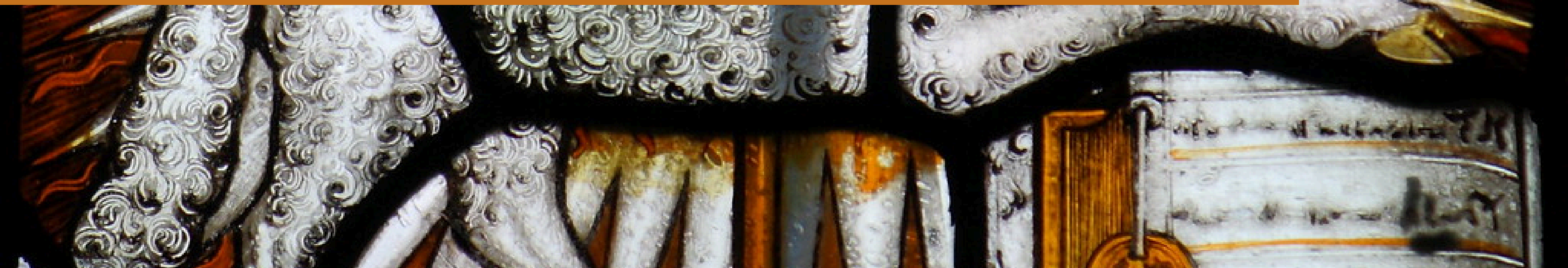



The Seven Seals

The Revelation of Jesus Christ - Week 2





Part One:

Before the Throne of God Above

Last Week

In Week 1, we discussed how one ought to read the genre of apocalyptic literature, how Scripture uses symbolic language, and the importance of avoiding the use Revelation as tea leaves to try to predict the future. Instead, it is meant to be a revealing of our Lord Jesus in all His glory, showing us visions of His once for all victory over sin, death, and the devil.

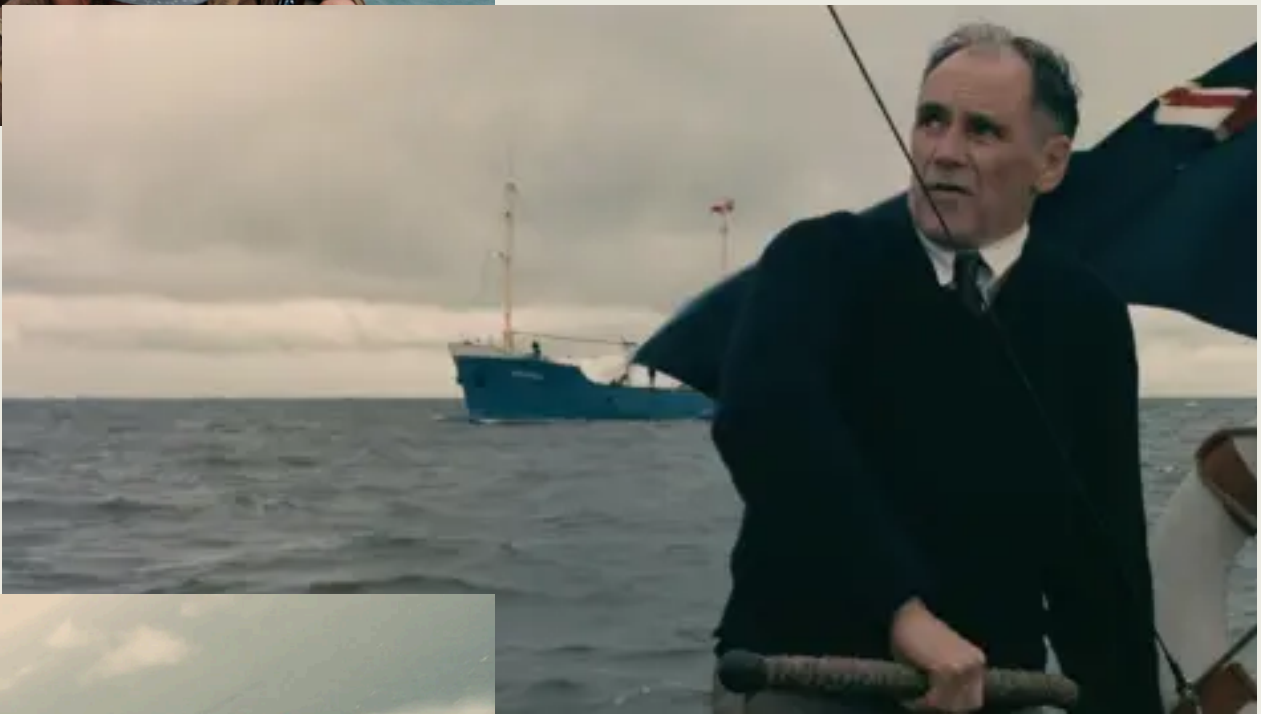
We also discussed to overarching structure of those visions, which are woven together to form a difficult yet beautiful work of symbolic artistry.





One Week

One Day



One Hour



**Seven
Seals**

**Seven
Trumpets**



**Seven
Bowls**

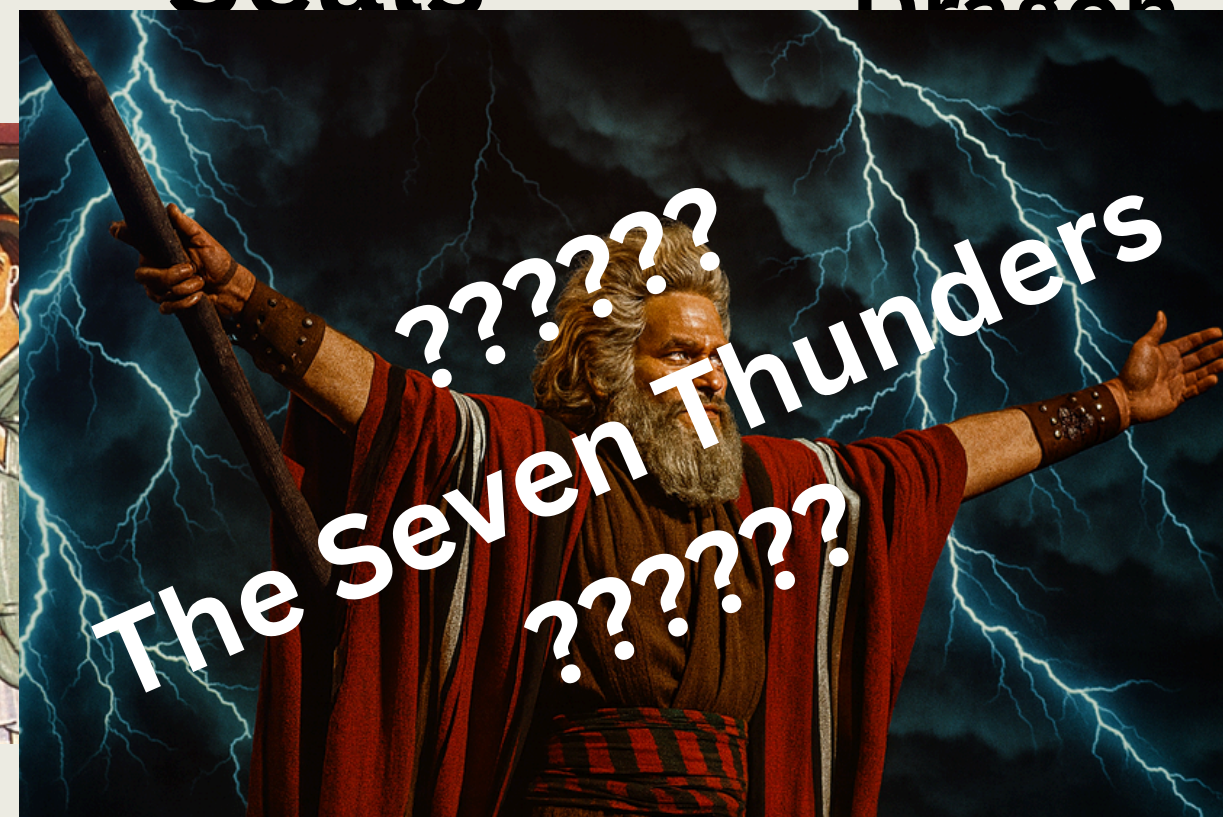


**Seven
Seals**

**The Woman
and the
Dragon**



**Seven
Trumpets**



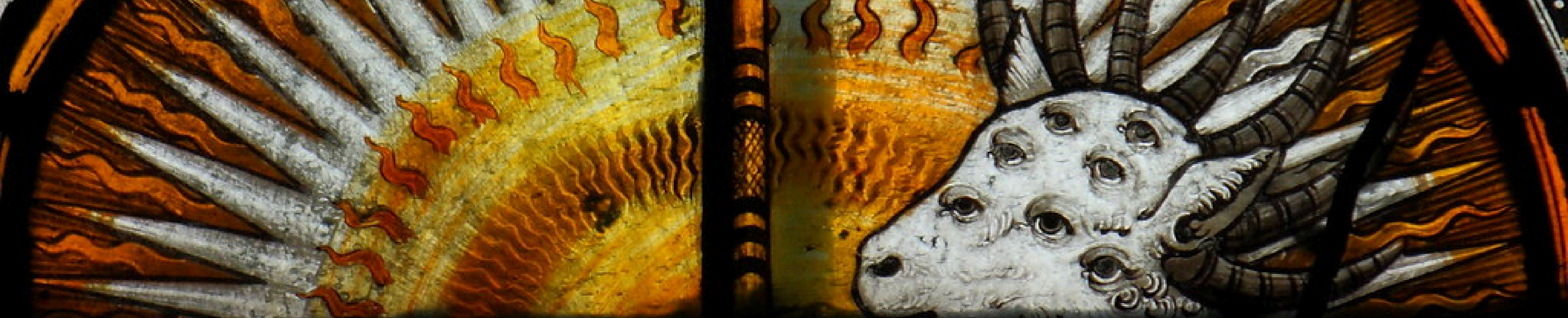
**Seven
Bowls**

**Defeat of
Satan**



**The Fall of
Babylon**





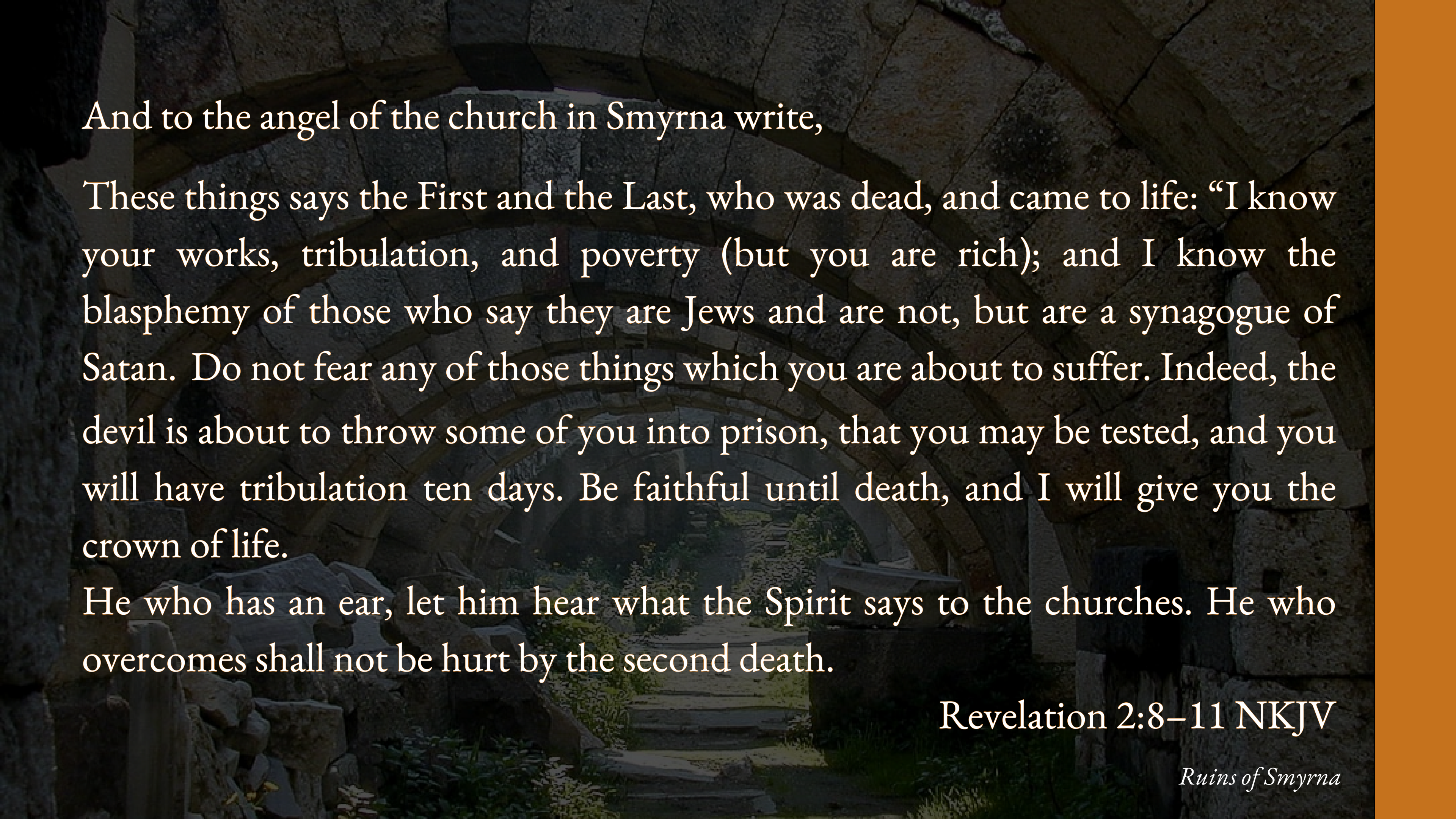
Questions from Last Week?



The Letters to the Churches

The Book of Revelation opens, after a short prologue, with seven letters to various churches in Asia. The purpose of these letters is to spiritually prepare the reader for the journey they are about to embark on. As such, over the seven weeks of this study, we will be beginning each class with a different letter, both as a devotional exercise, as well as to ensure we do not neglect this less-discussed part of the Apocalypse of St. John.



The background of the slide is a photograph of the ruins of Smyrna, showing a series of stone arches and a path leading through them. The image is dark and atmospheric, with a warm orange-brown vertical bar on the right side.

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,

These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.

Revelation 2:8–11 NKJV

Ruins of Smyrna

Man's Inhumanity to Man



As discussed last week, Revelation is best read as a series of layered visions, rather than a linear sequence of events, meant to reveal to us the person and work of Christ. This week, we will explore the first vision of the sequence, the breaking of the seven seals, which shows the human evils of this present age, and how Jesus Christ is steadfast in the deliverance of His Church out of the evils of the world.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Albrecht Dürer

The First Cycle

The first cycle of seven emphasizes that the followers of Christ have been delivered, as well as the strife and conflict among mankind in these last days.

1. The First Four Seals: The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)
2. The Fifth Seal: Suffering of the Saints (6:9-11)
3. The Sixth Seal: The End: Its Terror Described (6:12-17)
4. Interlude: God's People Preserved in Suffering (7)
 - a. The 144,000: The Church Militant
 - b. The Heavenly Multitude: The Church Triumphant
5. The Seventh Seal: The End: An Answer to the Prayers of the Saints (8:1-5)

Worthy is the Lamb

Before the first seal is broken, we see the throne room of God, and a scene is presented where none can open the seven-sealed scroll. St. John weeps at this, until the Lion of Judah, who is the Lamb that was slain is found worthy to open the scroll. Here we see a cosmic image of Christ's atonement. Christ alone can open the scroll, as He alone can pay the debt of sin. He alone can satisfy God's justice of the Cross. In so doing, He is able to unseal the Book of Life, opening the way for His Church to be redeemed and rescued from sin and death.





Part Two:

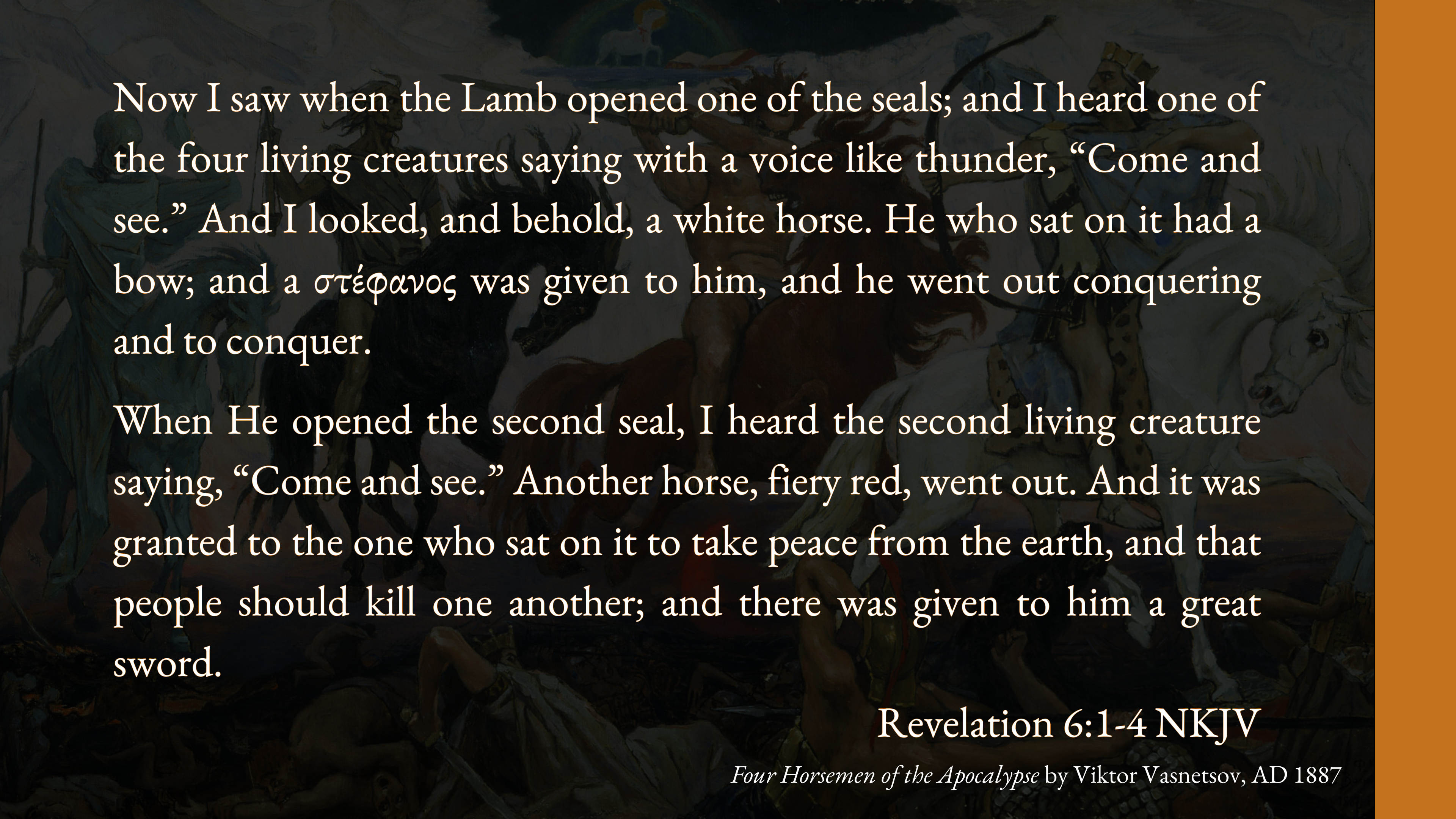
The Four Horsemen

A Study in Symbolism



As mentioned last week, the purpose of this study is not exploration of each individual detail of Revelation, but rather to learn to appreciate the work as a grand tapestry revealing the victory of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, it is beneficial to walk through an example of how to properly read symbolism in the Book of Revelation (and other apocalyptic literature), to help us all be better equipped to approach these difficult texts in God's word. Thus, let us engage in a brief exploration of the symbolism of the first set of seals, and their associated horsemen.

Fresco in the Dionysiou Monastery, 16th century AD

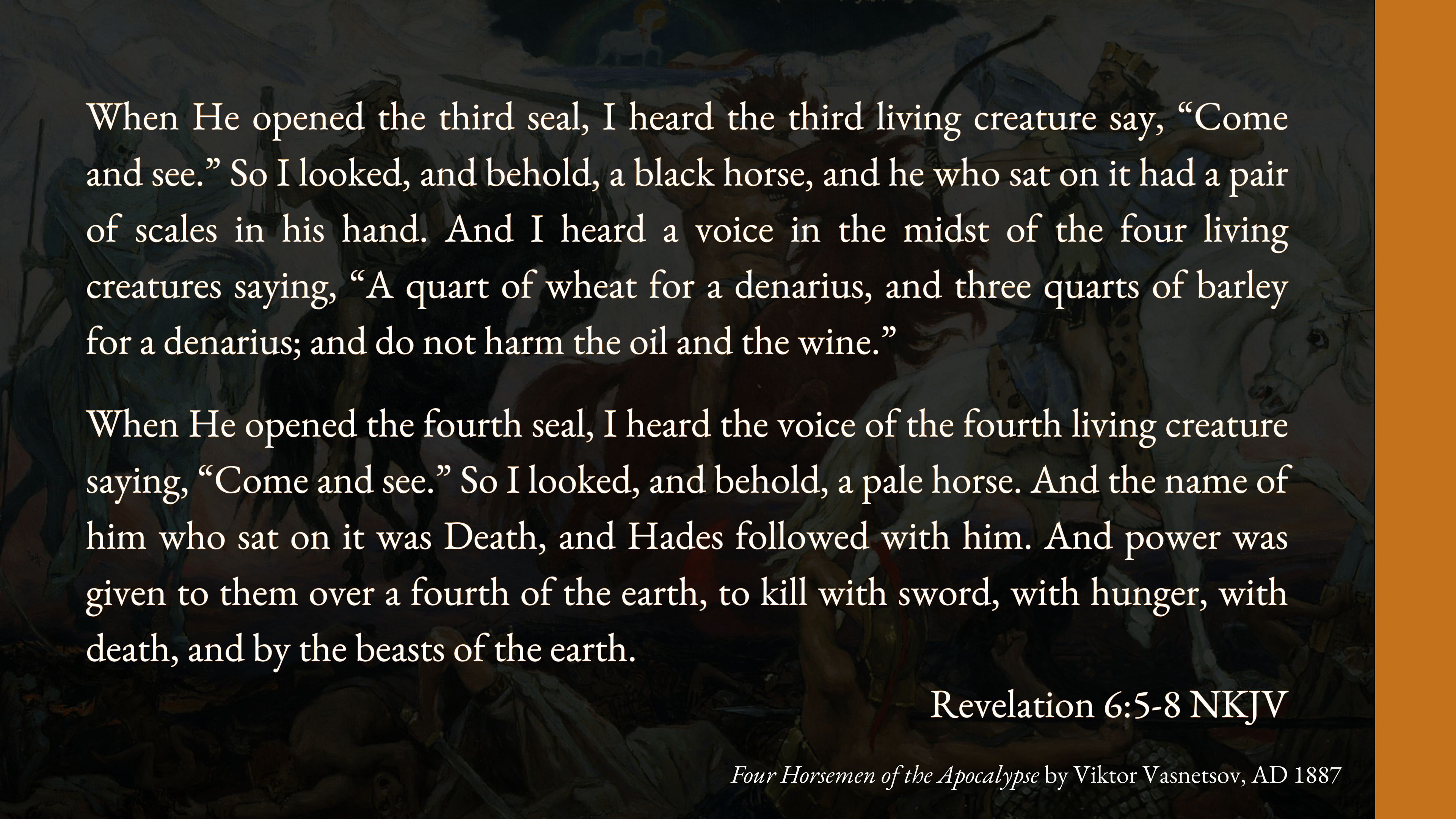


Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, “Come and see.” And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a *στέφανος* was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, “Come and see.” Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword.

Revelation 6:1-4 NKJV

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Viktor Vasnetsov, AD 1887



When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come and see.” So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard 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; and do not harm the oil and the wine.”

When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, “Come and see.” So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth.

Revelation 6:5-8 NKJV

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Viktor Vasnetsov, AD 1887

The Four Horsemen

Following the opening of each of the first four seals, we are treated to a vision of a horseman, the dread symbol of the different human troubles which face the Church.

- **Conquest** - The tyranny and oppression of foreign conquerors.
- **War** - The horrors of warfare, pillage, and murder.
- **Famine (?)** - The hardest symbol to parse, likely representing economic scarcity, avarice, and exploitation.
- **Death** - The ultimate enemy, who brings all men down to the grave eventually, via age, disease, disasters, etc.

This scene of the horsemen sowing discord across the face of the earth is what Christ describes in Matthew 24:6-8, when He speaks of “wars and rumors of wars...nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.”

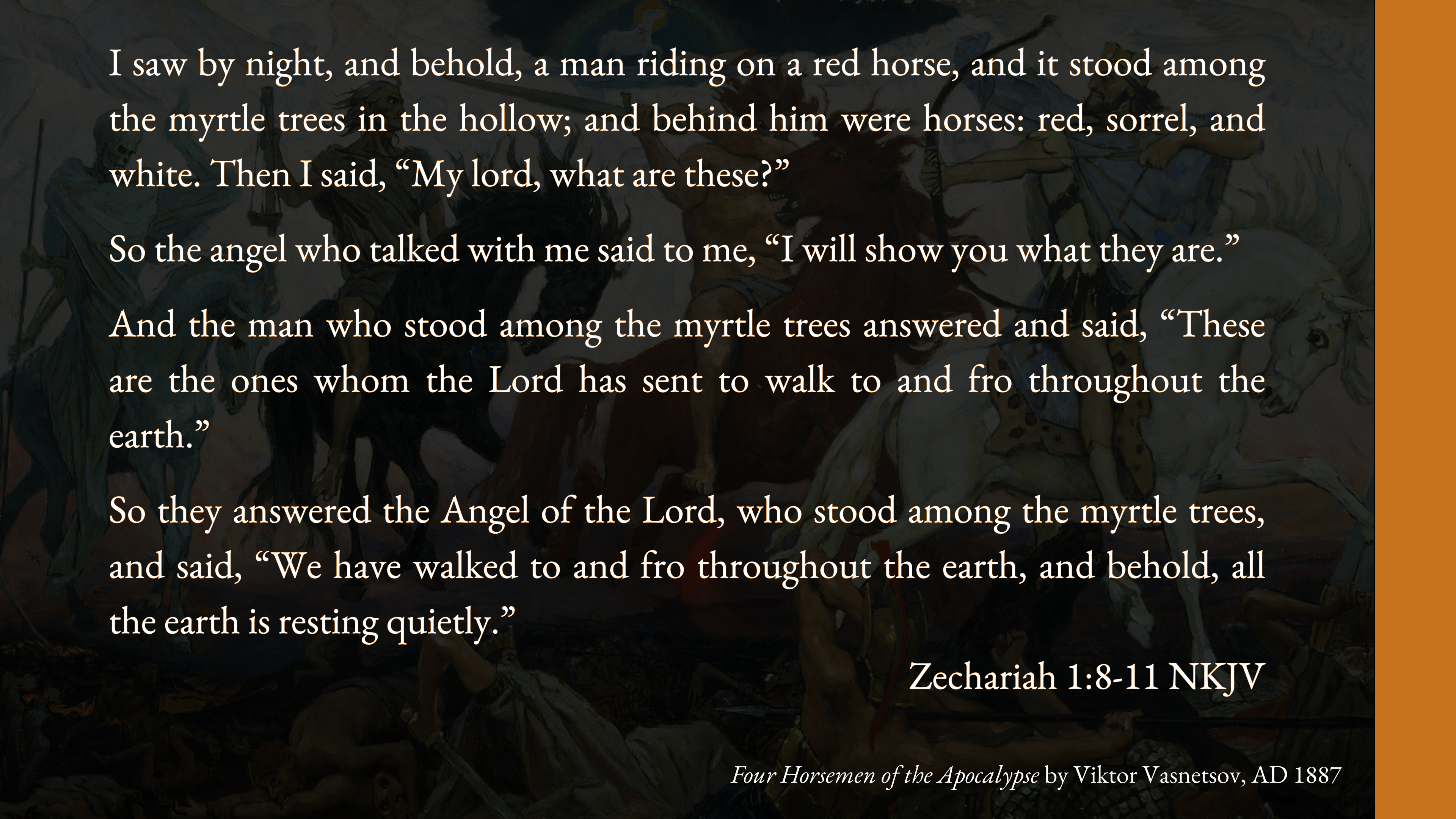
Context and Canon

Remember: symbols have multiple layers of meaning. The symbol of horsemen armed and rampaging across the earth has obvious, inherent meaning, made explicit in the text with mentions of ‘conquest,’ ‘war,’ and ‘death.’

If we leave our interpretation there, we miss the richness of the symbol within its canonical scope. This is not the only time we see multicolored horses in Scripture. St. John is drawing on an image from Zechariah and Ezekiel here, to make a deeper point about the nature of these trials that face mankind.



Knight, Death and the Devil by Albrecht Dürer, AD 1513



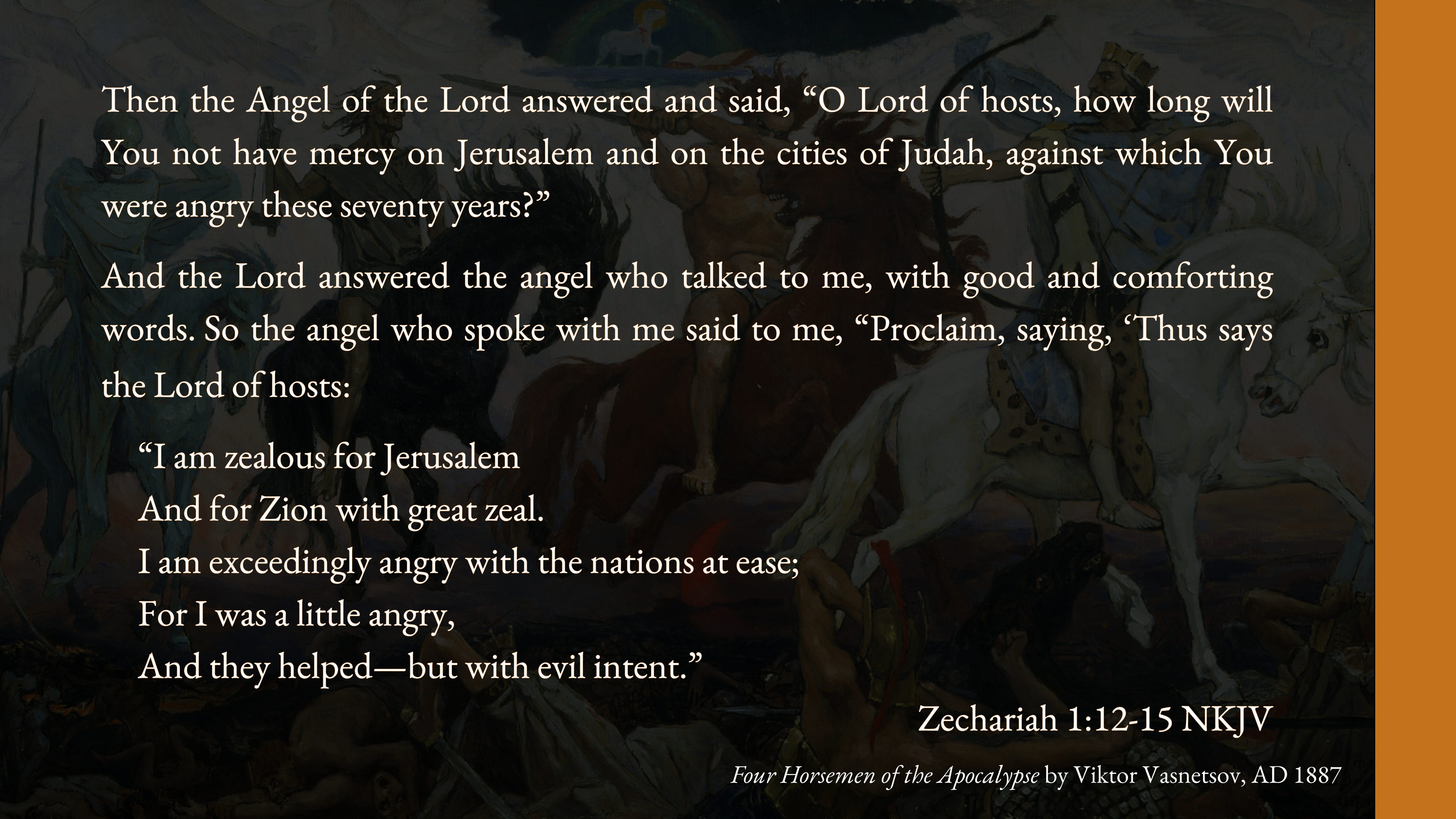
I saw by night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse, and it stood among the myrtle trees in the hollow; and behind him were horses: red, sorrel, and white. Then I said, “My lord, what are these?”

So the angel who talked with me said to me, “I will show you what they are.”

And the man who stood among the myrtle trees answered and said, “These are the ones whom the Lord has sent to walk to and fro throughout the earth.”

So they answered the Angel of the Lord, who stood among the myrtle trees, and said, “We have walked to and fro throughout the earth, and behold, all the earth is resting quietly.”

Zechariah 1:8-11 NKJV



Then the Angel of the Lord answered and said, “O Lord of hosts, how long will You not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which You were angry these seventy years?”

And the Lord answered the angel who talked to me, with good and comforting words. So the angel who spoke with me said to me, “Proclaim, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts:

“I am zealous for Jerusalem
And for Zion with great zeal.
I am exceedingly angry with the nations at ease;
For I was a little angry,
And they helped—but with evil intent.”

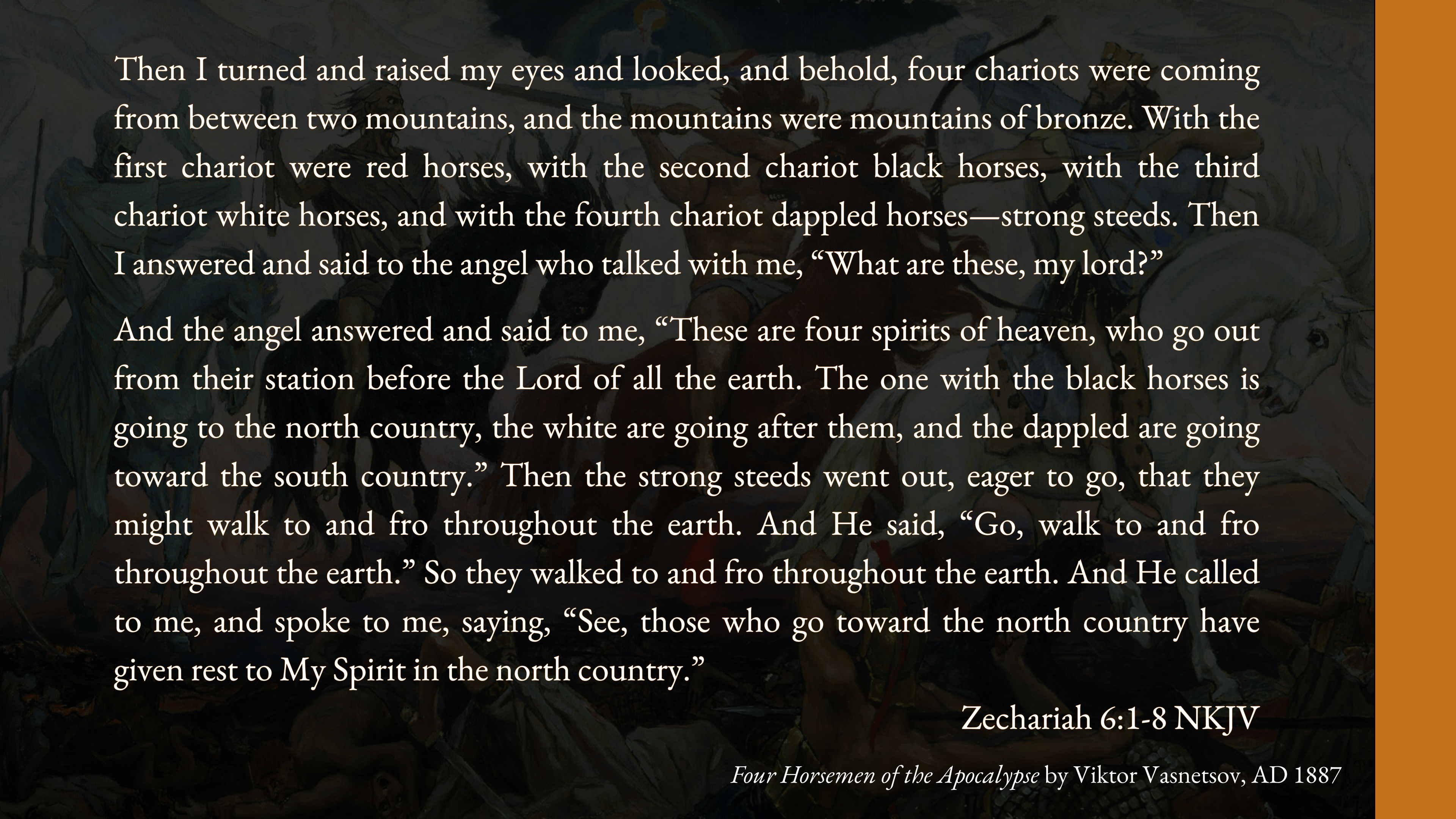
Zechariah 1:12-15 NKJV

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Viktor Vasnetsov, AD 1887

Anacyclosis and Revelation



Here we also see the beginning of a thread woven through the text of the Apocalypse, that of the perfidy of the nations, and their ultimate powerlessness before the might of Jesus Christ. Hold onto this, because it crops up again and again, especially at the end of the book with Babylon the Great. Here, the nations are established, sustained, and overthrown by God and His angel hosts, in service of His will and justice (Rom. 13). Thus in one sense, the horsemen become a symbol of the great churn of nations, which has been ordained and is directed by God.



Then I turned and raised my eyes and looked, and behold, four chariots were coming from between two mountains, and the mountains were mountains of bronze. With the first chariot were red horses, with the second chariot black horses, with the third chariot white horses, and with the fourth chariot dappled horses—strong steeds. Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, “What are these, my lord?”

And the angel answered and said to me, “These are four spirits of heaven, who go out from their station before the Lord of all the earth. The one with the black horses is going to the north country, the white are going after them, and the dappled are going toward the south country.” Then the strong steeds went out, eager to go, that they might walk to and fro throughout the earth. And He said, “Go, walk to and fro throughout the earth.” So they walked to and fro throughout the earth. And He called to me, and spoke to me, saying, “See, those who go toward the north country have given rest to My Spirit in the north country.”

Zechariah 6:1-8 NKJV

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Viktor Vasnetsov, AD 1887



Eric Liddell Reads Isaiah

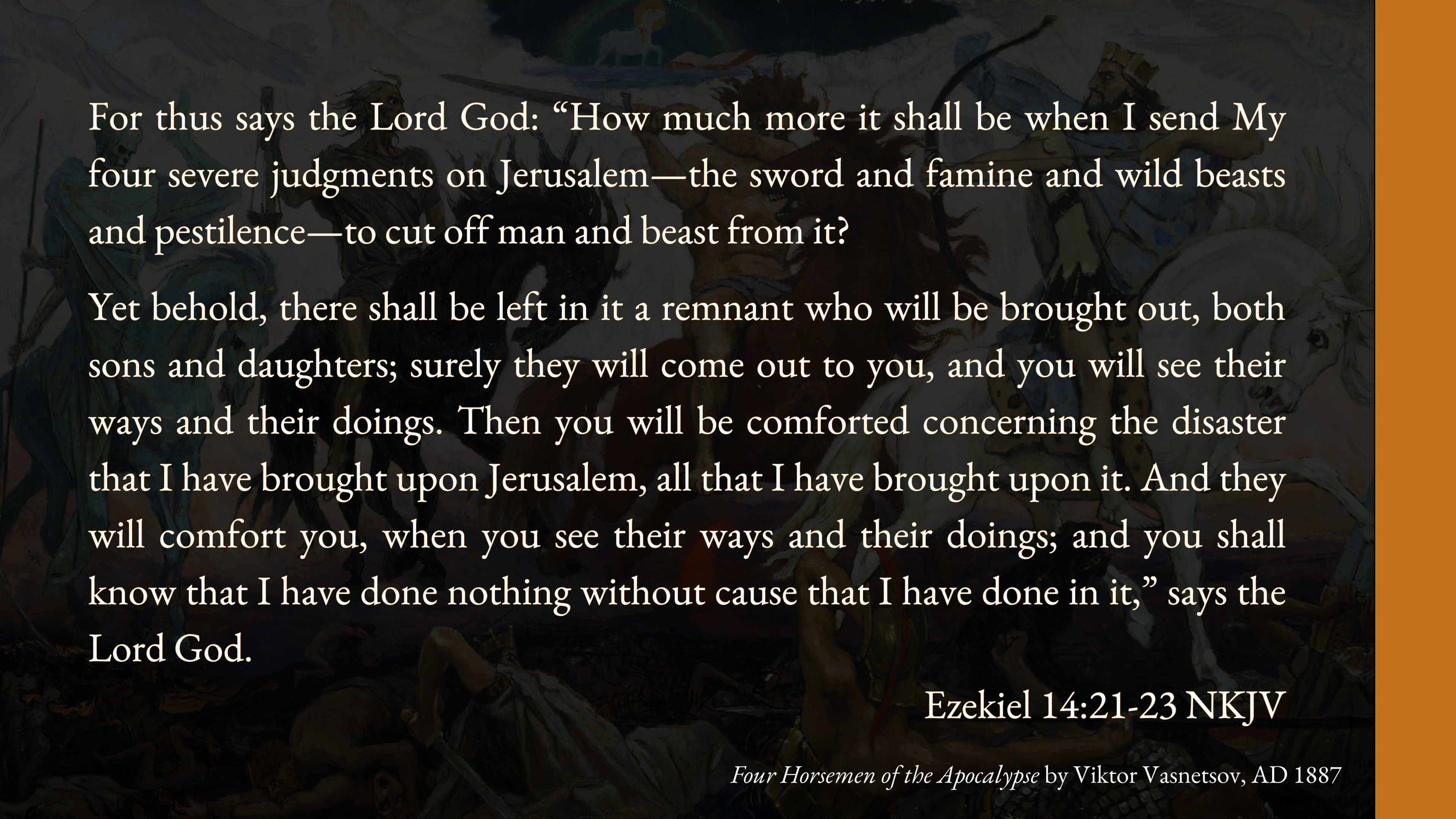


Share



Watch on  YouTube

Eric Liddell Reads Isaiah, a scene from *Chariots of Fire*



For thus says the Lord God: “How much more it shall be when I send My four severe judgments on Jerusalem—the sword and famine and wild beasts and pestilence—to cut off man and beast from it?

Yet behold, there shall be left in it a remnant who will be brought out, both sons and daughters; surely they will come out to you, and you will see their ways and their doings. Then you will be comforted concerning the disaster that I have brought upon Jerusalem, all that I have brought upon it. And they will comfort you, when you see their ways and their doings; and you shall know that I have done nothing without cause that I have done in it,” says the Lord God.

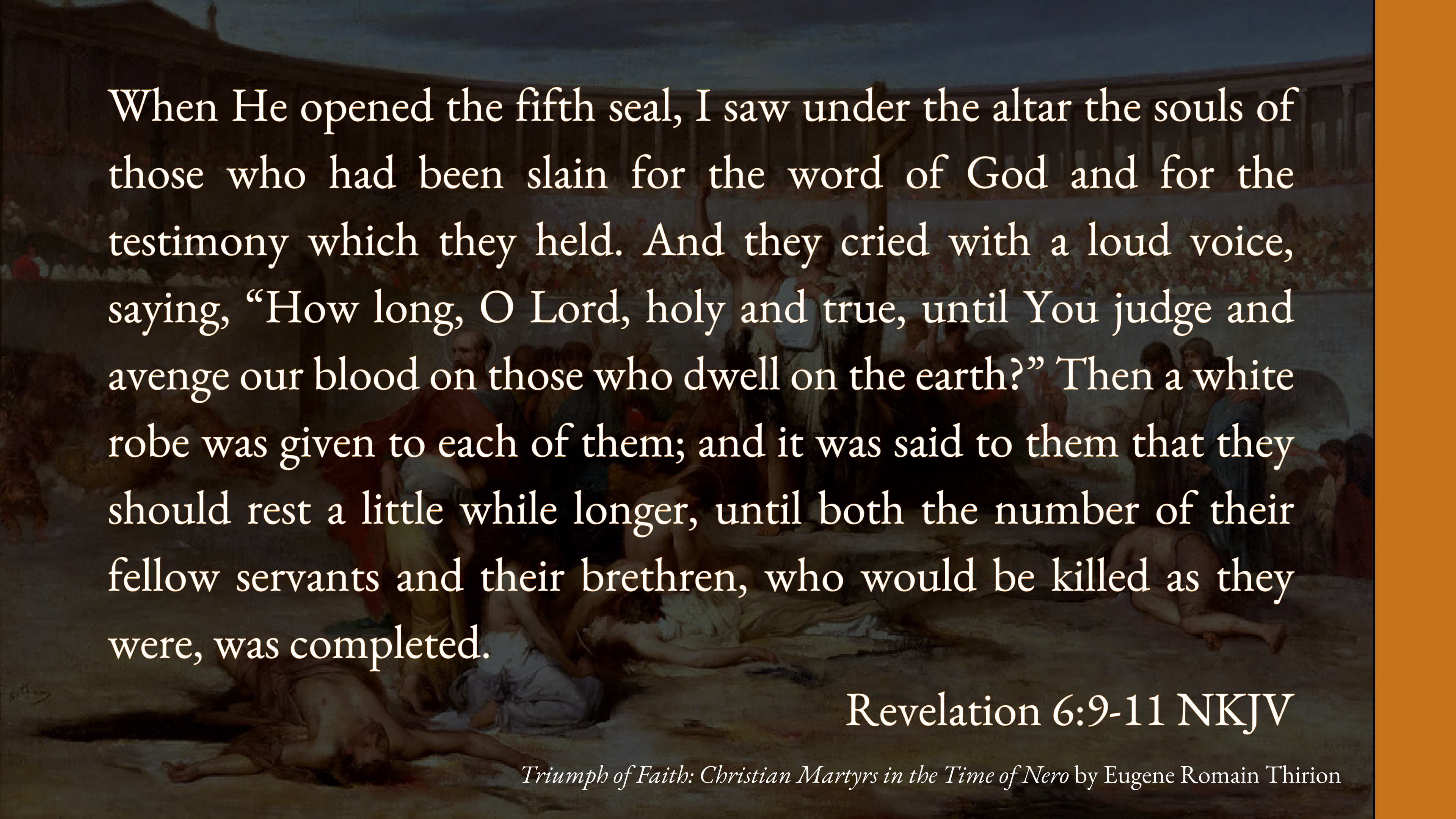
Ezekiel 14:21-23 NKJV

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Viktor Vasnetsov, AD 1887



Part Three:

Blood on the Altar

The background of the slide is a painting titled 'Triumph of Faith: Christian Martyrs in the Time of Nero' by Eugene Romain Thirion. It depicts a scene of martyrdom in a Roman arena. In the foreground, several bodies lie on the ground, some in white robes and others in more tattered clothing. In the middle ground, a group of people, some in white robes and others in more tattered clothing, are gathered around a central figure who is being executed. The background shows a large crowd of people in the stands of the arena, and a large building with many windows in the distance. The overall tone is somber and dramatic.

When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.

Revelation 6:9-11 NKJV

Triumph of Faith: Christian Martyrs in the Time of Nero by Eugene Romain Thirion

“How Long, O Lord?”

The Church in particular will be singled out, with the faithful being martyred for their witness to Christ. Much can be said about these three short verses. But as we have repeated over and over, the point of this book is to reveal Christ. Here, He is revealed as the object of the martyr's faith, as well as the one who clothes them in white while they await the resurrection.



"A few seem favourites of fate,
In pleasure's lap carest;
Yet, think not all the rich and great
Are likewise truly blest:
But oh! what crowds in ev'ry land,
All wretched and forlorn,
'Thro' weary life this lesson learn,
That man was made to mourn.

"Many and sharp the num'rous ills
Inwoven with our frame!
More pointed still we make ourselves,
Regret, remorse, and shame!
And man, whose heav'n-erected face
The smiles of love adorn, -
Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!

"Yet, let not this too much, my son,
Disturb thy youthful breast:
This partial view of human-kind
Is surely not the last!
The poor, oppressed, honest man
Had never, sure, been born,
Had there not been some recompense
To comfort those that mourn!

"O Death! the poor man's dearest friend,
The kindest and the best!
Welcome the hour my aged limbs
Are laid with thee at rest!
The great, the wealthy fear thy blow
From pomp and pleasure torn;
But, oh! a blest relief for those
That weary-laden mourn!"

Man Was Made To Mourn (6-7; 10-11)



Martyr Piety

The Christian life is lived in a dreadful tension. St. Paul sums it up well when he writes, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Revelation is a book all about that tension. It is a book dripping in the martyr piety of our faith.

It may make us uncomfortable today, but Revelation pictures the Christian faith as one spent under the sword, with conquering in Christ being equated to shedding one’s own blood as a testimony for His gospel. Historically, such a focus is likely informed by Nero’s persecution of the early Church. Nonetheless, it is eternally true; ever inspiring us to live radical, saintly lives, to win a place in the crimson train of our Blessed Lord.

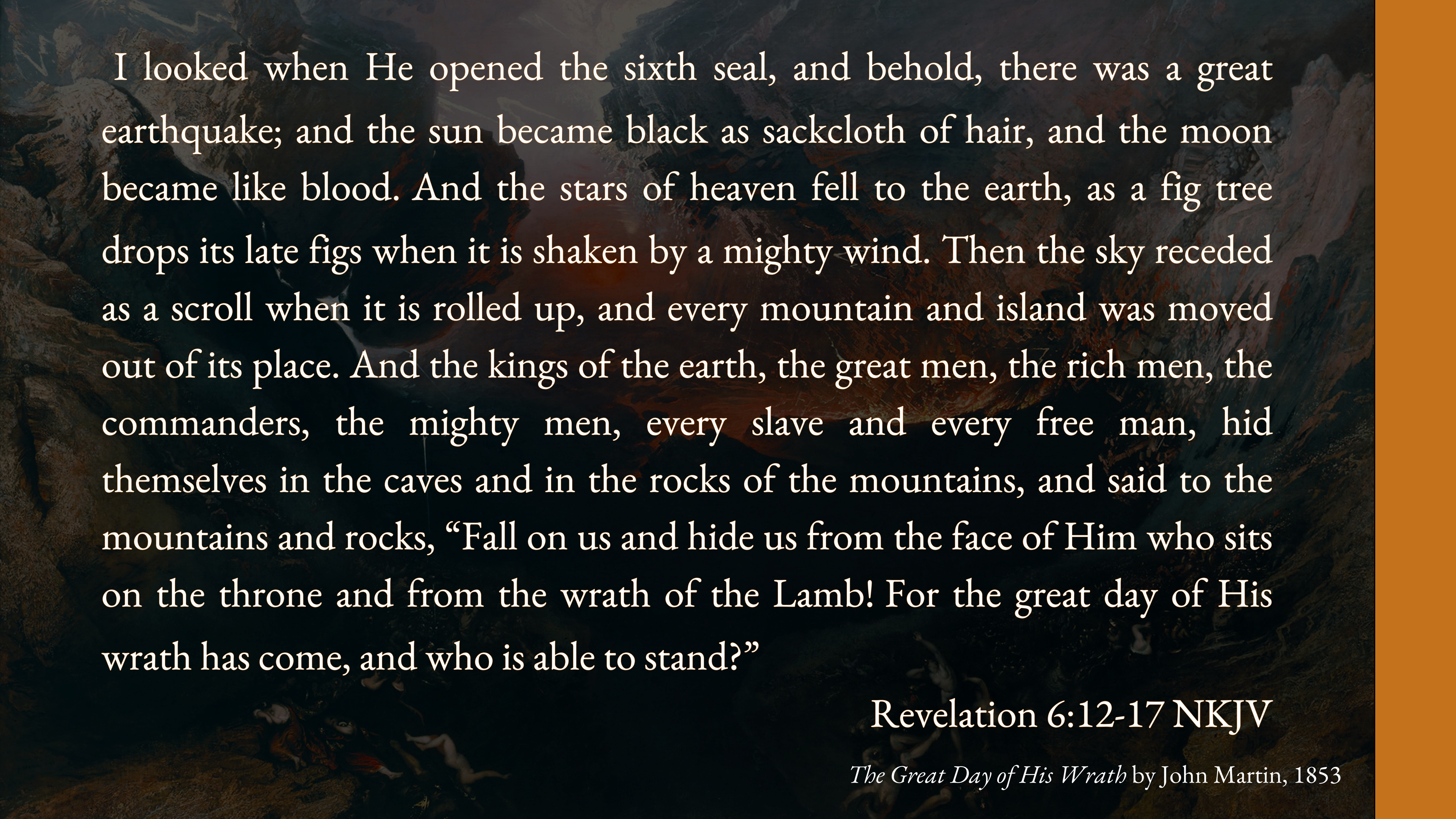


A Race Well Finished



“Now I begin to be a disciple. And let no one, of things visible or invisible, envy me that I should attain to Jesus Christ. Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ...I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.”

Martyrdom of St. Ignatius of Antioch by Pier Leone Ghezzi, c. AD 1700



I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

Revelation 6:12-17 NKJV

The Great Day of His Wrath by John Martin, 1853

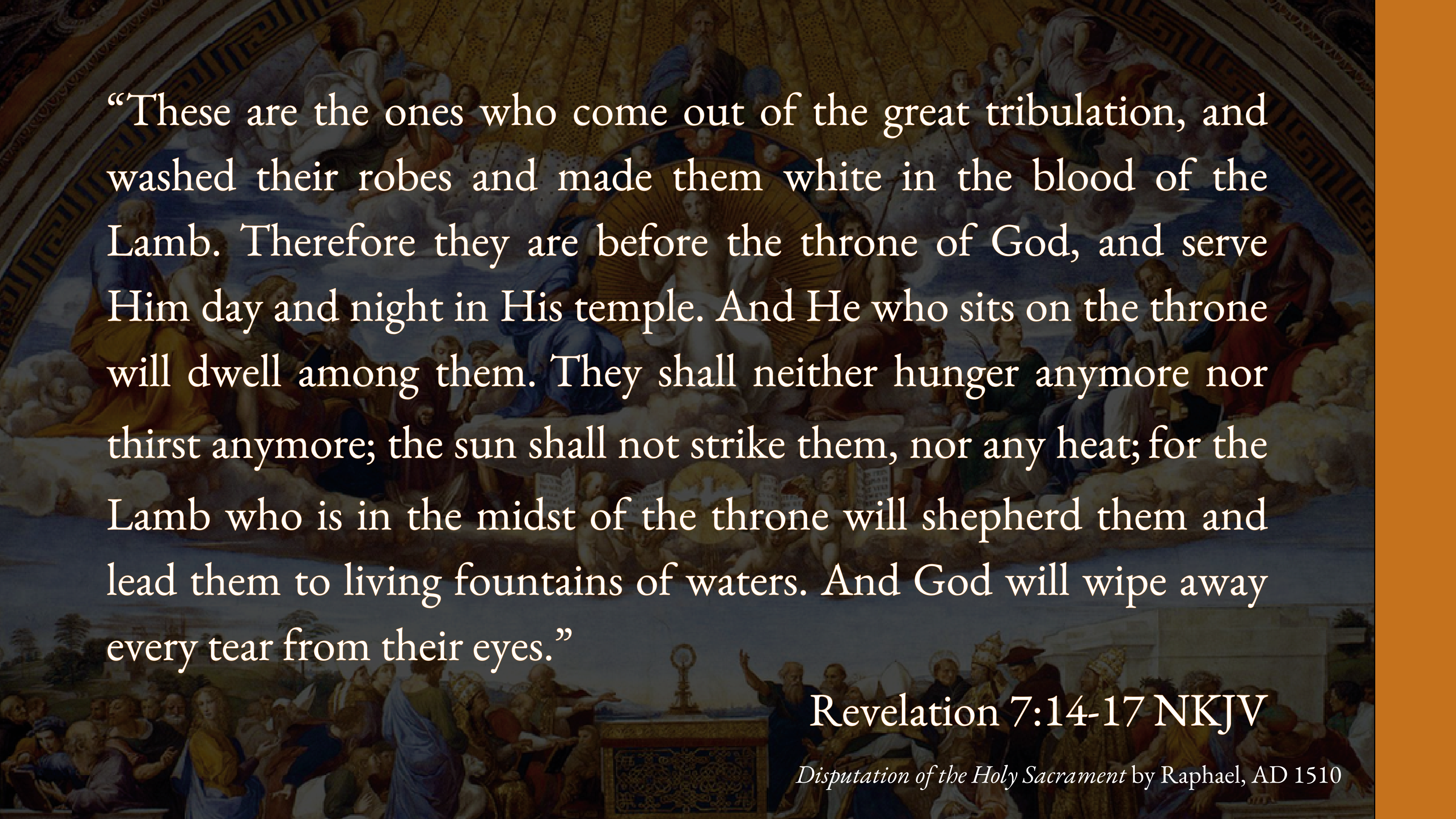
The End

The saints under the altar do not need to wait long. The sixth seal is broken, and we see the greatest vision yet, clearly drawn on Old Testament depictions of the Day of the Lord. This is the first time in the Book of Revelation we see what St. Peter describes when he wrote that “the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (2 Peter 2:10 NKJV). Yet this is not the end of the book! Because again, Revelation is not a linear story. It works in cycles, with each cycle being punctuated with the cataclysmic Day of the Lord.



Militant and Triumphant

Now we come to our first interlude. These sections break the regular flow of the narrative structure in order to draw special attention to a specific way in which Christ is at work in the world. Here we see two scenes. First, the sealing of 144,000 out of the tribes of Israel. Then, an innumerable multitude in Heaven, who have come out of the great tribulation, praising God. These are not two groups, but one Church, preserved by God both on the earth and after death. Here we see the great love of Jesus for His people. Even as He pours out His wrath on the unbelieving world, He saves His Church from damnation, welcoming them into His eternal Kingdom. The lesson is clear: trust in the promises of God, for He is steadfast in them.



“These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Revelation 7:14-17 NKJV

Disputation of the Holy Sacrament by Raphael, AD 1510

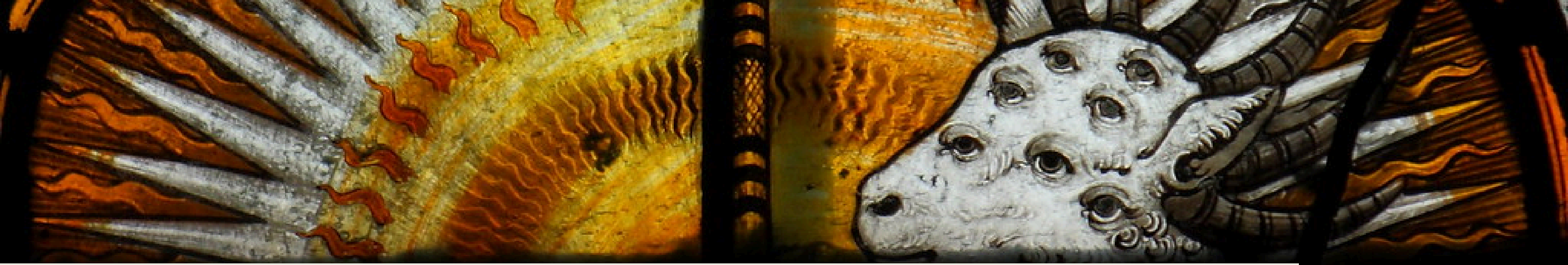
The Silence of God

This book is a Revelation of Jesus Christ, with every image serving to illustrate his glory, authority, and love. These can be hard things for us to grasp, living as we are in the midst of the great tribulation. Thus the Apocalypse of St. John gives us a peek behind the curtain so to speak. When we find ourselves in the deafening silence of God, and we feel like He is breaking all seven seals on top of our heads, we look to and praise the Lamb. Because through it all, He is standing victorious, offering us a chance to conquer by His side. That conquering will not look like a warrior on a horse however, rather it will be martyr's blood poured out at the foot of the altar of God.



Further Reading

- *The Concordia Commentary on Revelation* by Louis Brighton
- *The Book of Revelation* by G. K. Beale
- *A Theology of Revelation* by J. Scott Duvall
- *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary*, edited by Steve Gregg
- *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* by Richard Bauckham
- *Visions of the Apocalypse* by Bruce Chilton
- *Revelation: Reformation Heritage Bible Commentary* by Mark Brighton
- *Christ and the Caesars* by Ethelbert Stauffer



Questions?

