

6. The Fifth Seal and Great Tribulation

Revelation 6:9-11

The Book of Revelation

YouTube video link: <https://youtu.be/9m4BnXSYycw>

Famous theologian and author William Barclay once said, “All of history is in the hand of God, and in it and through it all, He is working His purpose out to its certain end.” I believe this is true. We can see all of history as “His story.” Yet that does not mean that everything that happens is God-ordained and God-initiated. God allows catastrophic events and even evil agents, both humans and angels to act in rebellion against Him. However, Psalm 11:7 tells us that “**He is righteous in all His deeds.**” God knows the end from the beginning. Therefore, He knows how to work all things together for good and for His ultimate purpose, for He is Omniscient, which means He knows all things. That is hard for us to comprehend, as we are bound by the limits of space and time, but God is not. He can see the end from the beginning. I say this because in looking at this book of Revelation, we must always keep in mind that the Lord holds all things together and is in control. Whatever we will be allowed to experience in our lifetime, nothing is ever a surprise to Him, and there is no situation or place where His love cannot reach us and keep us. His promise to us is true, “**I will never leave you or forsake you**” (Hebrews 13:5).

In our previous study in Revelation 6:1-8, [The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#), we looked at the first half of a seven-year period spoken of by Daniel the prophet (Daniel 9:27), that there will be four effects upon the Earth as the first four seals of the scroll in heaven are opened. Jesus also spoke of these effects in His talk with the disciples on the Mount of Olives in Matthew 24, referring to this time as the "beginning of sorrows" (Matthew 24:8). The Lord said the events were signs that would precede His Second Coming and that before He came, there would be a time of persecution of believers: “**Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. ¹⁰At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other**” (Matthew 24:9-10). This time of persecution is similar to what happens at the opening of the fourth seal. The persecution continues into the fifth seal with the martyrdom of believers in Christ taking place. At the opening of the fifth seal in Revelation 6:9-11, we read of God's servants crying out to Him for judgment to fall on those who are murdering believers in Christ:

The Fifth Seal

⁹When 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. ¹⁰They 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?**” ¹¹Then 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 (Revelation 6:9-11, Emphasis added).

The fifth seal will bring persecution and martyrdom (v. 9) of Christ-followers who have been faithful to the Word of God and their testimony as believers. At the opening of the fifth seal, martyred believers are asking God how long they must wait before the Lord avenges their blood (Revelation 6:10). Why would they be crying out for God to bring justice and judgment if the

wrath of God is being poured out during the breaking of the scroll seals, as some believe? It is my personal belief that at the fifth seal, God's judgment and vengeance have not yet started. I do not believe that God is the instigator of the persecution of believers. He sometimes allows it, but He is not the architect of it. Jesus told us that if they persecuted Him, His followers would likewise be persecuted (John 15:20). However, God has not appointed believers to go through wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:9). Yet, here at the fifth seal, believers in Christ are being martyred for their faith and testimony. God is not the author of the persecution of His people, so logically, it is the enemy of our souls that brings about persecution and martyrdom. How can the enemy be allowed free reign to do what he wants if the world at this point, is enduring the wrath of God? If the opening of the fifth seal brings martyrdom and a call from believers for God to judge the enemy, then why would the first four seals be the wrath of God? Author Charles Cooper, in an online article, writes:

The martyrs of seal five specifically ask God (O Sovereign Lord), "How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10, ESV). The NASB frames the question this way: "How long...will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the Earth?" Bratcher and Hatton, in *A Handbook on the Revelation of John*, suggest, "Please don't wait any longer to condemn and punish those people on earth who killed us," correctly reflects the sense of the question (Bratcher, R. G., & Hatton, H. *A Handbook on the Revelation to John* ((1993), p. 116)). Taken at face value, the question of the martyrs can only mean that no evidence of God's wrath occurs prior to the fourth seal.¹

In our following study, we will see that at the opening of the sixth seal, the wrath of God is imminent:

¹⁶They 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! ¹⁷For **the great day of their wrath has come**, and who can withstand it?" (Revelation 6:16-17).

It is when we come to the seventh seal and the opening of the scroll that the trumpet judgments start. That which is happening at the fifth seal is the **wrath of Satan against God's people**. God is not yet pouring out His wrath; it is Satan using the Antichrist to persecute the saints, something we are told about in Revelation 12:

...But woe to the Earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short... ¹⁷Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off **to wage war** against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus (Revelation 12:12; 17).

In Revelation 12:12 and 17, we see Satan cast down to the Earth by Michael and his angels (12:6) and a war erupting against the elect of God, the body of Christ. The prophet Daniel also prophesied about the Antichrist waging war against the saints and defeating them: "**I beheld, and the same horn made war with the saints, and prevailed against them**" (Daniel 7:21).

¹ <https://prewrathrapture.com/the-terminus-a-quo-of-the-day-of-the-lord-a-review/>

The fifth seal ties in with the warning by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 24, to His disciples on the Mount of Olives of a time of Great Tribulation (KJV) or Great Distress (NIV). This period will be a time when believers in Christ will be slain because of their stand for the Word of God and the testimony they have maintained. What happens on Earth at this time is not the wrath of God being poured out; the Great Tribulation is the wrath of Satan against God's elect because they do not conform to the Antichrist's desire to be worshiped!

Can you think of times in history when believers in Christ have been persecuted? Are you aware of any countries today where this is happening?

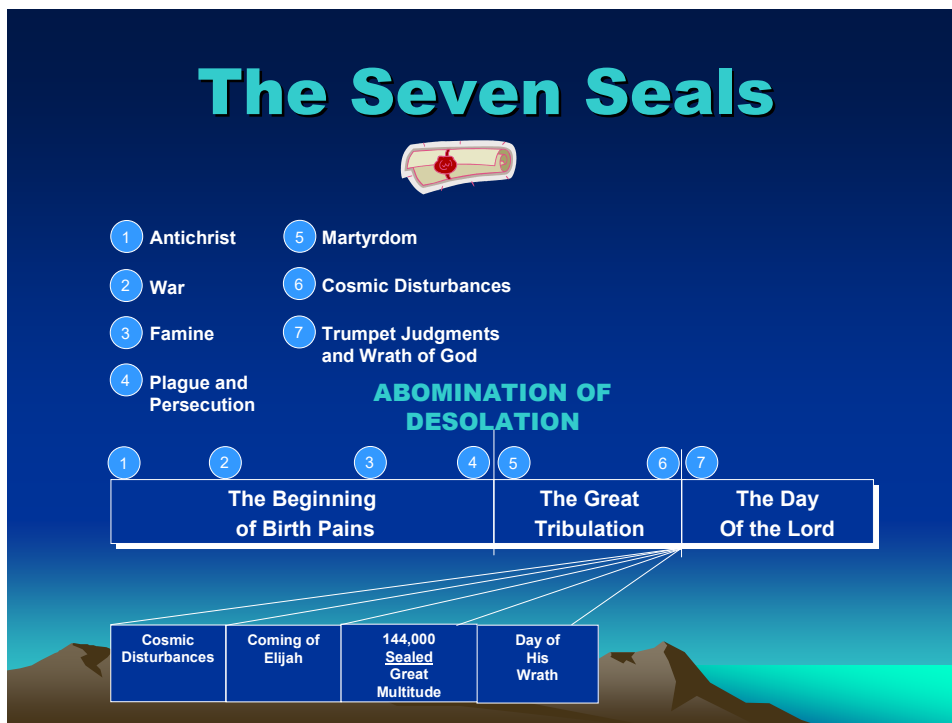
Great Tribulation Begins at the Antichrist's Desecration of the Temple

There is a shift from the general overview of the timeline in verse fifteen of Matthew's Gospel, where the Lord transitions to talking about the need for specific care at the midpoint of the seven-year period mentioned by Daniel the Prophet (Daniel 9:27). This shift or change from a general overview is indicated using the words, "So when," or in another English translation, the term "therefore" is used. Let's read Jesus' words of warning:

¹⁵“**So when** you see standing in the holy place ‘**the abomination that causes desolation**,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—¹⁶then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. ¹⁸Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. ¹⁹How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! ²⁰Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. ²¹**For then there will be great distress** [thlipsis], unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again (Matthew 24:15-21, Emphasis added).

Jesus warned us of an event He called the Abomination of Desolation, i.e., a desecration of the Temple by the Antichrist (Matthew 24:15, 21), that would precipitate a time of Great Distress or Great Tribulation on Earth. The prophet Jeremiah also talked about it: “**How awful that day will be! No other will be like it. It will be a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be saved out of it (Jeremiah 30:7)**.” Paul, the apostle, also wrote of the desecration of the Temple when the lawless one (the Antichrist) will set himself up in the Temple of God proclaiming himself as God (2 Thessalonians 2:4).

As we have mentioned before, there was a foreshadowing of this event when Antiochus Epiphanes took Jerusalem by storm and forbade the Jews to worship, punishing those who kept Jewish rites of worship with death and himself, desecrating the Jewish Temple. Although we see partial fulfillment in that event (this man made an image of Himself to be worshipped, as the Anti-Christ will do), there are many things that we see happening at the end of days that could not have been fulfilled at that time. There are many instances in Scripture that point to multiple fulfillments, what is referred to as types and shadows.” For example, people who lived through the days of World War II inevitably thought the end of days was upon them and likely saw Hitler as another possible fulfillment of the Antichrist. It was the same spirit, working again through an evil agent, stirred up with hatred against the Jews.



Some Bible teachers say that Christians will not have to go through this time of great tribulation, believing that it is a time when God's wrath is poured out. All Bible teachers agree that believers in Christ will not experience God's wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:9). This writer believes that, at the midpoint of the seven-year period, the time of wrath has not yet started, and what we call the Great Tribulation or Great Distress is a time of persecution. Let's look at how the Greek word, *thlipsis*, is used in the New Testament and understand what the gospel writers were communicating.

What is the Great Tribulation or Great Distress?

The word *tribulation* (KJV) or *distress* (NIV) is the translation of the Greek word *thlipsis*. My Hebrew Greek Key Word Study Bible tells me that this Greek word means:

"To crush, press, squeeze. It means tribulation, trouble, or affliction. *Thlipsis* conveys the picture of something being crushed, pressed, or squeezed from a great weight. It is used to denote grievous physical affliction or mental and spiritual distress."²

Not once is it described as a time of wrath from God. This Greek word occurs 20 times in the New Testament. Of those 20 times, the term is descriptive of trouble and difficulties that the believer variously goes through on his journey in life. For instance, when Jesus was teaching the Parable of the Sower, He said that we should expect tribulation or affliction as *thlipsis* is translated in the following passages:

²⁰"The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only

² Key Word Study Bible, AMG Publishers, Chattanooga, TN 37422, USA. Copyright 1996, Page 1632.

temporary, and when **affliction** [*thlipsis*] or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away (Matthew 13:20-21).

Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our **affliction** [*thlipsis*] (2 Corinthians 7:4).

It is correct to believe that God does not pour out His wrath on His people. However, God's people have always gone through tribulation, and He has warned us about this so that we do not fall away during this time. God wants us to understand that we will not have to suffer His wrath, but what does the Lord tell us about tribulation? Historically speaking, the doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture is relatively new to the Church. We see little evidence of people teaching this particular doctrine before the 1830s. Many great men of God believed that the Church would endure the Great Tribulation, men such as John Wesley, Charles Wesley, Charles Spurgeon, Matthew Henry, John Knox, John Hus, William Carey, John Calvin, Isaac Newton, George Whitfield, A.B. Simpson, George Mueller, John Newton, Jonathan Edwards, John Wycliffe, John Bunyan, and many others.³

There are only five times in the New Testament when the Greek word *thlipsis* is used in an end-times prophetic sense: twice in Matthew's gospel, twice in Mark's gospel, and once in the Book of Revelation. So, let's look at each reference beginning with Matthew's warning first:

²¹**For then there will be great distress** [*thlipsis*], unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again (Matthew 24:21).

²⁹**“Immediately after the distress** [*thlipsis*] **of those days** the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken" (Matthew 24:29).

Because those will be days of distress [*thlipsis*] unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again (Mark 13:19).

²⁴“But in those days, following that distress [*thlipsis*], “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; ²⁵the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ ²⁶“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷And he will send his angels and gather **his elect** from the four winds, from the ends of the Earth to the ends of the heavens (Mark 13:24-27).

Some say that when Jesus was talking about gathering His elect, He wasn't talking to us Gentile believers; He was talking to the Jews. But at the very end of the gospel of Matthew, he records Jesus as saying to His disciples to go and “...make disciples of all nations and to teach them to obey all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). All of what Christ taught them was what they were to teach others. He didn't tell the disciples not to teach the Gentiles about the end-time prophetic events because it didn't apply to them. Also, right at the end of Mark's words about the tribulation/distress, the Lord adds the warning to stay awake and not to sleep spiritually, then

³ As told by Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, Published by Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN. Page 54.

He adds the words, “**What I say to you, I say to everyone: Watch! (Mark 13:36-37)**. It’s almost like He knew that some would say that these words were not for believers.

The fifth time the Greek word *thlipsis* is used concerning the end times, it is spoken about as happening during the Great Tribulation. One of the elders standing around the throne of God explained to John who those were in white robes:

I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation [thlipsis], and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14).

The Great Distress or Great Tribulation will be a time of testing that God will use to deepen believers' faith in Christ and bring maturity and fullness to the Body of Christ. It will also be a time when many will come to Christ as they are awakened out of spiritual slumber.

The Antichrist and his followers will target those who hold to the God of the Holy Scriptures, both Jews and Christians. The Antichrist will be a satanically motivated individual who desires to have the whole world worship him and get behind his agenda. He will seek to dominate and influence people through control of food, laws, education, the health system, the government, religion, etc. We live in a time of full-spectrum spiritual warfare against those who serve the God of the Bible. This time will bring a period of distress and falling away, rebellion, or apostasy for many who have never been serious about their faith in God. The Antichrist will force people to worship him by setting up an image of himself in the Temple of God in Jerusalem, a temple that has not yet been built as of May 2024, but Paul the apostle said that it would be:

³Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. ⁴He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's Temple, proclaiming himself to be God (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, Emphasis added).

The Greek word translated as *rebellion* (*v. 3*) means to apostatize or fall away from faith. It also has a direct article that tells us that it is *the* rebellion, a significant event that will cause a worldwide departure from biblical Christianity and the Lord Jesus. Those who fall away are those who maybe go to Church but have never come into a relationship with Christ. These people are typified as the five foolish virgins in the Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25. We can't be dogmatic about this, but it is possible this falling away may happen when many are required to take the Mark of the Beast to be a part of the new one-world system. Part of accepting this Mark will be acknowledging the Antichrist as god. Many will compromise their faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when confronted with taking the Mark of the Beast. Let's look more closely at this persecution.

Hatred by the World System Toward Followers of Christ

All those who serve the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Jews and Bible-believing Christians) will suffer persecution and, in some cases, will die at the hands of God's enemies. We are amid a

spiritual war that is taking place on planet Earth. When an unfortunate situation arises, many so-called Christians will compromise and turn away from the faith. Just as true Bible-believing Christians were hauled off to prison along with Jewish people during the Second World War by the Nazis, so there will be an outbreak of hatred towards true Christians and Jews alike sometime in the future. Satan and the occult motivated the Nazis, and it is the same in our day and the days ahead. There is an occult dimension to the Antichrist and his world kingdom, just as there was in the Nazi party.

Believers will be betrayed and hated by those that today we may consider friends or even family:

²¹“Brother **will betray brother to death**, and a father his child; **children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death**. ²²You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who **stands firm to the end will be saved** (Matthew 10:21-22).

Those who stand firm (v. 22) at that time are believers, so the word *saved* should be translated as *delivered*. The Greek word translated into English, as *saved*, means to "deliver out of danger and into safety; used principally of God rescuing believers from the penalty and power of sin and into His provision of safety." We will be delivered by being caught up to be with the Lord. Some suggest that the above passage was fulfilled in the persecution that broke out after the stoning of Stephen in the Book of Acts, chapter 8, verse 1. However, it is evident from other passages that the Great Tribulation or persecution is still ahead of us because this persecution will happen during a time when one man will rule every tribe, people, language, and nation, something that's never happened in history. The "He" in the below passage speaks of the Antichrist:

⁷He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. ⁸All inhabitants of the Earth will worship the beast—**all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life**, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. ⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear. ¹⁰“If anyone is to go into captivity, **into captivity they will go**. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed.” **This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people** (Revelation 13:7-10).

Jesus encourages us that, when the time comes, He requires us to be faithful and endure—even to death if need be. Death is never the end of a believer. It is but a doorway into eternal life. These words of Jesus should encourage us if we are those alive during the time of persecution. If we see these things happening on Earth, we know that the time is not far off. We shall soon see Him coming in great power and glory to receive us to Himself (Matthew 24:30-31).

If you are in Jerusalem at the time of the Abomination of Desolation, Jesus warns you to get out of the city right away (Matthew 24:15-28). Still, for those of us throughout the world, we must wait on the Lord and get His specific direction, trusting Him to show us what to do. When thinking of that period, we often forget that God is waiting for us to depend on Him amid dark times so that He may show Himself strong on behalf of His Church (2 Chronicles 16:9). He delights for us to lean upon Him in such times of need. Though the enemy will seem to be having his way, the power of the Lord will be upon His people.

The closer we get to the end-time, the more significant the darkness and evil will be, but at the same time, the greater the light and power will be on true believers (Isaiah 60:1-2). The gifts of the Spirit will be more evident in those days. I believe we will see a return to very close fellowship and believers gathering in house churches as they did in the days of the early church. Bible-believing churches that teach the truth of God's word and illuminate the events that are going on will be forced to shut down with true believers going underground in small groups or house churches.

How do you think God will shine through His saints in the last days? Amid persecution, why do you think people will be drawn to Christ and His Church?

During that time, I foresee a situation where believers in Christ would have to be wholly disconnected from any computer, cell phone, or electronic device. Communication with other believers will not be through any digital devices. At that time, using any connecting device will broadcast an exact location. In the future, there will be no ability to buy things *via* cash, and those who opt out of the Anti-Christ's system will likely be disallowed to use the Internet because they will not bear the Mark of the Beast. All money will be cashless and only transferred from buyer to seller with a digital device, which can only be accessed by those who have the Mark of the Beast.

Anyone who declines to take the Mark of the Beast might have to use a bartering system. Believers in Christ will know when the time comes, for God will not leave His people in the dark. Part of the Mark may likely be some signature/authorization computer chip that will allow a person to buy or sell *via* the stores, mobile phone, or the Internet. It will have all your personal information on it, and it will somehow detect whether or not you "worshipped the beast" when you came online. Many people have speculated on what the Mark of the Beast will be like. We know that some kind of image will be set up in the Temple (Revelation 13:15).

Once people have taken the Mark, they are bound to worship Satan and his Antichrist. If a person has taken the Mark and changes his mind and refuses to worship the Antichrist's image, he will be killed: Many people have speculated on what the mark of the beast will be like. To worship the Antichrist, could likely be to pay some type of homage and be inextricably linked to this individual and system for survival:

The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed (Revelation 13:15).

We who refuse the Mark will need to have food, either growing or in storage, to last how long we don't know, for we know that the Lord will intervene and cut short the time (Matthew 24:22) by catching up believers before the second half is over. (We don't know the day or the hour of His coming). One thing we do know, though, is that we will overcome the Antichrist by the power of the shed blood of Christ and by the word of testimony of our experience of Christ:

¹⁰Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. ¹¹They overcame

him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives **so much as to shrink from death**. ¹²Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the Earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short (Revelation 12:10-12).

The apostle Paul warned us about this time of difficulty, saying that believers will not be in darkness that that day will overtake us as a thief, for those in Christ Jesus are children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober (1 Thessalonians 5:4-6). Those who are wise will prepare themselves spiritually, putting off every deed of darkness so that we will not be deceived. We won't know the day nor the hour, but we will know the season which is what Jesus taught us in the Parable of the Fig Tree (Matthew 24:32-35). When we see these things happen, those who are there at that time will be aware that the season is near for the coming of the Lord.

My intent, as I read this book, is to be ready for whenever our Bridegroom comes. We are to be vigilant, watchful, and pray, still carrying on with the Father's business, for the end will not come until the whole world has a chance to hear the Good News. We have never seen such a time as this when the ability to communicate is rapidly increasing. Jesus said:

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14).

Our destiny is to be married to our heavenly Bridegroom, who is preparing us to be powerful agents of His kingdom. The testing process may be difficult for some. Still, there will come a day when Christ assures us we will stand and receive heavenly rewards and enter eternal life in close relationship with the lover of our souls, the Lord Jesus Himself!

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of **those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God**. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and **had not received its Mark** on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4).

What an awesome day that will be! Your joy will know no bounds if you are a believer in Christ! We will see His face and enjoy Him and one another forever and ever. That experience of His presence will be worth the fire of testing!

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