christian faith says, *"Behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it is called Faithful and True... From*

*his mouth comes a sharp sword...*" This is what we need to know as we face our own crisis of conviction.

We need to see what John saw. Some of us need to enlarge our vision of Christ. We think of him as meek and mild. He looks like a pale, skinny hippie with straggly hair. We have no problem with seeing him as the lamb who was slain. And he is that. But what we need to know is that he's also a strong and victorious warrior who rides on a white horse. There is nothing and no one more powerful than him. Right here in this passage he is called "the Almighty." Evil is real. Evil is powerful. But evil vanishes at the Word his command.

With that vision of him we should confidently follow Christ as the One who is greater than evil and will one day defeat all evil. We shouldn't live as defeated, fearful, doubting humans but as the armies of heaven who will ride with him on white horses of our own. With this vision, the idea of caving into the world around us is foolishness. It doesn't matter what the score is now, why would you switch over to a team you know is going to lose in the end? Those who cave in might have all the goodies now, but in the end rather than eating at the marriage supper of the lamb they will be the eaten.

But we don't just write them off either. As long as we're here on this side of that great day when Jesus rides forth on his white horse, we should do everything we can to fight evil in our society. The question is how do we do that? How do we fight? What do we do about the evil that is present in the world? The world seems to only give us two options. The Left, reluctant even to use the word "evil," calls for us to repent of our history, and to imagine a new world, to "visualize world peace," to sing with John Lennon, "Imagine all the people, living life in peace..." The Right calls for us to respond to evil with force or with legislation. Yet for all the visualizing of the Left and the force of the Right, evil persists.

On top of that there are some Christians who basically say, "Do nothing. This world is going up in smoke and it's no use trying

to save it." But that's not an option either. The answer is right here: Take up the sword. Not a literal sword, but the Word of God. Hebrews says, "*For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart*" (Heb 4:12). And when Paul spoke about spiritual warfare he gave us only one offensive weapon, "*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*" (Eph 6:17).

To use this sword, we have to start by believing it ourselves. Like John earlier in Revelation, we have to eat the book and digest it. And then we have to live it right in the midst of this world, not retreating from the world but graciously invading it. Then we have to speak it into the world.

When I left for college as a new believer, a friend gave me a New Testament to take with me. Within a couple of months I had read the entire thing. Like a sword, it began to change my life, carving away old ways of thinking and living. Then I began to share what I was learning with people around me and it had the same effect on them. I didn't realize until later that I had been given a very sharp and powerful sword.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, this sword coming from the mouth of Jesus is the answer to the problem of evil. Just after the climax of the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee discovers that his friend Gandalf was not dead (as he thought) but alive. He cries, "I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself! Is everything sad going to come untrue?" The answer of the Christian faith to that question is—yes. Everything sad is going to come untrue and it will happen by the sword which comes out of his mouth, which is the Word of God.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*