

The Man Comes Around

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[0 : 01] Johnny Cash's last album was called American Four, and I love this album. It was recorded with Rick Rubin just before Cash's death in 2003.

Apparently Cash was so weak during the recording that he could only sort of sing about one line at a time. So Rick Rubin would record this one line, and then Johnny Cash would have to catch his breath, and then Rick Rubin would basically splice these lines together, and that's how they made the songs, piece by piece.

And on American Four, most of the songs in the album were covers. Probably the most famous one was Hurt by Nine Inch Nails, if you're familiar with them. And so a lot of covers and quite a few songs, older Cash songs.

But he did bring one new, one original song to American Four, and that was called The Man Comes Around. And apparently he spent months and months writing this song, unlike his most famous song, Walk the Line, which he wrote in about 20 minutes, apparently.

The Man Comes Around is a brutal song. It's a song about God's judgment. But it is a powerful piece of music. And it's filled with apocalyptic imagery of God's judgment.

[1 : 21] And you probably have heard it. So I think, Noah, why don't you cue up the first sort of 30 seconds just to remind you of the song. And I heard, as it were, the noise of thunder.

What four beasts sang, and kind of sleep. And I saw, and the home of my thoughts. There's a man going around taking names.

And he decides who to free and who to blame. Everybody will be treated all the same. There will be a golden ladder reaching down.

There will be a golden ladder reaching down.

It was a song to remind him to be faithful to his wife and to God whilst he was on tour. But he was known for wearing black, which seems a bit dark. And perhaps a contrast to his beliefs.

[2 : 54] But he wrote a song about why he wore black. In a song called The Man in Black. And it's a song about social justice. And he said he wore black in solidarity with sinners and the marginalized.

Which one of reasons he played all these kind of concerts in prisons. And I read a couple of lines from a song called The Man in Black. I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down living in the hopeless, hungry side of town.

I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime, but is there because he's a victim of the times. I wear black for those who've never read or listened to the words that Jesus said about the road to happiness through love and charity.

So this was Cash's big thing. It was solidarity with the downtrodden. So it's very interesting to note that the final song he ever wrote was a song about the judgment of God.

So you have The Man in Black, a song about solidarity with sinners. And you have The Man Comes Around, a song about judgment against those same people. And it can feel like these two things bump up against each other.

[3 : 58] But the Bible does talk about both. We have Jesus who was the friend of the sinner, the friend of the oppressed. And we have Jesus here in our passage tonight, the judge of the world.

And perhaps we don't particularly like this idea of God judging. But it's clearly what the passage is about. There's no way to get around it. So let's humbly come to Revelation 6 and see what God has to teach us this evening.

So remember from last week, God has a scroll. And the scroll, like an architect, has sort of plans rolled up under his arm. And the scroll contains God's plan for history, God's plan for the world.

And the scroll has seven seals, you know, like wax seals. You know, like you pour a bit of wax on like in the olden days and like a king would have a signet ring and it'd press down and say, yeah, I authorize this. The scroll had seven seals on it.

And our chapter this evening, what we have is we have the lamb, we have Jesus cracking open these seals one at a time. Chapter 6, the first six seals are cracked open.

[5 : 05] They have to all be broken before we can unravel the scroll. And with each seal that's cracked open, there's a short vision that John has. So let's begin with the first four, just the first four seals.

And these are about things that have happened and are happening right now. So let's look at them. And it's probably the most sort of, well, one of the most famous images in Revelation.

It's the four horsemen of the apocalypse. But it's not saying, you know, these horsemen are going to come at the end of the days. It's saying, no, this is describing in symbolic form the larger realities of the world today.

It's saying, here's what the world has looked like in the past, what the world has experienced in the past. It's saying, here's what the world is experiencing today and here's what it's going to experience in the future. In terms of a time frame, if you want to narrow it down any more, it's basically, it's the time frame between Christ's ascension and Christ's return.

It's a picture of life. Here's what life looks like for Christians. So the four horsemen, one at a time. The white horse. It's a rider with a bow and he's coming to conquer, it says.

[6 : 16] This specifically represents the ongoing reality of war. In our world. And the sort of, you know, the color of the horse is white and he's wearing a crown.

It's this kind of demonic parody of Christ who later in Revelation will see wears or rides a white horse. But, here's a question here, is war a current reality in the world?

Clearly it is. I did a lot of reading for this sermon about the world. And let me give you some stats. There's a report out of London this year and it said that there were only 10 nations in the world.

There are 10 nations in the world, only 10, who are not currently at war or not engaged in some kind of conflict on some level.

The report went on to say that battle deaths are at a 25 year high and the number of refugees and displaced people as a result of war. We haven't had these numbers since World War II.

[7 : 20] And to put some real numbers on this, the number of refugees doubled between 2007 and 2015. There are approximately 60 million refugees in the world.

Refugees because of war. Finally, the report noted that 13.3% of the globe's total economic activity is spent on violent conflict.

13% is spent on violent conflict. That's the rider of the white horse who is at work in the world. Next, the red horse. Verse 4, let me remind you of what it says. Out came another horse, bright red.

It's rider was permitted to take peace from the earth so that people should slay one another. And he was given a great sword. He was given a great sword. So if the first horse is about external conflict, cross-border conflict, this horse here is about internal conflict, conflict within a country.

We know that the scholars tell us that the word slay here, this is not the kind of word that you use by talking about like a battle on a field where people are like fighting with swords when they slay each other.

[8 : 31] It's not talking about that. It's talking about sly death. It's talking about assassination. The modern equivalent is terrorism. It's talking about terrorism. So I read this report on, there's this thing called the Global Terrorism Index, and it tracks terrorism in the world.

And it said, in the most recent report this year, it said that there has been a nine-fold increase in deaths by terrorism since September 11.

A nine-fold increase. About 32,000 people were killed by terrorists last year. This is the work of the Red Horse people. Next, verse 5, the black horse.

And its rider had a pair of scales in one hand. And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, A quart of wheat for a denarius and three quarts of barley for a denarius, but do not harm the oil or the wine.

This requires some explaining. You're like, if I'm going to live with any of these ones, maybe I'll take that one. I'll deal with the black horse. That doesn't sound so bad. A denarii was a day's wage in the ancient world.

[9 : 46] So what do you get for a day's wage? You get some wheat or some barley. Enough for a very, very small meal for one person. But the wine, the luxury items, that's always available for the wealthy.

The horror of the black horse is economic inequality. Economic inequality. Oxfam, who you would have heard about, published a report this year.

I tried to get the most recent reports when I was reading stuff. Oxfam published a report this year. Here are a couple of sort of salient facts to this. 85 individuals own as much as half of the rest of the world.

85. Half of the world's adults average less than \$500 in their net worth. So half the world's adults are worth \$500, their total worth.

The richest 1% have more wealth than the rest of the world's population combined. In 1960, at the end of sort of colonialism, people living in the richest country were 33 times richer than people living in the poorest country.

[10 : 58] That's a big gap. That's a substantial gap. By 2000, when sort of globalization had sort of fully cooked in, that disparity had increased to 134 times richer.

So these countries up here were 134 times richer than these countries here. This is the work of the rider of the black horse. This is a reality today.

Finally, the pale horse. Verse 8. And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill with a sword, with famine, with pestilence, and by wild beasts.

The pale horse brings death. Not just any death, though. It's unnecessary death. It's awful death. It's death that shouldn't happen. The same Oxfam report said that 2,000 children die every day because of diarrhea.

Diarrhea they contract because they don't have access to safe drinking water. That's 2,000 children a day. American author and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard asks the great theological question of our time, and it's this.

[12 : 17] What in the Sam Hill is going on here? I mean, these horses describe the great evils in our world of all time.

Where's God in this? Now, some people could ask, has God just lost control of the human project? No. And I think this is one of the great shocks of the passage.

One of the great shocks is this, is that God is letting this happen. In each case, you'll see the messenger of God says to the horseman, come. Do it.

We also see that a crown is given to the white horse. The red horse, it says, is permitted to take peace from the earth. The pale horse is given authority over a fourth of the earth, in verse 8.

What's going on here? How is that? Why? What? To boil it down, you boil it down to this.

[13 : 23] The four horsemen represent God's judgment on the world. Now, this does not mean that God is out there making kids sick and starting wars. It's more nuanced than that.

I think Romans 1 explains this quite well. I'll read Romans, just one verse from Romans 1. It says this. The wrath of God is revealed in this. God gave them over to the lusts of their hearts.

Which basically means people rejected God. So God lets them live with the consequences of their actions. And in the case of the horsemen, the consequences of our war and famine and great inequality.

So God's judgment looks like this. God letting people have what they want. And the result is social and economic and physical disaster.

Now, let me nuance that some more. It's not only that God lets this happen. As we read just before, one of these horsemen is given a bow and a sword.

[14 : 23] And it's hard to work out how to say this exactly, but it's not just judgment via a hands-off approach. It's that. But it's also, it seems, that God initiates.

We have a great danger in the West of sentimentalizing sort of God and restricting God's work to just good things. I remember being in a staff meeting at a non-for-profit I worked at a long time ago.

And it was announced that we'd receive this big donation. And somebody said, God is good. And the person sitting beside me said, no, no, no, we shouldn't say that. God was always good.

God was always good even when we were broke. God is sovereign. He is headship and leadership over the good things that happen and the bad things. His relationship with those bad things is very complicated.

And I don't know how to explain it because I don't fully understand it. It's not a one-to-one relationship. It's not a linear relationship. I know that. But the Bible affirms that somehow God let this happen and initiated it.

[15 : 33] We're left with a lot of questions, obviously. One of them might be this. It could be this. It could be, listen, I just don't like the idea of a judgmental God.

It doesn't sit with me. Don't like it. Not interested in it. But the objection could go further. They said that kind of belief is dangerous, you could say. You believe that God is angry and judges people?

That's a dangerous belief. Because what can happen is that if you believe God sort of punishes people like that, then that empowers people to do the punishing. What you could be doing is encouraging people to take the law into their own hands and do God's will by killing off all these folks that they don't like.

That sounds like quite a reasonable objection, doesn't it? It's a big objection to the idea of a wrathful God of judgment. Miroslav Volf has, I think, a great response to that objection.

Volf is a theologian. He grew up in communist Yugoslavia. His father was tortured in a concentration camp. Volf was persecuted. He was interrogated many times.

[16 : 43] And I just tell you that because he's not some sort of ivory tower, out-of-touch scholar. And he says this. He says the only way that we can be people who practice nonviolence, that we are people of peace, the only way we can be that people is by believing God will make things right and that he will judge.

Which means we don't take the law into our own hands because we know that God will settle all accounts. So I can refrain from violence myself because I know God will settle the account.

Here's a quote from him. It's a little bit long and slightly technical, but here we go. He says this. My thesis is that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance.

My thesis will be unpopular with man in the West. But imagine speaking to people as I have, whose cities and villages have been plundered and burnt and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit.

You point to them, we should not retaliate. Why not? I say the only means of prohibiting violence is by us, by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God.

[17 : 51] If God were not angry with injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship. Let me give you a practical example of this.

A couple of weeks ago, it was the 10th anniversary of a tragic school shooting. This happened in 2006, October the 2nd. A guy walks into an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania and shoots 10 young girls, 10 little girls.

They were little girls. Five of them died. Five of them maintained serious injuries. And then the gunman killed himself. In these situations, the media normally focuses on the madness of the killer.

What was his family like? What websites did he go to? Who was he hanging around with? Who was he associated with? That kind of thing. But in this case, the focus was all on the Amish community and the incredible response of this Amish community.

After the shooting, Jack Meyer, who was a member of the community in Lancaster County, he said this, So I don't think there's anyone here who wants to do anything but forgive. And not only reach out to those who have suffered loss, but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts.

[19 : 06] So the Amish community forgave the man, forgave the man's family, and took up an offering for the family of the killer because he was the breadwinner.

About a week ago, I listened to an interview with the mother of the shooter on NPR. And she talked about how horrible this whole thing was.

She talked about how that she is now a caregiver for one of the Amish girls who is nonverbal and is immobile, is in a wheelchair.

She's a caregiver for this girl now. But she talked about that week, and she sort of said she wanted this very small, very private funeral for her son. And she said as they started the funeral, as they walked to the graveside, she said about 40 Amish start coming out from around the side of the graveyard and surrounded them like a crescent, she says.

Love just emanated from them, she said. As I said, many of the sort of pundits and talk show hosts were amazed at the attitude of these Amish people. They even made a movie about it. But the testimony was so powerful to Christ, and forgiveness was so out of their framework, like this unilateral forgiveness was so out of the framework of the movie producers, that they sort of felt like they had to suppress that a little bit.

[20 : 29] And so they invented a character on the TV movie called Ida. And Ida was an Amish woman who could not forgive and who was filled with anger, and she nearly left her faith.

See, for the producers, radical forgiveness like this was just too much to believe. And the newspapers, when they reported on it, they would say things like this. They would say, oh, these people, they represent the best of us.

Sort of ignoring the Christian roots of what this Amish community had done in this radical forgiveness. Because these guys could only forgive because they believed in a Christ who forgave his tormentors.

And they could only forgive because forgiveness at his heart says this. It says this. It says, I give up my right to pay back. And we can only do that when we believe in a God who will ultimately bring justice, who will ultimately judge, who will ultimately repay.

When we believe in that God, then we can give up our right to pay back. It's the only reason this thing can happen. Moving on, and very quickly here. In verse 9, the scene moves from earth to heaven.

[21 : 42] So we have the first four riders, the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The setting of that is on the earth. It's the history of the world. Then, the next scene, we're taken up into heaven.

And we hear, and the fifth seal is broken, and the vision is this. We hear the voices of Christians who have been killed for their faith. And they're crying out to God, and they're saying, how long? How long, God? When will you judge?

When will you make things right? And see, they know, they know that it's only God who should do this. They've renounced their right to pay back, and they're trusting God to do that work.

And God can therefore say to them, put on your white robes and rest. And they can rest. Because they trust in a God who judges. They trust in a God who is just.

And the robes they're wearing, white robes, represent the fact that they're in a right relationship with Christ. And we wear those robes symbolically now. We have been made right with Christ so we can rest in the face of injustice.

[22 : 42] We cannot be people who are about seeking revenge. And that frees us to seek reconciliation. Finally, the sixth seal. We're back on earth again, scene changes.

But we're in the future this time. And this is the final judgment of God. John is given a vision of the end of the world. God bringing about his final judgment. The sun is black, it says.

The moon is blood. The stars are falling from the sky. It's like the universe is falling apart. And in this final scene, you notice that there are two great emotions.

There is terror and there is anger. First, terror. As the universe seems to sort of unwind. Verse 15 says that kings and generals, the powerful, the rich, the great ones, the slaves, they hide themselves in caves.

It's very interesting, isn't it? That it's mostly powerful people that are hiding. And that's probably because these type of people are the kind of people who, when faced with trouble in their normal life, can just sort of buy their way out of it.

[23 : 49] Or call in favors from powerful friends. When I finished university, I went to Lake Tahoe for three months and snowboarded. When I came back, a friend of mine who was entrepreneurial loaded up his snowboard bag with like ten snowboards that he was going to sell in New Zealand at a massive profit.

And he declared one snowboard when he went through customs. And we take customs very seriously in New Zealand. And so he gets pulled over and they open up his bag and he's got this massive stack.

He's got thousands of dollars worth of snowboards. They were very expensive back in the days. So at the very least, he would have had that all taken away from him and he would have been charged.

His father was a doctor in a very wealthy area in a very wealthy suburb in Auckland. And so my mate calls up his dad. His dad just calls some mates. Calls some friends.

And the customs officer about 20 minutes later gets a phone call from a superior saying, Let the boy go. Give him stuff and let him go. Let him walk. Apparently he was absolutely furious, the customs officer.

[24 : 57] See, these people here in the passage can normally buy their ways out of situations. Just call up buddies and sort it out. Not in this case. In this case, there is no escape. These people are petrified.

My father was a war vet. I remember as a child, he would often wake up in the middle of the night screaming. He'd be dreaming about the war and reliving some horror.

It was just, I mean, it was horrible. But that kind of fear that my father experienced, this has got nothing on these people, what they're experiencing. We know this because you can read what they're saying here.

They're saying they're crying out to the mountains. Mountains fall on us. Mountains fall on us. They would rather have that than have to face Christ on the final day.

Which leads to the second emotion. Wrath. Anger. You see, on this final day, God is not up there like an accountant. He's not counting out people's good deeds and their bad deeds.

[25 : 59] He's not making some calculation about how to treat somebody. God is angry. He's full of wrath. He feels it. He's angry because he cares.

He cares. He cares. He's angry because people have hurt his world. And he's angry about that. And judgment is coming.

And the passage ends with a question. And it says, who can stand before God on that day? Goodness, that's a great question, isn't it? Who can stand before this God on that day?

The answer is chapter 7. The answer is next week's passage. But it's those who have put their trust in Christ.

It's those who have trusted Christ's record of goodness and not their own. They will face God and be welcomed with loving arms. But more on that next week.

[26 : 56] Folks, this is a really tough passage. And it is difficult to hear, I know. But it is the truth of God. And if you have questions about that, I'd be really happy to talk to you about it.

Or James here as well. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.