

God's Eternal Plan #25
The Great Tribulation
Revelation 6:1-17

Most thinking people in today's world have some grave concerns about the outcome of the future. They are afraid that an irrational leader somewhere will set off a nuclear exchange. They are convinced that many people now living in affluence will soon find it necessary to lower their standard of living. **Meteorologists are fearful that pollution in the upper atmosphere may do freakish things to the weather and bring about mass starvation.** And I am amazed at the number of thinking people, many of them nonChristians, who believe that the end of our civilization is at hand.

Although it is true while I have some serious misgivings man's moral development, which has by no means kept pace with his technological advances. In fact, people are just as immoral, selfish, and cruel as ever. The Terrorists with their nuclear weapons resembles a child playing with a loaded gun, which sometime or another could go off, bringing worldwide disaster.

In spite of all that is going on around us I am not about to resign myself to being destroyed in a nuclear holocaust. And the reason for such confidence is I have a copy of God's eternal plan called the *Bible*. And this Book, the Bible, tells me the rapture of the church could take place at any moment. **Besides that, I'm not convinced that God is going to allow an allout nuclear exchange in the near future.** In fact, it could be that neither the rapture nor a nuclear war will take place during the present generation. God just may see fit to give us a period of relative peace and prosperity. He could respond to the prayers of His people and bring about a great spiritual awakening among believers, and this in turn could reverse the moral climate all over the world.

Let me be quick to point out that, whether things get better or worse, a period of terrible tribulation is inevitable. The Scriptures make it clear that intense devastation and terror will sweep over the earth just before Jesus Christ returns to establish His kingdom. Biblebelieving Christians in both a-millennial and premillennial circles agree that a period of unparalleled distress awaits mankind. **Some say that believers will go through it, while others are convinced that the church will be raptured first.** They concur, however, in their conviction that the tribulation will take place.

In our next two studies I want to trace the course of that unprecedented time of terrible trouble and suffering we call the tribulation. I will do so by focusing upon its unpleasant elements revolution, famine, pestilence, demonic affliction, and natural disasters. The positive factors of the tribulation will be considered later.

The primary teaching on the great tribulation is given to us in the book of Revelation. It is portrayed by three distinct symbols seals, trumpets, and bowls of wrath. Jesus Himself will open the seals as He reclaims the earth from Satan's domination. **Angels will blow the trumpets and empty the bowls of God's wrath.** The events associated with the seals, trumpets, and bowls occur during a time span of 3 and 1/2 years.

The first 3 ½ years mark the beginning of Daniels's 70th Week. The next 3-½ years is described as the Great Tribulation. It is during this last 3-½ years span that we find these judgments. **The seal judgments will take place over the entire 3 and 1/2 year period.** The trumpet judgments will begin at some undesignated point within it. The bowl judgments will be poured out in rapid succession during the closing weeks. Even though the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments will begin at different times, they will all come to an end at the glorious return of Christ.

Look, first of all, at the Seven Seals. These are described for us in Revelation 6:1-17, “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 crown 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. 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. 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. 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?"

The apostle John's inspired description of the great tribulation began with his portrayal of Jesus opening a sevensealed scroll. As the seals were broken and the scroll was unrolled, great events came into focus. The process gave John a bird's eye view of the entire 3 and 1/2 year period we call "the great tribulation."

The Rider on the White Horse. Revelation 6:1-2 says, "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 crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer." **When the first seal was opened by Christ, a rider on a white horse burst into view.** The color of the steed signifies victory in battle, the bow in the warrior's hand symbolizes his control of the weapons of warfare, and the crown on his head depicts his acknowledged position of authority. This rider is Antichrist! He will come upon the world scene in a time of general distress, and he will appear to be the hope of mankind.

The Rider on the Red Horse. Revelation 6:3-4 says, "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." **The breaking of the second seal brings before us the same rider, but this time he is on a red horse.** This color symbolizes bloodshed and war. We are told that the horseman has "power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other." Furthermore, he "was given a large sword."

We have seen from our study of Antichrist that when he feels his position is secure he will instigate a program of cruel persecution against the Jews. Violence begets violence; therefore, worldwide revolution will soon follow. These conflicts will escalate until they culminate in the war of Armageddon. Antichrist will not fulfill his promise to bring peace to mankind.

The Rider on the Black Horse. Revelation 6:5-6 gives us this insight, "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." **The opening of the third seal revealed a black horse with its rider holding a pair of scales.** His entrance was accompanied by the announcement, "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 black horse with its rider symbolizes famine. During the tribulation, food will become so scarce that it will have to be weighed out carefully. Prices will be so high that a man will have to work a whole day for one ration of wheat or three rations of barley. **The supply of "oil and wine," however, will not diminish.** This indicates that the rich will still be able to buy their luxury foods, even while the poor go hungry. The sad old story of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer will continue in spite of Antichrist's promise of prosperity for all.

The Rider on the Pale Horse. Revelation 6:7-8 says, "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." **While John looked on, the fourth seal was opened and a pale, greenish colored horse appeared.** Its rider was named Death. He was followed closely by Hades, the abode of the dead.

The coming of the rider on the pale horse indicates the intensity of the suffering under the red and black horses. We are told that one-fourth of the earth's population will be killed "by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth." The two new elements that will bring death under the symbolism of this horse are "plague," and "the wild beasts of the earth."

Violence, famine, disease, and "the wild beasts of the earth" will bring death to multitudes in the great tribulation. The word "beasts" may refer to cruel and wicked men. Remember, Antichrist and the False Prophet are portrayed as beasts in Revelation 13. **If we take the expression "wild beasts" literally, though, we can only conjecture about how this prophecy will be fulfilled.** Earthquakes may bring about the release of hundreds of zoo animals. Wild with hunger brought on by the food shortage, they could slay many people.

The declaration that one-fourth of the world's population will die staggers the imagination. Right now, that would be more than 6 billion people! Later we'll see that another vast multitude will be killed by the demonic hordes described in Revelation 9.

The Souls under the Altar. Revelation 6:9-11 gives us this insight, “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.” **When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, God allows John to take a peek into the very presence of holy God.** These three verses of Scripture give us some tremendous insight into God’s eternal plan.

The first thing we notice is these “souls” were under the altar of sacrifice. That tells us these were not souls of Christians who had given their lives for the cause of Christ. **How do we know that? Because the “dead in Christ” were raised when the Church was raptured.** But these were *not* “bodies,” these are “souls.” Therefore, we know they were *not* a part of the first two events of the “first resurrection.”

Let me just remind you the “first resurrection” is broken down into three parts: (1) 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 says, “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming.” (2) 1 Corinthians 15:51-53 says, “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” (3) Revelation 20:5-6 says, “But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.” Therefore, it is obvious these Martyrs are those who will be killed for the “Word of God” and their “testimony” *after* the Church is caught out.

The second thing we see is they are given “robes.” This does not mean that they were resurrected; it means they were given *spiritual robes* for their *soulish* bodies. Please be reminded – although at death we lose out earthly, or *fleshy* body, we will still have a *soulish, spiritual,* body, that can see, hear, feel, speak, etc. This is seen in the story that Jesus told in Luke 16:19-31 concerning Lazarus and the *Rich man*.

Look quickly at the sixth seal, which represents physical change. Revelation 6:12-17 says, "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?" **When the sixth seal was opened, John saw a great earthquake rock our planet.** In addition, the sun turned black, the moon became bloodred, stars fell to the earth, the sky rolled up like a scroll, and mountains and islands disappeared. When these cataclysmic events take place, raw terror will grip the ungodly. Having rejected the Almighty, instead of repenting they will irrationally call on the mountains and rocks, crying out, "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 their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

There is an interval between the sixth and the seventh seals, which, as we will see in our next study, allows God to introduce to us the 144,000 evangelists.