

## A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Eight

### Chapter Six – part 2

#### Introduction:

In the first few verses of chapter 6 we witnessed the opening of the first four seals. As each was opened one of the 4 "living beings" uttered the word 'Come!' and four horses charged into the scene. Those four beings represent the world (creation) and the opening of those seals (the four horsemen) symbolically provided us with examples of the trials that God permits to test the faith of Christians in the world -- both then and now. But, in spite of the bleak picture presented by those seals depicting suffering and death, the first one – the white horse and rider – promises us victory over the powers of the world.

There is a conclusion to be drawn from the war, famine, persecution, and death represented by those seals. Since the establishment of the church, Christians have and will continue to face hardship and conflict in their lives. Sadly, the reality is that some will not endure because their faith isn't strong enough. Those who do however, are promised victory and an eternal home in Heaven.

Three seals remain to be opened but before looking at them, an introduction is in order. Remember that each of the four horsemen were symbols of events that would happen on the earth before Jesus returns again. When Christ established His kingdom and said the ***“gates of hell shall not prevail against it”*** (Matt. 16:18), He referred to that part of His kingdom that abides on the earth and is comprised of all who are obedient to Him. Of course, that part will cease to exist when the world ends, but the other part of Christ's kingdom exists in Heaven and will never end. It is eternal!

Once the earth is destroyed, the final victory will have been achieved and ALL the faithful throughout time will be gathered together in Heaven. As we will see when we examine the opening of the fifth seal, some are already enjoying that home in Heaven, while the rest of us are awaiting that final step through the door to eternity.. Those who have gone before us, including those first century Christians who endured unspeakable suffering, bore the trials of the

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earth without losing faith while the rest of us still living must face whatever might come our way with that same steadfastness.

The common denominator in the first four seals is that they all refer to things that happen on this earth. But, with the opening of the fifth seal we are introduced to a second group of visions that do not deal with the earth. They are connected to Heaven, and the scenes more closely relate to life in the world which is to come. Even the opening of the sixth seal, which appears to shift our focus back to the earth, is actually speaking of the end of the world and what comes after. There we will see the much talked about “144,000” and “The Great Multitude from Every Nation.” Hopefully I will manage to present them in such a way that we are able to fully understand their meaning.

As I have said several times, apocalyptic visions in general are difficult to describe, so when we read in verse 9 of the *“Souls under the altar in Heaven”* it may take some time to explain. None of us has experienced the afterlife, so at times we will need to “hit the pause button”, so to speak, and freeze the vision while we discuss the details before allowing it to play out. If we don’t interpret the visions correctly, we might miss the overall picture the book of Revelation is trying to show us.

### The Next Two Seals (Revelation 6:9 - 17)

**“And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were 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, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? White robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled. And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars of**

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heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens 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 that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"

### THE FIFTH SEAL...

When the Lamb opens the fifth seal, John sees *"...underneath the altar the souls of them that had been slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held."* The altar is obviously symbolic, because there is no need to offer sacrifices in Heaven. But apocalyptically speaking, an altar is the symbol of sacrifice. Therefore, when we see one mentioned in heaven, it is understood that whatever is associated with that altar has been sacrificed on earth. The Greek word rendered *"slain"* would be better translated *"sacrificed."* It is the same word that was used when referring to the Lamb in verse 6 of chapter 5.

One might ask the question, how can John see a Soul? The truth is he doesn't see them with his eyes. We spoke earlier of how John is seeing things "in the spirit" or under the control of the Spirit. This image was placed in John's mind. Since John is seeing them "under the altar," we know they had been "sacrificed" and that it had occurred on earth. Perhaps they were martyrs in the traditional sense of that word, as many think, but they also could have been faithful Christians that died during a famine, of a disease, or in some other manner. We learned in the previous section that those things are allowed in this life to test our faith. However these faithful ones perished, I believe they can still be considered martyrs because it is said they died *"for the word of God..."* The word rendered "for" is from the Greek word **"dia"** which means *"for this cause"* or *"because of."* They died "because of" the word of God, and/or "because of" the testimony to which they held firm. It is sometimes stated this way: they died by reason of

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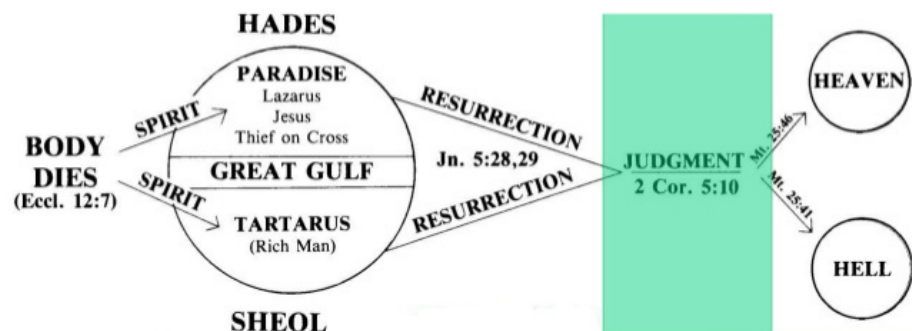
the Word which means they believed the Gospel and accepted it, and were not willing to deny it regardless of punishment or hardship. The “Word” was the basis of their hope, and also the reason they are in Heaven.

Hit the pause button. This is the first of those places where we need to discuss a detail before continuing. I’m referring to the presence of souls in Heaven. That is a problem for a significant number of people who believe Heaven is currently vacant of the souls of anyone who died on earth. If I understand this view correctly, they believe the souls of all who die on the earth are kept in a “holding place” called either Sheol or Hades, awaiting a day of judgment before being placed eternally in Heaven or Hell. I imagine this view stems from the story of Lazarus and the rich man found in Luke 16:19ff. If you’re not familiar with that parable of Jesus, you might want to read it for yourself because I will provide only a summary here. Lazarus was a poor man with sores over much of his body, probably crippled, and was laid at a rich man’s gate every day to beg for food. The rich man, on the other hand, fared well every day, and the story infers that he did not help Lazarus. Both men died. Lazarus was carried into “Abraham's bosom” and the rich man was buried. Verse 23 uses the term “Hades,” in regard to the rich man.

This image summarizes their belief as I understand it. Upon earthly death the soul (spirit) goes either to Paradise or Tartarus, the two major divisions of the large circle labeled

Hades/Sheol. At The end of the world ALL souls in Hades/Sheol are resurrected to be judged (the green section) at which point they are placed into

either Heaven or Hell. If this view is correct no earthly souls are currently in Heaven. Yet, we just read in Revelation 6 that John sees the souls of those who died because they firmly held onto



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their faith. Additionally, the scriptures also teach that those who trusted in God's Word were promised to be with Abraham in God's kingdom. ***“I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”*** (Matthew 8:11).

So, what does that mean? Where is this place called either Hades or Sheol and how does this tie into our discussion of Revelation 6? I believe the answer is simple: there is no “holding place” for departed spirits, and the souls of the righteous are dwelling in Heaven right now. Revelation 6 tells us that the ***“souls of them that were slain for the word of God” are there in Heaven.*** Furthermore, no scripture speaks of such places of comfort and torment except this parable in Luke 16. I believe Jesus is showing us Heaven and Hell in that story, not some interim place called Hades. In that image on the previous page you can quickly see that some sort of judgment occurred at earthly death in order for the spirit to be sent to Paradise or Tartarus. In chapter 20, we will see that that judgment is an ongoing process throughout life that ends at our death and will determine where we will spend eternity. You will have a better understanding of this by the time we get to that chapter.

Hit the “Resume” button: Revelation 6:10 records that those martyrs ***“...cried with a loud voice.”*** The Greek word translated as “loud” is ***“megas”***. Thayer defines it as “great” in the sense of mass, weight, measure or stature. He further says it can apply to number, quantity, stature, age, ability, authority, power, or even time, but never mentions volume or loudness. Certainly, it is possible that they were using a loud voice, but the primary emphasis seems to be not on the loudness, but the unison of the mass of voices that made it great. It applies more to their number and to the importance of their plea.

Their plea was, ***“How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”*** Some take the position that a lengthy amount of time has passed since the opening of the first seal and the appearance of the white horse and rider. But time only exists on the earth. In Heaven there is no time; a day is as a thousand years.

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Furthermore, as we have already discussed, each of the first four seals represents the span of time on earth from the establishment of the church to the end of the world. Therefore, it can not be determined when this was spoken, or how much “earth time” had passed since they died. Certainly, these could be some of the early Christians that were put to death in the Roman arenas or even earlier during Nero’s reign.

One commentator suggests that John was using earthly terms because of the comfort it affords the reader, and that may be true. Whatever the reason for their question, notice it is answered in verse 11: “*...rest yet for a little season...*” You may be familiar with the phrase “In God’s Time.” The Creator, He who designed and made this beautiful world we call home, wanted to create humans to enjoy it. He decided to grant them free will to make their own decisions even though He knew they would not always make the right choices. Because He knew every one of us would err many times in many ways, He formed a plan for our salvation and redemption even before He spoke this world into existence. Once sin and death entered into the world, he implemented that plan with the sacrifice of His only Son. We mortals tend to wonder why He allowed some 4000 years to lapse between that first sin in the Garden and Jesus’ death on the cross, but to God that is just the blink of an eye. He isn’t governed by time and does as He sees fit when the conditions on the earth dictate it. That is what is meant by “God’s time.”

Notice the wording of verse 11: Each of those slain souls received a white robe. Of course the “white robe” is the symbol of righteousness and victory. These saints have attained final bliss, have been cleansed from all defilement, and are there in the presence of God and all other Heavenly creatures. Their victory has been won. But also notice that they still retain their memory. They remember the pain and suffering they endured and are asking when they may be avenged. They are told they should *rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled*. I believe one of the earlier bible scholars, Wilhelm De Wette, said it best: “*The ‘little time’ depicted and set forth under the seals comes to an end and merges into eternity when Christ returns.*” Spence says this

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*“little time”* corresponds to the things that will *“shortly come to pass”* mentioned in Revelation 1:1.

I might also point out that the *“fellow servants”* and *“brethren”* mentioned in verse 11 are NOT two different groups, but instead refer to the Christians still living on the earth. Some of them will be *“killed as they were”* (martyred) and the others will die in other ways. The point being made is this: Christians on earth need to proceed with Christ’s work, and when that is done all will be complete and the world will end.

### THE SIXTH SEAL...

When John observes the 6<sup>th</sup> seal being opened, **“...lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens 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 that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?’”**

There is more controversy over this seal than any we have seen so far. Before getting into a detailed discussion of what happens when it is opened, let’s review a few pertinent things.

1. ANY conclusion we reach in regard to this seal must not contradict other teachings in the scriptures.
2. This book was written with a two-fold purpose:
  - a. to be a source of encouragement to the Christians of that time — those enduring persecution, and,

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b. to be applicable so as to benefit Christians throughout the ages.

As I already mentioned, there is a great deal of disagreement among commentators over the meaning of this seal. Here are some of the more popular views, most hinging on the author's understanding of when John recorded it – prior to the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD) or after:

1. Grotius – the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.
2. Elliot – 4<sup>th</sup> Century near the end of the Roman Empire.
3. Wordsworth – The last age of the Church.
4. Cunninghame – The French Revolution of 1789.
5. Hinds – The reign of Constantine in 313 AD.
6. Spence – The end of the world and the coming great judgment

Obviously, the first century Christians knew nothing of the French Revolution or the reign of Constantine, and if we are correct in our dating of this writing as circa 96 AD, Jerusalem had already been destroyed. In order for this book to be an encouragement to those Christians suffering persecution in the year 96 AD, they would need to be able to understand what was being said to them. It would need to apply to something that they could immediately relate to. Their trials and persecutions were severe. They were desperate for the type of encouragement that they could not only rely on but cling to! I believe the vision of the seven seals gives them just what they needed. The first one foretells the victory of the church over Satan and his followers. The next three show that in spite of difficult times, victory is assured.

And, in case some are inclined to think that it would be better to escape this suffering and do as the world does - renounce Christianity - we are given a glimpse of the future with the fifth seal. It tells us the war is not over, so stand firm! Heaven is the guaranteed home for the souls of the righteous. We have not yet discussed the sixth or seventh seal, but be assured they show a “day of reckoning” and an assurance of heaven for those who endure. It is, of course, no accident that there are SEVEN seals. With this numerical sign of completeness, the whole of



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God's plan is briefly outlined through this vision. Christians throughout the ages can rely on it for encouragement.

Now let's look at the contents of the seal:

The first thing we see mentioned is an *"earthquake,"* which is symbolic of doom and judgment. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Ezekiel and Daniel all use language similar to this, but with a difference. They foretell a time of judgment upon some worldly power, person or single event. But the judgment we are speaking of in this record is worldwide and involves every living person on earth!

Matthew, Mark and Luke each speak of a judgment to come in their gospels, but I believe Matthew's account, where Jesus Himself answers the question, *"When shall these things be?"* is by far the most comprehensive. Each of those writers penned their gospels between 55 and 60 AD, only a decade or so before the Roman military blockaded the city of Jerusalem in a four year long campaign against Jewish insurgency. The outcome was the complete destruction of Jerusalem, in which most of the city, including the sacred temple of the Jews, was flattened. All records kept there were burned. It was complete devastation.

Jesus had tried to tell the Jewish hierarchy that this was going to happen. It is recorded in Matthew 24:1-33. All that is contained in those 33 verses speak of the destruction of Jerusalem, because in verse 34 Jesus says, *"Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."* He is saying that the generation hearing Him speak these words will not die before everything He has just spoken of shall come to pass. Matthew wrote those words in approximately 60 AD, and history confirms that Jerusalem fell ten years later in 70 AD.

Then, beginning in verse 36 Jesus switches his emphasis to the end of the earth saying, *"But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only."* He reminds them of the great flood during Noah's time that came without warning, and

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says that the Son of man shall return in the same way. He then speaks specifically about the last days and His return in the closing verses of Matthew 24 and a large part of Matthew 25.

So, since I believe John wrote Revelation after the destruction of Jerusalem has already occurred, what we are reading about here in chapter 6 refers to the end of the world. We're inclined to wonder about the duration of the events described here on that final day. How long does all of this take? I have no answer to that question, except the one the Apostle Paul gave the church at Corinth: ***"In a moment, in the "twinkling" of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet shall sound and the dead will be raised..."*** It may be instantaneous or it may not be. We simply don't know. In case you're interested, philosopher Jack Van Impe defines "the twinkling of an eye" as eleven one-hundredths of a second. Whether the Apostle Paul was speaking literally or not, we know it will be very quick! It's much more important that we concentrate on the second thing Paul said: ***"It will come as a thief in the night,"*** or, when we least expect it. Our vigilance must not be lax; we can't afford to be found unready!

A couple of observations of note: Verses 12-14 lists an earthquake, the sun becoming black, the moon becoming like blood, stars falling to the earth, the sky split apart and rolled up, mountains moved out of their place, and islands moved out of theirs. Did you count the number of events in those THREE verses? There are SEVEN, of course. Verse 15 lists those affected by the destruction: kings, great men, rich men, commanders, strong men, slaves, and free men. There it is again – the number SEVEN.

The great day has come according to verse 17, and the question is asked, ***"Who shall be able to stand?"*** The answer is "none of the above" because every one of those mentioned in verse 15 said to the mountains and rocks, ***"Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb."*** We know what is to become of those begging to be hidden from the face of God on that day, and it will be verified in chapter 20. This vivid image of the heavens being rolled up and the stars falling to the earth is a description of the end of the world as we know it. The scene doesn't end here, though, it continues in

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chapter 7, which we will discuss in Part 7...