

Standing in the Day of Disaster

Rich Nathan

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Revelation: Looking at Life From the Perspective of Heaven Series
Revelation 6 and 7

Have you ever gone through a season in your life where it seemed like all hell had broken loose? Some of you may be in that season now. Each day brings one more financial problem, or relational problem, or family problem.

There is a wonderful couple on our staff who has been going through a very difficult season. They have two daughters – one of which has a kidney disease so severe that they're looking to put her on a transplant list. The other daughter was diagnosed with thyroid cancer five years ago. She went through seven surgeries during which her marriage fell apart. Not only does this couple have two daughters with significant health challenges, but the wife currently has a brother who is in ICU because his lungs just stopped working due to chronic pulmonary disease. While the wife's brother was in ICU, his wife had a heart attack. So she is in CCU one floor above her husband. This staff couple also had another brother die a year and a half ago; a brother-in-law died a year ago; and by the way, the wife herself has health problems. She suffers with diabetes.

How many of you can identify with the experience of a series of disasters? You got into a car accident or your car broke down and someone close to you has

serious health issues or dies. Perhaps you experience legal pressures springing from a custody battle or divorce.

As a pastor in a large church, I personally encounter people every single week who are going through some tremendous trial or difficulty in their life. They have a child who is ill at Children's Hospital, a child who has severe learning disabilities, people who have completely exhausted their financial resources and are drowning in debt. Every week I get emails from people describing a really difficult life situation. You put 7000 people together in a church and there are going to be people whose marriages are on the rocks. Single moms who are struggling to hold things together with their kids. We have substance abusers. We have gay couples here. We have victims of molestation. We have folks struggling with mental illness. There are many people who are struggling to overcome addictions. There are some of you who are struggling with various emotional problems – depression, anxiety, and compulsive thinking.

Now, there are two features of American culture today which make it difficult for us to handle seasons of trials. First of all, I believe that we in America have lost sight of one central truth that runs through the whole of the Bible and all of history – both Christian and non-Christian. That central truth is that life is supposed to be hard. Brothers and sisters, do not for a moment allow yourself to succumb to the unbiblical, unreal American ideal that life is supposed to be pain free, that life is supposed to be comfortable, or that life is supposed to be easy.

I can't tell you how many people I talk with who complain about a difficult circumstance in life and the underlying presupposition of the complaint is that what I am experiencing is abnormal. Folks often say, "I am so disappointed. My small group leader didn't return my calls." "This women's group wasn't what I expected." "Someone said something very unkind."

I think to myself: What are your expectations of the human condition? What do you expect from life? People not returning your calls is normal. It happens to me all the time. It will happen to you. Broken commitments are normal. Sickness is normal. Family problems are normal. Computer problems are normal. Technology failing is normal. It is normal in this world to not have enough money to buy everything you want. It is normal to misplace things. It is normal to be hassled at your job. Extended family problems are normal. Dealing with ridiculous bureaucracy is normal. Not getting your way is normal.

Jesus said:

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Jn 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Why don't we pin that promise up on our refrigerators?

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Jn 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. **In this world you will have trouble.** But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Likewise, the apostle Paul said in Acts 14:22,

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Ac 14:22 "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,"

The apostle Peter put it so plainly when he said in 1 Peter 4:12,

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1Pe 4:12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.

I love the way Eugene Peterson put it in the Message version of the Bible. He wrote in his wonderful paraphrase:

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Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process with glory just around the corner.

What I observe in America, alongside this extraordinarily unbiblical and unrealistic idea that life is supposed to be pain free is an incredible fragility in many people that I meet. Americans in the 21st century are exceptionally fragile. Many of us simply can't bear any weight at all. We can't handle any hardship without squawking and complaining to everyone. We collapse easily. Our marriages collapse easily. Our faith collapses easily. We are easily wounded. We easily throw in the towel. You cannot pastor a church very long, as I have, without having a worship leader or a children's ministry worker, or a key

volunteer that feels that God is telling them to pull back from all ministry because of difficulties in their life.

Now, there are hard times when it is appropriate to pull back. There are times when we need to reprioritize, but it is always amazing to me how often God tells people to quit all forms of Christian service. It is really striking, especially when you find so few “quit” verses in the Bible, that the Holy Spirit’s program in America today appears to have lots of leaders who believe God is telling them to quit serving other people, to take several years off from extending themselves.

You know, the longer I am in ministry, the more I find myself admiring people who simply stand in the day of difficulty. The longer I am in ministry, the more I find myself admiring folks who do not throw in the towel, who do not collapse, who do not quit. After 18 years of pastoring, and more than 30 years in Christian leadership, I find myself really admiring people who simply keep standing whatever life throws at them. I’ve met dozens and dozens of people over the years who were super excited. They seemed to be every where in the church for six months and then they are never heard of again. But folks who show up week after week, year after year, folks you can count on to teach a children’s ministry class, to lead a small group, to usher at a service, to help with deacon activities, to counsel financially troubled people, to hand out groceries in our food pantry, to work in the medical clinic – folks who keep standing - those are the people I respect the most in our church. To use a baseball analogy, it is the Cal Ripkins,

a guy who wasn't super flashy, who didn't have the best tools, just the guy with the lunch bucket who shows up every day for work that I so deeply appreciate.

Today, as we continue in this series from the book of Revelation, we are going to be looking at problems that absolutely dwarf anything that the vast majority of us have ever experienced. There may be a few of you coming from other countries, or who have been in the military, or in some kind of Foreign Service who have experienced some of the things that we will be talking about, but there are few of us who have been through war, famine, plagues, or persecution. There are none sitting here who have been through martyrdom, but certainly, on a lesser scale, many of us are facing a series of challenges.

I know my wife and I are right now. We are part of that sandwich generation that many of you are a part of. We care for a 2½ year old and my wife, Marlene's mother is an aging widow. Marlene is an only child. Her mom just fell this past week breaking her wrist, which means that she is currently unable to perform basic functions for herself and so we are squeezed between aging parents and small children. Many of you can identify with that challenge.

As we move ahead in this series from the book of Revelation, I've called today's talk, "Standing in the Day of Disaster." Let's pray.

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Rev 6:1 I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!"

Rev 6:2 I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

Rev 6:3 When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"

Rev 6:4 Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

Rev 6:5 When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand.

Rev 6:6 Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"

Rev 6:7 When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"

Rev 6:8 I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

Rev 6:9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

Rev 6:10 They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

Rev 6:11 Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

Rev 6:12 I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red,

Rev 6:13 and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.

Rev 6:14 The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Rev 6:15 Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.

Rev 6:16 They called to 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!"

Rev 6:17 For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

There are great interpretive challenges in Revelation 6 and 7. In fact, some of the most controverted issues in the entire book about which there are endless debates are found in these two chapters. Perhaps the most significant issues are first of all what does the rider on the white horse in Revelation 6:2 mean;

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Rev 6:2 I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

And jumping ahead to chapter 7, who are the 144,000 who are sealed by the Lord?

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Rev 7:4 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

Now I believe that one of the keys to unlocking Revelation 6 and 7 is the question that people ask in Rev. 6:17,

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Rev 6:17 For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

Who can stand? Who can stand on the day of disaster? When life hits you in the face with a series of blows, who can stand? We find the answer in Rev. 7. First of all, God's Holy angels stand, 7:1

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Rev 7:1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.

But in addition, those who belong to Christ stand, Rev. 7:9,

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Rev 7:9 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

But let's begin with the problems of the disasters that come upon people on the earth and then we will be able to answer the question: Who can stand? Rev. 6:1-2

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Last week in Rev. 5 we learned about a mysterious scroll that was sealed with seven seals. We learned from Rev. 5 that there was no one in heaven, or on earth who was worthy to open the seals except for Jesus Christ, who was called The Lamb of God.

I suggested to you that the content of this mysterious scroll formed much of the rest of the book of Revelation. The content, to put it real simply, is this: the scroll

contains the secret regarding how the kingdom of God is going to advance in this world in the midst of opposition. Specifically the scroll answers the question: how will God's enemies be defeated in this world, and how will the nations be brought to Jesus Christ? The scroll is all about the advance of the Kingdom of God in this world. I do not believe that chapter 6 and all of these disasters that we are going to read about are the content of the scroll.

I believe that ch. 6 contains events accompanying the opening of the scroll, but the scroll is about how the kingdom will advance. The opening of the seals in chapter 6 describes the entire course of human history bringing us right to the end. Chapter 6 is not about a distant future. It shows us life on this planet right until the very end.

Now, I want to skip for a moment the opening of the first seal and look at the openings of seals two through six quickly. We'll get back to the first seal in a little while. In vv. 1-8, we read about four horses.

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Rev 6:3 When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"

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Rev 6:5 When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand.

Rev 6:6 Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"

Rev 6:7 When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"

Rev 6:8 I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

First of all, there is a white horse in v. 2.

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Rev 6:2 I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

And then, in vv. 3-4, we read about a red horse.

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Rev 6:3 When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"

Rev 6:4 Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

It is really plain that what is being revealed is the unleashing of war across the face of the earth. Human history is a history of war. In the last five years in Africa, one in four people has lived in a country racked by civil or cross border war. Tens of millions of Africans have been forced to flee their homes in the last

five years. There are more than 20 million land mines lurking beneath African soil.

A reporter for the magazine *The Economist* wrote this about a recent trip to the Congo: “What scared me most about the Congo was not the shouting, stone-throwing crowds, nor the rattle of gun fire, nor the occasional dead body slumped by the side of the road. It was the sight of a boy soldier—he looked no more than 12, but he might have been a malnourished 15—sitting on a step, resting his chin on the barrel of AK-47.”

“Teenagers with guns are always terrifying. An older soldier is more likely to ask himself, before shooting you, whether there is any point in doing so. Children are more unpredictable and harder to reason with, especially when they are drunk or drugged. All this I knew. But the sight of a boy idly pointing an automatic weapon at his own brain made me gasp with anxiety. ‘If he is so careless of his own life, I thought, how careful will he be of mine/?’”

We in the United States are familiar with those conflicts that we are involved in. For example, the current war in Iraq. We are also familiar with the conflicts that the media calls attention to – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the occasional mention of the conflict in Chechnya. But how many of you were aware of the 27-year war in Angola that just ended in the year 2002, in which more than a million Angolans died out of a population of 13 million? Or nearly 2 million were forced

to flee their homes. How many of you are aware of the nine nations that have fought in the Congo in the last five years? War is increasingly a feature of life in our world.

And so is famine. History is all too often a story of famine.

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This business of the black horse, with its rider holding a pair of scales suggests that in the context of famine, bread has to be rationed so it is sold by weight. In v. 6,

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Rev 6:6 Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"

This suggests exorbitant prices for basic goods. This is 8x the normal price for wheat and 5x the normal price for barley.

It is hard for us in America to in any way wrap our minds around the existence of famine and starvation in so many parts of the world when within a half mile of my

home there are three, count them, three mega-grocery stores, each of which must have 200,000 square feet of groceries. The shelves are sagging under the weight of all this food that we have here in the US. Of course, some in our country still go hungry, but it is nothing like the scale of hunger and starvation that exists in so many parts of the world.

Here is a chilling fact for you: Do you realize that the most significant cause of famine over the last 100 years is not natural disasters – floods, droughts, and the like. Rather famine, at its essential core, has been used by governments and politicians as another method of war. Most of the famines have been caused, in other words, by human sin.

Some of you are old enough to remember the terrible famine in a little area called Biafra, in the African country of Nigeria. Back in 1968 Nigeria responded to Biafra's attempted secession by waging war against the Christian Ibo tribe and by cutting off food supplies to the civilian population. The US, for political reasons, wrapped up in Cold War politics, refused to directly relieve the famine conditions in Biafra. They insisted instead that all famine relief go through the government, even though a government commander said, "Starvation is the legitimate weapon of war." So American food aid was intercepted by the Nigerian government. In the end, one million Biafrans were starved to death.

Likewise, in Bangladesh, in 1971 East Pakistan appealed for limited independence and so food supplies were cut off in Bangladesh.

One of the worst humanly created famines in the last 100 years took place in the Ukraine during the 1930's. Stalin wanted to collectivize all agriculture in the Ukraine and eliminate private farming. To do that, he decided to kill off all private farmers that he labeled "kulaks." To be called a kulak, your family simply had to own 3 cows. In 1932 Stalin issued an order sealing off Ukrainian villages from being able to receive grain. Soldiers went house to house in Ukrainian villages searching for any hidden sack of grain and killing families who were found to be hiding grain. The borders were shut around the Ukraine, making it impossible for people to leave. At the same time, the Soviets dumped nearly two million tons of grain on Western markets. In essence, what they did was to decide to break the Ukraine through the tool of starvation. At the height of the famine, Ukrainian villagers were dying at the rate of 25,000 people a day. 3 million children died in 1932-1933 of starvation in the Ukraine. It is estimated that a quarter of the Ukrainian population was killed.

While this was going on, a New York Times correspondent in Moscow was being treated to parties and a lavish lifestyle by the Soviet KGB. This New York Times correspondent named Walter Duranty kept filing reports back to the New York Times saying that there is no starvation or death from starvation in the Ukraine. He wrote: "The so-called famine is mostly bunk." Mr. Duranty's work won him a

Pulitzer Prize in 1932 for “dispassionate, interpretative reporting of news from Russia.” This Pulitzer Prize winner covered up the deaths of between 8-10 million people, so he could keep enjoying parties.

We have a responsibility to try to intervene where we see famine, especially where we see humanly caused famine. The New York Times and USA Today just a week ago ran front-page stories on the Darfur region in the Sudan and the famine that is being caused by the Sudanese government. This is the very kind of thing that individual Christians ought to keep writing to Congressmen and Senators demanding American aid and American pressure on the Sudanese government. Unless we intervene as a nation, several hundred thousand people will die this year in the Sudan.

And then we read of the opening of the 4th seal, vv. 7-8,

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Rev 6:7 When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!”

Rev 6:8 I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

The pale horse is generally understood as plague or disease. There have been terrible plagues in history. Most Americans don’t know that the US experienced a terrible plague for about 9 months between Sept. 1918 and June 1919. There

was the worldwide flu epidemic that came into the US with returning troops from WWI in Europe. Over the course of nine months somewhere between 700-800,000 Americans, mainly young people between the ages of 20-40, died. In the course of 9 months this flu epidemic killed more Americans than the American soldiers killed in WWI, WWII, Korea, Viet Nam, and the two Iraqi wars combined. To get some sense of the staggering number of deaths, imagine driving through the city of Columbus and not finding a single person alive. Just drive down the streets and it is an absolute ghost town. Houses are totally uninhabited. Schools are empty. There are no pedestrians on the street. There is no one driving. All the businesses are shuttered. It would be as if every man, woman, and child in the city of Columbus were killed.

The most famous plague of all is, of course, the Black Death, the bubonic plague that struck Europe in the 14th century. Spread from Asia, it was carried down the caravan routes through the Middle East and then up into port cities in Italy. China lost 35 million people. Here is a contemporary account written 1348:

“The mortality in Siena began in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing...it seemed that almost everyone became stupefied seeing the pain. It is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. The victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath the armpits and in the groin, and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness

seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so they died. None could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices. In many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of the dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. I, Agnolo di Tura...buried my five children with my own hands."

There was a form of art called "Danse Macabre" that resulted from the Black Plague.

A third of Europe was wiped out by the Black Plague. Africa is experiencing a plague that is every bit on the order of the Black Plague. One country that this church is working in is the country of Zambia. The Zambian Health Ministry estimates that half of Zambia's population is going to eventually die of AIDS. But we can barely call ourselves Christians if we as a church do not do more to minister to those with the AIDS virus and also to care for their orphans.

The fifth seal is the seal of persecution and martyrdom, vv. 9-11,

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Rev 6:9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

Rev 6:10 They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”

Rev 6:11 Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

When John writes that he saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God, he is merely picturing the fact that Christians have been martyred in the name of Christ. In the Old Testament ritual blood was poured out at the base of the altar. Here in the New Testament, the martyrs are portrayed as having been sacrificed upon an altar and their blood is poured out at the base. Christian martyrs are viewed as sacrifices offered to God. That is what the apostle Paul says in Phil. 2:17,

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Phil 2:17 But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.

There are so many accounts of martyrdom throughout the history of the church. What most people do not realize is that there are hundreds of thousands of Christian martyrs in the world today. People are still being offered up as sacrifices to God.

Finally, we read about cosmic catastrophes, vv. 12-17. We are brought right up until the end of history.

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Rev 6:12 I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The

sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red,

Rev 6:13 and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.

Rev 6:14 The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Rev 6:15 Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.

Rev 6:16 They called to 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!

Rev 6:17 For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

This is very graphic language to portray earth-shattering disasters. The question arises in v. 17: In light of all these terrible disasters that are on the face of the earth, who can stand?

Some years ago my wife, Marlene, and I went camping on the Outer Banks off of North Carolina. We love to camp and we've done a lot of camping, but we had never camped on the beach before. I tried to erect our tent, knocking in the little tent pegs that we had for camping in the woods but the wind kept pulling the pegs out of the sand. I tried to put them on an angle, but they kept lifting out. The sides of the tent were blowing. I had no idea what to do. I said to Marlene: How about if we just climb in the tent. Our weight will hold it down. She said: I'm not going to get into a tent that is going to blow around the beach all night. Forget it.

I saw someone else further down the beach putting up a tent. They looked like they knew what they were doing. So I went over and said: How are you securing

the tent? They said: Well, you need special sand pegs (which were about a foot and a half long thick plastic pegs). I said: Where do you get those? They said: Oh, there is a store about a mile from here that sells them. So I bought a bunch of sand tent pegs and they secured the tent. They held it down and despite all the winds blowing against the tent, the tent stood all night.

Now, I want to give you quickly five tent pegs that will allow the Christian to stand in the day of disaster.

Tent Peg #1 – Our Team is Winning! Revelation 6:1-2,

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Rev 6:1 I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!”

Rev 6:2 I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

Now there is a great amount of dispute regarding what this rider on the white horse symbolizes. The majority perspective is that this rider on the white horse ought to be interpreted negatively, fitting in with the other three horses. The conquest is the negative conquest from an invading army. It is, of course, an open question but I am persuaded that the white horse ought to be interpreted positively, as the victory of the gospel. I think the color white is the key to interpreting this. White is always the symbol of Christ or something associated with Christ in Revelation. It is always seen as something good in this book.

- The exalted Christ, for example, has hair as white as wool in ch. 1.

- The faithful are going to get a white stone with a new name written on it, in ch. 2.
- We are going to wear white garments in ch. 3.
- The 24 elders are clothed in white in ch. 4.
- The martyrs are given white robes in ch. 6.
- The Son of Man is on a white cloud in ch. 14.
- Christ is going to return on a white horse in ch. 19.
- In the final judgment, God is seated on a white throne in ch. 20.

The symbolism of the book of Revelation would be completely reversed if the rider on the white horse was not seen as a positive thing. I believe that all these terrible things that are coming on the earth are bracketed by the certain victory of the gospel.

I told you this story a little over a year ago. I was planning to take my dad to France to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the D-Day Invasion. My dad piloted a landing craft that landed in the D-Day Invasion before H-Hour. He was landing Army engineers. He has not been back to France for 60 years. It was one of those things I had thought about doing for a while. I thought: Wouldn't it be good to take my Father? Very often, I have good intentions, but I don't follow through. I thought to myself: This time I am going to follow through.

So I called my Dad. I said: Dad, I want to take you over to France. I bought two airline tickets. I want to take you to the beaches of Normandy. My dad had some friends in the Navy buried in the American Cemetery there.

About two weeks before we were going to leave, my father called me up on a Saturday afternoon. He was very upset. He said: Richie, this is a call I never wanted to make. I can't go with you to France. Paula [who as my stepmother] is dying.

My dad had a very happy second marriage for 31 years. His beloved wife was dying. He said: I can't leave her. I am so upset about it. I kept delaying this call. I really wanted to go with you. I even bought new shoes to be able to walk around.

I said: Dad, don't worry about it. Take care of Paula.

He began crying at the other end of the telephone. My dad worked construction for over 40 years. I never in my life heard him cry. I got off the phone. I was so sad for my dad. I was also heart-broken for myself as I was really looking forward to spending the time with my father.

Two hours later I had to come to church to preach. I was really broken up inside and yet I knew that people needed encouragement. Standing in the back of the

auditorium trying to worship, we took communion. I watched 1500 people opening up their little communions. The Holy Spirit spoke to me and said: Son, look around you. Our side is winning! As I watched people open their communions, I thought: You know, even though I am personally in pain, I'm on a team that is winning. We are following the rider on the white horse and he is winning. Our team is winning.

I've been giving you some really bad facts. Do you want to hear some hopeful facts?

- Every single day in China 28,000 people give their lives to Christ. There are more than nine Pentecosts a day in China. There are more than seven Pentecosts a day in Africa.
- More people have given their lives to Christ in Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1980 than in the thousand years previous to that in the nation of Iran.
- Every single hour of every single day of every single week about 3000 people give their lives to Christ.

That is Tent Peg #1.

Here is Tent Peg #2: Evil is Limited. Rev. 7:1-3

SLIDE

Rev 7:1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding

back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.

Rev 7:2 Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea:

Rev 7:3 "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."

Notice that the angels are holding back the four winds on the earth. God is telling them to not harm the land or the sea until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.

Evil is limited. "Sealing in the ancient world had to do with ownership." An owner would use their signet ring and stamp something with melted wax or with a carved cylinder imprint something. It communicated ownership and protection. Those who belong to Jesus Christ are spiritually marked out by Christ for protection. We're given the Holy Spirit.

You say: Rich, how does this protection work? Christians die in wars. Christians die of famine. Christians die of plagues and disease. Christians die through martyrdom and persecution. What does it mean to be sealed?

It means precisely this: Whatever comes your way, nothing can ever separate you from the love of God. To be sealed means that no matter how evil things are, no matter how awful your ex-husband is, no matter who you are dragged in front of, no matter what the court decision is, no matter what happens on your job, no matter what happens when you go in the operating room, you cannot be

separated from the love of God. You are protected from God's wrath. Evil is limited in its power. You can not be separated from God. God is there with you in the courtroom. God is there with you in the hospital. God is there with you at your job. God is there with you in your family. If you are sealed by the Lord, God is even with you in death.

Here is what the apostle Paul says in Romans 8:35-39,

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Ro 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

Ro 8:36 As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

Ro 8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Ro 8:38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,
neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

Ro 8:39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is my understanding of the sealing of the Christian believer. When you are opposed, when you feel overwhelmed, do you comfort yourself with the thought that no matter what happens, you cannot be separated from the love of God and you cannot fall out of the hands of Jesus?

Here is the Third Tent Peg: We win by following our Leader. Rev. 7:4; 9-14

SLIDE

Rev 7:4 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel

Rev 7:9 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

Rev 7:10 And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

Rev 7:11 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

Rev 7:12 saying:

“Amen!

Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.

Amen!”

Rev 7:13 Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”

Rev 7:14 I answered, “Sir, you know.”

And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Here is the other major interpretative issue in chapter 6 and 7: Who are these 144,000? I can tell you one thing. They are not the Jehovah Witnesses. Some people suggest that these are Jews or Jewish Christians, particularly those coming from a dispensationalist background like the *Left Behind* Series. They suggest that by ch. 7 the church has already been raptured and the 144,000 are Jews who are going to be witnesses to the gospel during the Great Tribulation. Then the great multitude is the Gentile converts, but this view depends on the theory that the church has been raptured before the Tribulation, a theory for which the book of Revelation offers no evidence.

In fact, the idea that the church is going to be raptured at the beginning of the Revelation and that the chief objects of the wrath of the anti-Christ will be the Jews is not borne out by the rest of the book of Revelation. We read that Gentiles in ch. 13 are the objects of the wrath of the beast.

Some people say the 144,000 are all Christians.

I believe that the 144,000 are specifically Christian martyrs. This number is symbolically an army of martyrs. Vv. 4-8 of chapter 7 is a census of the tribes of Israel. In the Old Testament, a census was always a reckoning of the military strength of a nation and only males of military age were counted.

Now there are twelve equal contingents from the 12 tribes. This is the army of Israel and it is reunited in the last days under the leadership of the Lion of Judah to defeat the oppressors of Israel, but the multitude in heaven ascribe their victory to God and to the Lamb. We read in v. 14,

SLIDE

Rev 7:14 I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Now this is not a literal prediction that every faithful Christian will be martyred but it does mean that every faithful Christian, in our struggle with the Beast must be prepared to die. All faithful Christians must accept martyrdom, if it comes, and

not compromise our witness. Last week we discovered that the way that the Lion of Judah conquered was by way of becoming the Lamb of God. The way of Jesus is not the way of military conquests. The way of Jesus is not the way of oppressing people, smashing down your enemies. The way of Jesus is victory through suffering at the hands of one's enemies. We win by following in the footsteps of our leaders.

Here is what that means for you and me, brothers and sisters. The way we win, the way the kingdom of God advances is when we choose not to retaliate for an offense. The way we win and the way the kingdom of God wins is when we choose to turn the other cheek. We win and the kingdom of God wins when we follow in the steps of Jesus by out-serving the world. We follow in the steps of Jesus by welcoming people; by opening our arms; by being forgiving. That is the way a whole multitude is going to come in.

It says in v. 9,

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Rev 7:9 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

The kingdom of God is multicultural. It is multiethnic. It seems sometimes that we Christians are a tiny little minority struggling to be heard but one day the promise to Abraham that those coming from his body will be as numerous as

grains of sand on the seashore and the stars in the sky will be fulfilled, but it will be fulfilled as we Christians walk in the steps of our Lord.

Finally, here is the fourth Tent Peg: It is always right to sing. Throughout the book of Revelation songs just bubble up in the most unlikely places. We just finished reading about all these terrible things that are on the face of the earth. And yet, what do we see? Followers of Jesus are before the throne singing. V. 10,

SLIDE

Rev 7:10 And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

Do you know that singing to God and worshipping is not just a mountain top experience? Do you know that singing and worshipping is not just appropriate when your life is going great. Christians are people who sing. We sing in the desert. We sing in the night. Christians sing in prison. We sing in the storm. Paul and Silas sing in prison. Christians have sung in concentration camps, in hospital rooms, in nursing homes, and in refugee camps. We can't help but sing.

Have you tried singing and worshipping, making a deliberate choice to sing when you are in the day of disaster. We sing because we live in the reality that nothing can ever separate us from God, or his love. We sing because our side is

winning. We sing because we are following our leader. As we sing, we stand in the day of disaster. Let's pray.

Standing in the Day of Disaster

Rich Nathan

May 21-22, 2005

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 - E. Cosmic Catastrophe (Rev. 6:12-16)

- III. Standing in the Day of Disaster
 - A. Our Side is Winning (Rev. 6:1,2)
 - B. Evil is Limited (Rev. 7:1-3)
 - C. Follow Our Leader (Rev. 7:4-14)
 - D. It is Always Appropriate to Sing (Rev. 7:9-12)
 - E. The Lamb is Our Shepherd (Rev. 7:17)