

Where is history heading?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 January 2025

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] through this couple of chapters in Revelation, where is history heading? What does this year hold in store? And even bigger than that, where is all of history heading?

Perhaps you saw on the BBC a reminder of the Tomorrow's World TV show, their predictions made back in 1985 about what 2025 would be like. So they anticipated some things that were fairly close, so they imagined a world where robots would help with surgery. They imagined a world where microchip banking would be a big thing. They imagined it being in arms rather than on our phones. But they also were wildly wrong. They imagined us mining space junk and walking around and not saying, hey Google, we'd have these huge VR talking heads that would kind of pop out and give us information when we needed it. Ultra fast travel that would let us get to the other side of the world in less than an hour. Some ways fairly close, some ways wildly off the mark. What about Jesus' vision of history that we're given here through this vision from John? It's a vision that takes in not just 2025, but takes in all history from the first century until the end of time. These are impressions. There's lots of symbolic language, lots of graphic pictures, so it's impressions, but they teach, they encourage, because this is true. And you'll maybe have noticed that in chapter 6 and chapter 7, there was a different focus. In chapter 6, and we're going to think about it, it was very much history from below, the focus of what would happen on the earth, and there were scenes of trouble and judgment of various kinds. But then in chapter 7, we had this kind of history from above, from heaven.

We had this privilege of eavesdropping on eternity to listen in, to hear the songs of those who've gone before us, and to hear words of hope. So my hope is that as we get back into Revelation, as we come to these two chapters, we'll discover that these are truths that are very much for our lives. That as we read our newspapers, as we head back to school and to work this week, as we face futures that by and large for us are unknown, that we'd come more and more to see and to trust the Lamb who is on the throne. So let's begin, first of all, in chapter 6, thinking about this history history from below and these scenes of suffering and judgment. There are three groups mentioned in this chapter, and each of them have different things to teach us. The first, maybe we've come across these before, are who are often known as the four horsemen of the apocalypse. That image is now part of popular culture. Now you'll read about it in books, you'll see it in movies, you'll see it in memes, you'll have paintings that figure them, originally drawn from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, but really I think come to kind of strike the popular imagination through the book of Revelation. And the purpose of these four horsemen, I think, is to show the downward spiral of evil.

[3 : 25] Grant Osborne, a Bible commentator, says in this vision scene, God is allowing sin to punish itself. And so we see something of the horror of what happens when God hands people over to their own sin.

These are scenes that were written for first century listeners, but it's a story that's told and retold through the pages of history. So let's look at it really briefly. First horse and rider as the white horse, given a crown and riding out on conquest. So the theme of this horse is conquest, the idea of taking. The one who's riding the horse, he's like an antichrist figure, looks a bit like Jesus, but absolutely bent on destruction.

And we recognize something of this instinct in human history, conquest that brings destruction when people fight for territory, or fight for profits, or fight for power at the expense of others. Often it leads to what we see in the second horse, verse 4, this fiery red horse with a rider given power to take peace and to make people kill each other. So the theme here in histories of war and of killing, of bloodshed produced by emperors and dictators, what happens when rival claims for power collide, and how often it's the innocents that get caught up in that suffering.

When the third horse comes out, this black horse, the theme here is on the effects of what happens when there's war on the earth. There's famine.

[5 : 14] The effects include food shortages and price rises. So there was the rider with a pair of scales, and he's shouting a kilogram of wheat for a day's wages. These are higher, much higher prices than normal. And this often happens in the middle of war and devastation. So again, we're being reminded of the effects of sin and destruction in the world. And often, again, it's the needy who are exploited.

And then we come to the fourth horse, the pale horse. And its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind. And the theme of this horse and this rider is death and disaster.

There is a devastating impact on the world. 25% is the picture of those who are caught up in various ways of death and destruction. There's killing by sword and famine and plague and wild beef.

It's the misery of sin and its effects on the earth. And to have any knowledge of history, and indeed to have any knowledge of current affairs, is to recognize that this is part of the ongoing story of our world. It was true for the folks living in the Roman Empire in the first century.

It's been true through the 20th century. We can think about Germany. We can think about Russia in Europe. But every continent and every century has its dark stories to tell. And the 21st century has been and will be no different. So as Jesus the Lamb opens the first four of these seals, as He's revealing what happens as history is unfolded, we see the reality of suffering on the earth, and we know it in our experience. Well, the next seal that gets opened takes us to a different scene, takes us to see the martyrs in heaven. When He opened the fifth seal, verse 9, I saw under the altar the souls of those who'd been slain because of the Word of God and the testimony they'd maintained. So that killing sword of destruction, it doesn't spare God's people.

[7 : 35] Towards the end of the year, in the Houses of Parliament, open doors who advocate for the persecuted church, they delivered a report telling our MPs that 4,998 Christians had been killed for their faith around the world in the past 12 months. The same story continues. The Bible tells us people are killed for their faithfulness to Jesus because they bear witness to the fact that Jesus is Lord.

Today in North Korea, there's about 200,000 Christians imprisoned in labor camps simply because they want to be faithful to Jesus. And so these martyrs who have been killed, they pray. And in verse 10, they pray, how long, sovereign Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?

Sounds a lot like a number of the Psalms. When God's people are surrounded by enemies and they're surrounded by wickedness, they find themselves praying, how long? There's that longing for God's justice, for God to intervene. And notice that the martyrs in heaven, they're appealing to God. He is the one who will deal with wickedness and evil. And so they trust the God, the King who's on the throne, the one who said, vengeance is mine, I will repay. Now, how does God respond to their prayer?

Verse 11, we see this, each of them was given a white robe. So here is good news, those who have suffered, those who have died as followers of Jesus, they now enjoy victory and triumph. That's what the white robe signifies. But they're also given a word to wait, to wait a little longer until the full number of their fellow servants were killed just as they had been. So they have to wait because there are more followers of Jesus who will be killed for their faith. And there's this remarkable truth that God knows that. And God is even able to use that for His plan to bring more people into His kingdom.

[9 : 52] One, I think, dramatic example of that, maybe some of us know the story of a guy called Nate Saint. He worked with Jim Elliott. He was a missionary pilot who really wanted to take the Word of God, the good news of Jesus, to this remote tribe of island Indians.

And they made contact, and initial contact seemed to be quite good. There was some sharing of gifts. It was an attempt to communicate something. A few days later, they returned, and Nate Saint and Jim Elliott and two others were killed, were martyred for Jesus. But the story didn't end there, because in the course of time, Nate Saint's wife and Nate Saint's sister would join other missionaries in going back to that island, going back to those people, and bringing the good news of Jesus. And many of those islanders were then saved. And a church was established. And wonderfully, Nate Saint's own son, Steve, would come to be baptized by the very man who had killed his dad. He'd become a convert, leader, leading a church, baptizing the son of the man he had killed.

So, seals 1 to 4 and seal 5 remind us about the reality of suffering on the earth, suffering for the church. And then there's a turn again in seal 6. We're moving all the way to the ends of history. So, again, this is where we see lots of symbolism drawn from the Old Testament about the coming of the Lord, the end of history. So, you get the sun turned black like sackcloth, the stars fell to the earth, the heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up. These are all images from the Old Testament about the coming day of the Lord, when God comes back for final judgment and salvation.

And so, we've seen the riders, we've seen the martyrs, and now in verse 15 to 17, we're introduced to a group we can call the rebels. So, there's a group collected of the great and the good and everybody. There's kings, there's princes, there's generals, there's rich and mighty, there's everyone, slave and free. And this group represents all those who stand opposed to God, all those who choose to reject Jesus, all those who have made it their business to bring trouble on God's church, all those who have said no to God's salvation. And when Jesus returns, there is this reality that brings great fear. Verse 16, listen to the language. Jesus uses this same language when He teaches. They called on the mountains and the rocks, fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. There is fear and distress for those who now realize opposition to Jesus, who is the King, is both foolish and futile, that in the end judgment will fall. And it causes intense fear and distress. And we leave our section with this key question in verse 17, the great day of the wrath has come and who can withstand it? Who can stand when Jesus comes back to judge all of us? How can we face the prospect of standing before the judgment seat of God without fear?

[13 : 45] Question seven will give us the good news answer, but we wait for that to snow. But before we move there, three points of application to keep in view for this year and in light of history. One, we need to keep in view the reality of the return of Christ. So, the book of Revelation will say this lots of ways, backing up what Jesus said in His own words when He was on this life. Here is the goal to which history is heading. Jesus is coming back one day. And this is a message that is designed to give the suffering Christians in the first century hope. And it's always designed as a message to give God's hope. There is a day coming when Jesus comes back. There will be final judgment and final salvation.

Here is the moment when all evil and suffering and death will be gone forever. Here is when Jesus will take His people to be with Him to live in the new creation. And so, we need to keep that in view. The message of the Bible, the message of Revelation, is that the timing, when's that going to happen? The timing is unclear. Jesus on this earth said, even He didn't know. Only God the Father in heaven knew.

So, the timing is unclear, but the reality is certain. Jesus promises it. Jesus guarantees it. And so, that being the case, this message stands as a word of warning. The judgment messages in the Bible always represent a warning, which is actually at the same time a gift from God, a chance to turn and to change. Because the warning here is that if we say no to Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, the Lamb who died, that we might have our sins forgiven.

If we reject that invitation to forgiveness, if we say no to the promise of eternal life with God, then we have awaiting us what's described as the wrath of the Lamb.

[15 : 52] Because God is holy. Jesus is holy. Jesus hates evil. Jesus must do what is just. He must punish sin and rebellion. And so, today becomes a day of opportunity to think about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, that we might turn to Him and be saved. And for all of us, knowing that Christ will return, it's that invitation to live life backwards. Here is this moment that all history has pointed to in our life too, that we will stand before Jesus one day. How should we live today in light of that certain future? What does that mean for the priorities that we set for our lives in this coming year?

So, there is the return of Christ. Another reality to keep sight of is the road of Christian suffering. And again, the book of Revelation is full of this. The reality that just as it was for Jesus, so it will be for His people. That Jesus came as the man of sorrows, familiar with grief.

Jesus came as the suffering servant. Jesus suffered and died on the cross in the place of His people. And the Jesus who took up His cross said that we too must take up our crosses.

And so, we need to bear in mind the reality of suffering for us as Christians. And perhaps as we get ready for a new week, we recognize that suffering is on our doorstep. Maybe it's in our schools, because it's hard to live as a Christian in school. And sometimes we hear things from our teachers

that are very different to what the Bible teaches. Maybe it's suffering in the workplace, because the values of the organization do not match up to the values of the Christian church, and they are imposed on us. And that can be really hard. How do we stand up for Jesus in that context? Maybe suffering is on our doorstep every time we go into our house, because our family are not believers and we're on our own, and we feel that sense of isolation. What do we do when we face this path of suffering? We keep our eyes on Christ, the one who went before us, and the one who now walks with us on the road. He is with us through those dark valleys, and the rewards that He promises, and we'll hear them, make all of our suffering worth it, because Jesus is worth it. Here's a third reality to keep in view this year, and it's the reality of the rule of Christ.

[18 : 31] This has been emphasized since the beginning of the book of Revelation, and it's vital for us to understand and to remember who rules history. We switch on our news, and we watch our media outlets, and we can feel like it's chaos, and it's crisis from our perspective. But the perspective of God's Word is that it is in control, that God's will will be done. And it's even here in this chapter, the first thing we see in the chapter, it's Jesus, the Lamb of God, who is opening the scroll of history.

He is making sure God's plans come to completion. And the last thing we hear is that Jesus will come back as judge to finally deal with all that is wrong and establish the new creation. And because these things are true, we are to look to Him and to trust Him, and to recognize that those who belong to Jesus, we will stand on that day. And that's what we need to see in chapter 7. So, we're going to turn now, thinking we thought about history from below, now we need to think about history from above to hear these messages from heaven. Because the privilege of chapter 7 is remarkable, because we get to listen in to saints who have gone before us. Christians who have died before us, they sing this song.

And there are messages here to fuel our faith. Maybe you've had this experience, you're in the middle of a slog, whatever that slog might be. You know, you're in the middle of practice to get better at something, or you're preparing for an exam, or you're halfway up a challenging hill climb, or you're in the middle of the slog, perhaps, of being a parent wanting to bring your child up in the faith. Whatever it might be, imagine yourself in the middle of the slog, and someone comes beside you who's been there, who's done that. And they encourage you, keep going. It's all worth it. I've been in your shoes. I've walked this path. And the rewards, it more than makes up for the pain, for the struggle that you're going through. That's what we have in chapter 7. It's a message of encouragement to Christians on earth, from those who worship Jesus in heaven, who have come to experience that eternal weight of glory, and who say to us, following Jesus is absolutely worth it. And at the same time, it helps to answer the question, who can stand? How can we stand safe and secure before Jesus one day? Three things to notice. Those who stand, first of all, are those who are sealed. This is the point of verses 1 to 8. So, this is a different kind of seal. So, there's the seals of history. It's like a seal you might find on a really old book that needs to be unlocked. That's not the kind of seal here. The seal is the royal stamp. Like libraries have stamps, a mark of possession.

[21 : 52] There are those who are stamped as belonging to God. The chapter begins with a dramatic scene. We've got four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, and they're holding back the wind, the wind of God's judgment. That judgment will not come until angel number five comes along with God's seal to stamp, symbolically, stamp those who belong to Him. Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servant of our God.

To be sealed as belonging to the Lord is both protection from judgment and also privilege. Who are sealed? Those who are sealed are everybody who belongs to Jesus. So, in verses 4 to 8, we meet some of that symbolic number language. We've got this symbol for the whole church being represented.

The number 12, there's 12 tribes of Israel. There's also 12 apostles. The number 7, number 1,000 is their biggest number. It's the number of completeness. So, here is this picture of 144,000 intended to represent the whole church. And we know that because in verse 9, there's this great multitude from every nation, tribe, and people, and language. So, the 144,000 is this numberless crowd that's multi-ethnic, multi-language. So, those who can stand before Jesus when He returns are those who are sealed as belonging to Him because they put their faith in Him. Those who stand, secondly, are those who sing the song of salvation. This is verse 9 to 14. We've got this wonderful choir there in verse 9 from every tribe and tongue and tongue and people reminding us, as Christians, we have unity because Jesus is our center, because God is our Father, because we have the Holy Spirit, but

we don't have uniformity, that we are all different. Different languages, different culture, and God values that. And we get this beautiful picture of worship in heaven, of the global church being represented, and culture is there, and language is there, and that's good. There's also a scene of great triumph.

At the end of verse 9, they were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. So, I think we've spoken about this before, that when a Roman emperor came to town after he'd won a victory, people would dress themselves up in white, and they'd get their palm branches, and they'd wave them to welcome the victorious king. Maybe you remember in the story of Jesus, that when he's welcomed, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, there are people that bring the palm branches. Here is our king.

[24 : 50] Well, here is that sense of triumph, because they are celebrating the victory of Jesus as the eternal king. Look at the great theme of their praise. They cried out in a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. What causes joy in heaven is that God and Jesus Christ have the final victory, that salvation is mission accomplished, that all evil and all who stand opposed to God and His will will in the end be dealt with, so that God and His people can dwell together forever.

And there is a great gospel being announced here. It's interesting, in verse 13 and 14, there's this question, who are the people in white robes, the Lamb? Here's the good news.

Jesus saves His church. There is tribulation. There is intense spiritual battle. It isn't easy being a Christian, but in the end, Jesus makes sure that His people are brought safely through.

And His people are those who have been washed in His blood, which again is a picture way of saying, we have been made pure. There is forgiveness, because Jesus died as a sacrifice, to take the penalty for our sin so that we don't have to. And in fact, His death and His record of righteousness given to us means that we are made fits for life with God. So, it's the good news of victory, because what Jesus has done for us on the cross, and we get to participate and to enjoy that.

And the saints in heaven, they're doing it already. And so, those who are stand, who stand, who can have hope and joy when Jesus returns, are those who are sealed, are those who can sing the song of salvation, and they're also those who are sealed, and they're also those who see the shepherd. Because this chapter finishes with a wonderful picture, a wonderful scene to take with us into this year.

[27 : 15] It's the scene of Jesus, the good shepherd, leading His people into the joy of life with Him in the new creation. So, this theme of God, the shepherd, of Jesus, the shepherd, is a really powerful one that runs through the whole Bible. When God's people were slaves in Egypt, and there was no help for them, God said, I'll be the shepherd, and I'll deliver them.

Isaiah 40, we heard about God being a shepherd for His people, rescuing His people. Psalm 23, we sang of God the shepherd, and Jesus comes and says, I am the good shepherd. And here, there's this particular aspect of the shepherding work of Jesus, He leads His people safely home into eternal joy. That's where history is heading for the people of God. It's heading towards the joy of service. Verse 15, they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple, and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. Here's a picture of God's people, like the priests in the Old Testament, serving God joyfully in the temple. Here is the picture of Christians living always to worship our God and our Savior, and we're sheltered. We're covered by His glory, by the glorious promise of His presence with us forever. So, there's the joy of service. There's also the joy promised of suffering removed. It's there in verse 16 and verse 17.

All of these are really rich promises drawn from the book of Isaiah. Never again will they hunger. Never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. What's coming for the people of God? An eternity where everything that causes suffering and sadness and sorrow is removed from us forever. What's coming for us is a feast of joy that never ends in the new creation that God through Jesus provides for us.

Captured here in verse 17 as the joy of springs of living water. Again, that comes from the book of Isaiah. He will lead them to springs of living water. It's the work of God's servant, the Lord Jesus. Just as it was the work of God providing water in the wilderness for His people to satisfy their needs, just as it was the promise that God the shepherd would lead His people by still waters, making sure we have everything we need, the promise of Jesus, I give living water that eternally satisfies.

[30 : 02] This is our future as the people of God. And ultimately, it's the joy of the shepherd. The lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. To see the face of Jesus is the center of our joy. To know Him as our good shepherd now and forever. This is what satisfies the people of God.

So again, three things as we close. Three realities to keep in view. First, we return to the idea of the return of Christ. So as we've been listening to that song from heaven, it's been a testimony for our sake.

That message, we have been there. We've walked in your shoes. We have suffered. Some of us have died for Jesus, but it was all worth it. Not one of us is disappointed, and you will not be disappointed either.

John Newton wrote a letter to a friend in ministry encouraging him in this way. When we awake into that glorious world, we shall in an instant be satisfied with His likeness.

One sight of Jesus as He is will fill our hearts and dry up all our tears. I think one of the things that we really need to grasp hold of here in our modern, comfortable West is to grasp hold of the fact that eternity is far, far greater.

[31 : 49] That Jesus is far more beautiful than what so often grabs our attention and keeps us clinging to life here in the world. Second reality to keep in view the road of Christian suffering.

Those winds, those storms of judgment, the Bible says, honestly, they will come. But we have the promise that if we are sealed by Jesus, we have spiritual protection. We have the guarantee of future glory that Jesus will not fail us because we belong to the Lord.

Just before Christmas, boys and girls, you may have noticed this, Cadbury's chocolate lost its royal seal of approval for the first time in 170 years.

King Charles no longer wants it to be the supplier to the king's palace. That's bad news for Cadbury's that you can lose the royal seal of approval.

We need to understand as Christians, we can never have that experience. We will never lose that royal seal of approval. Here is hope. If we love Jesus as Lord and King, if we live for Him, then our place in God's family is safe and secure.

[33 : 16] If we are struggling in the Christian life, and it seems really hard, we need to remember that Christ has sealed us as belonging to Him, and our standing and our confidence is not based on our feeling, it's based on His faithfulness. He will make sure His people are home with Him forever.

And one last thing to remind ourselves of, and it's the rule of Christ. Whoever we are, whatever our story today, the Bible says to us, God wants us to know that our future hope and our hope of glory rests in knowing, trusting, following Jesus as the good shepherd and being part of His story of salvation.

Jesus, the good shepherd who came to this earth on a rescue mission to rescue lost sheep. Jesus who would lay down His life for His sheep to fully pay the penalty for our sin.

Jesus the one who is calling His sheep by name, who powerfully, effectively draws people to Himself, out of darkness into His light, the one who every day leads and guides and protects and provides goodness and mercy for His people.

This is the good shepherd who will return, who will take us home to be with Himself forever in the new creation. That's where history is heading for the people of God.