

# LESSON 6A

## FOUR TERRIBLE HORSEMEN

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BY RAY C. STEDMAN

The sixth chapter of Revelation brings us to the beginning of the judgments of the wrath of God. It is not an easy passage to preach on, but it is part of the content of blessing promised to those who read and keep the prophecies of this book (1:3).

I grew up on the Great Plains of Montana, and during the summer months we often experienced sudden thunderstorms. Often before the storm there would be strange calm, a sense of foreboding in the air. One could almost feel the violent storm that was about to break. This is what we experience frequently in today's world. There is a keen sense of an approaching crisis in the affairs of earth. Many secular writers of our day reflect this. To change the metaphor, it is as if we are floating down the stream of time and we sense that a great cataract is thundering ahead and we are about to plunge over the abyss.

The Bible has long predicted a crisis of that nature. One of the proofs that the Bible is from God is the fact that in the Old Testament the book of Daniel corresponds closely to the book of Revelation. Daniel saw many of the same things that John records here, although Daniel lived 500 years before John wrote. In the ninth chapter of his prophecy Daniel is given a great calendar that would outline history to its final days. There was marked out a period of 70 "weeks," which means weeks of years. Seventy "weeks" times seven years is 490, so there would be 490 years that were to be fulfilled from the beginning of the building of the wall of Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah, to the end of the age. 483 of those years would end on the day when the Messiah would be presented to Israel as her King. Sir Robert Anderson, head of Scotland

Yard in Britain during the first part of this century, has carefully worked this out for us. On the precise day when 483 years had run their course, Jesus rode down the Mount of Olives on a donkey and was presented to the nation as their King.

Just a few days later he was rejected and crucified, for the prophecy of Daniel had said that Messiah would be "cut off and have nothing," which is surely a reference to the crucifixion. After that there is an indeterminate, long-running period of time during which the prophet was told "wars and desolations were determined," {cf, Dan 9:26 KJV}.

It is during that indeterminate length of time that the church comes into being, starting on the Day of Pentecost when God began to call out a special people for his name, made up of both Jews and Gentiles. That church began almost 2,000 years ago, and perhaps is almost completed now, but it is still on earth today.

The prophet is then told of certain other events that were to occur during the last seven years of that 490-year period. Those events have not yet happened! Many commentators have thus understood that this seven-year period is still unfulfilled and when it begins it will be largely and closely associated with the nation Israel.

Those seven years are referred to by Jesus himself in his great prophetic passage in Matthew 24. Before his crucifixion, as he sat on the Mount of Olives, he explained to the disciples what must come to pass. In that passage he refers several times to "the end of the age," or more simply, "the end." That end is the seven-year period of Daniel's prophecy that will run its course when Israel is once again brought into prominence among the nations.

It is that same period of seven years, which Revelation 6 through 19 covers, we are looking at the events to occur in that period. The four Gospels tell the story of the life of Christ, but one-third of the gospels focus upon the last week of our Lord, the seven days before the crucifixion. So also in Revelation, 13 out of the 22 chapters of this book relate to the seven-year period of time which constitutes the end of the history of this age.

If you have read ahead a little in Revelation you will have noticed three series of events that occupy this last week of years. The first series is the seven seals, six of which we will look at today. Included in the seals are seven trumpets that must yet sound, and seven bowls of wrath which are to be poured out upon the earth. Each of these series divides into four things and then three things: Four events that are outward, visible and easy to recognize, and then three revelations of what is going on behind the scenes, as it were, by the activity of angelic agencies, both for good and evil.

Now let us look at the opening of the seven-sealed scroll which is held in the hands of the Lamb who was slain. John describes it in Verses 1-2:

**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!" 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 6:1-2 RSV}**

There is much dispute as to what this rider on the white horse represents. Some identify him as Jesus, because in Chapter 19 Jesus appears on a white horse, wearing a crown (a different kind of crown, however) and bringing to an end all the terrible series of judgments that have come upon the earth. But it is a mistake to identify these two because the context is entirely different. Here we are looking at the beginning of the judgments of God, and in Chapter 19 we see the end of them. The rider of Chapter 6 is summoned by one of the living creatures, but it would be unthinkable for a creature to summon the conquering Christ of Chapter 19.

But it is significant that this rider on the white horse here bears some resemblance to the appearance of Jesus on a great white horse in Chapter 19. They both ride a white horse; they both wear crowns; and

both are bent on conquest. It suggests that this rider is someone who is like Christ, but is not Christ.

Many of you are already anticipating what I am going to say: This is doubtless the long predicted antichrist, whom Scripture speaks of in various places, who is yet to appear in the last days. The "Man of Sin" {2 Th 2:3 KJV} the Apostle Paul calls him, also "the Lawless One" {2 Th 2:8 NIV} who is yet to appear and offer himself as though he were God's Christ. Jesus himself said to the Jews of his day, "I have come in my Father's name and you do not accept me, but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him," (John 5:43 {NIV}). This rider comes like Christ, but in his own name.

He is given a bow, but no mention is made of arrows. This appears to be a bloodless conquest he launches. When you ask, "What is this describing?" I think it is clear that it suggests some kind of overpowering of the minds and wills of men, without physical destruction. How is that done? The answer is -- by some form of deceit, by lying that misleads and deceives men and thus overcomes them without the shedding of blood. It is noteworthy that in Matthew 24, the first word Jesus speaks to his disciples is, "Watch out that no one deceives you," {Matt 24:4 NIV}. You will find references to the possibility of deception throughout that chapter.

We are bemused by delusions today. We are hardly aware of how much we are being deceived all the time. Turn on the television and fraudulent ideas, along with a mixture of truth, are immediately poured into your brain. Pick up a magazine or read a newspaper and you will find they make false claims that certain acquisitions will produce great blessing and liberty for you. But trying them will soon tell you that it is a lie. They do not work. We are constantly offered much of promise but which are totally unable to deliver.

- Drugs deceive! Millions of people, young and old, are being deceived by the flush of euphoria that a drug produces for a time.
- Cigarettes deceive! Thousands have died because they have felt that smoking a cigarette makes them feel sophisticated and mature. Many young people, especially, have been led into that trap.
- Perfume ads deceive! They offer outlandish,

extravagant promises of rapture and romance that will follow if you merely douse yourself with something from a bottle.

- The New Age deceives! This week I thumbed through a magazine produced by New Age and found it filled from cover to cover with lies. It claims that men and women have secret powers, hidden abilities within, which if you discover them will enable you to rule people, to manipulate them and run the world to suit yourself. These ideas are constantly being fed into the human mind.
- We have even learned this week that Oat Bran does not work like its cracked up to be! We have all been fed a line on that! It is no better at lowering cholesterol than anything else.

We are obviously living in a very deceitful age.

What this rider on the white horse tells us, however, is that the worst is yet to come. We are living amidst great deceit, it is true, but it is not as bad as it is going to be. There is coming an even greater lie. Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul in his second Thessalonian letter:

**The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. {2 Th 2:9-12 NIV}**

That makes it crystal clear, does it not? This first conquest by evil in the last days is set in motion when God takes off the reins and lets deceit have its way among men until it reaches a climax of delusion. We will learn many more details of that as the book proceeds.

Now the second seal is opened:

**When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" 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 6:3-4 NIV}**

This rider is easy to recognize. It is war, of course, but not war between great armies -- at least not at first. The word for *slay* is really the word "slaughter." It is a reference to civil war or civil anarchy where mobs of people group together to attack and destroy other peoples whom they do not like. We are seeing a demonstration of this today in what is going on in Azerbaijan at this very time. Even the Soviet army is unable to bring peace or to prevent this slaughter. We have had further examples of it in El Salvador, in Nicaragua, and in the gang wars raging in the streets of Los Angeles, Miami, New York City, and other places. It is a murderous slaying of others by people unrestrained by any control.

But that will lead to what is mentioned in the last sentence, "to him was given a large sword." In the days when John wrote they obviously did not have megabombs, missiles, tanks, or any of the modern weapons of warfare. Such weapons of destruction had to be put in terms that people would understand in that day, so the major weapon of destruction then was a sword. But this is a "great" sword, a powerful weapon of destruction. It is with good reason that many commentators have seen this as a picture of the awesome power of a nuclear bomb, something that destroys enormous numbers of people. If you read the 38th and 39th chapters of Ezekiel you will find a vivid description of such warfare, where armies come down out of the north into the Holy Land and are decimated by what appears to be radiation sickness. It is powerfully portrayed for us in those accounts.

Then we have the third seal opened, in verses 5 and 6:

**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. 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 6:5-6 NIV}**

Most scholars take this to be a reference to widespread famine on the earth. They say that the scales symbolize food being weighed out carefully. It is in such short supply that it must be rationed. Even then no one can get very much because it

takes a day's wages to earn a single quart of wheat or, because it is cheaper, three quarts of barley. This would only be enough food for one person for a day. You would work all day long and all you would be able to earn at best would be enough for your own physical needs. There would be nothing for your family or for anyone else. But the luxuries, the oil and the wine, are left untouched.

But perhaps this is not referring to famine because in the next seal, as we will see, famine is specifically mentioned as part of that judgment. What else causes terrible shortages and creates high prices so that people cannot buy adequate amounts of food? It is inflation; economics out of control; panic in the marketplace! During the days of the Weimar Republic in Germany after World War I, I remember as a boy hearing accounts of people taking ten thousand German marks bills, loading them into wheelbarrows, and taking them to market to buy a single loaf of bread. That is what runaway inflation does. It makes money worthless. That in turn becomes an excuse for the rigid controls over buying and selling which we find in Chapter 13 when, under the reign of antichrist, the whole world is subjected to enormously restrictive controls so that "no one can buy or sell without the mark of the beast," {cf, Rev 13:17}.

That brings us to the fourth seal, in Verse 7:

**When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! [The word actually is chloros, from which we get the word chlorine, a pale green horse, like chlorine in color.] 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 6:7-8 NIV}**

This rider is named "Death"; and floating along behind, was a figure that is identified as "Hades," or Hell. Death takes the body and Hades takes the soul. As someone has put it, "Death rides the horse, but Hades follows with the hearse." There are four forms of death that are related to this attack.

First, the sword, which here is not war but murder; individual assault upon one another. It is people taking the law into their own hands and murdering other people without regard to justice or law.

With murder comes famine and widespread starvation. We are all familiar with the terrible pictures of famine areas, largely in Africa, and the swollen, distended bellies of little children with spindly legs as the flesh of their bodies disappears and they die a terrible death from starvation. Jesus spoke of such famines in Matthew 24. There would be on earth, he said, earthquakes, famines and plagues. These plagues are endemic diseases. When civilization begins to crumble, the defenses of mankind against diseases are lost as well. Whole populations are decimated by such plagues. There may be a reference here to biological warfare, the willful spreading of diseases among people so that they are wiped out en masse. It covers also the appearance of previously unknown diseases. We have a foreshadowing of these in the terrible plague of AIDS in our own day.

Fourth, the wild beasts of the earth multiply, and humans are subject to attack by these predators. The account says that a "fourth of the earth" is given over to the four attacks. It is difficult to know whether that is a geographic or demologic division of earth. If it is geographic, then a fourth of the globe is decimated by these terrible plagues. If it is demologic, it means a fourth of the population is taken. There are approximately four billion people on earth today and that would mean that one billion people, equivalent to the entire population of China, would be decimated by diseases. It is a picture of a desolated earth caused by man's hatred and barbarity.

These four seal-judgments are all references to forces that are already at work among us, but they will be carried to an unprecedented extreme in that day. Thus these four seals confirm God's announced method of making men face up to truth. How does he make us stop hiding our heads and refusing to face reality? By allowing evil to have its full head! Romans 1 declares that he "delivers men over" {cf, Rom 1:24, 1:26, 1:28} to their own passions, their own evil, and allows it unrestricted manifestation. God teaches us to face up to unpleasant truth by giving us what we demand. If men want to believe a lie, then God will send the lie, the lie of the antichrist, the powerful delusion that Paul describes. If men seek to kill and destroy and refuse to see the evil of that, then God gives them widespread anarchy,

mob rule, and, ultimately, nuclear destruction. If men want more and more luxury and higher standards of living, they are given what goes along with it -- high inflation, which finally makes money worthless. If men demand power and control, what they are given is intrigue, murder, disease, and desolation in the earth. These cannot be stopped, because they are inescapable consequences of the evil of mankind.

We have three more seals to look at in the series, although only two of them appear in this chapter. In these two, no longer are natural forces allowed to have their head, but here is something quite different. We are shown supernatural activities; God working in the midst of the judgments of the four horsemen, both for good and evil. So we read of the opening of the fifth seal,

**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. 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?" 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 6:9-11 NIV}**

This is a difficult paragraph to understand because it is dealing with a phenomenon hard for us to grasp, i.e., how people can die over the course of a period of time and yet all arrive in heaven together. It marks the difference between time and eternity. The altar mentioned here has not appeared in this book before this. But it indicates, as will be confirmed by later references in this book, that we are viewing the great temple in heaven, the temple which Moses saw when he was on Mt. Sinai. He was shown a pattern which he was to copy in the tabernacle of old. He was ordered to copy it exactly as it was shown him. Thus the tabernacle contained a great brazen altar, and a laver in the outer court, a Holy Place with certain furniture, and a Holy of Holies, all reflecting the heavenly temple that Moses had seen.

We learn from other Scriptures that these symbolize the ultimate dwelling place of God which is man himself! Man is the dwelling place of God. When we come to the end of Revelation

we will see that fulfilled. It is man who becomes the temple of God. These symbols are given to us as a tremendously significant explanation of the psychological makeup of our humanity -- body, soul and spirit -- just as the tabernacle consisted of an Outer Court, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies. (*I do not have time to dwell on that.*)

This group of martyrs is clearly identified with the great multitude in Chapter 7, which we will look at next week. John sees a great crowd which no man could number, from every tribe, nation, and language of earth, standing before the throne, all having been killed for their testimony. This group belongs to that multitude as well, for they are given a white robe and told to wait until their brethren would also be killed. This indicates that these martyrs and those killed later who make up the great multitude, all enter heaven at the same time. It is God's way of expressing the transference from time into the conditions of eternity, where past and future are eclipsed and only the present exists.

If you have had loved ones who have died in the past -- perhaps your father, mother, grandfather, or some godly friend that you know belongs to the Lord -- you tend to think of them now as waiting in heaven for you. You may think of them as sitting around playing harps, dressed in heavenly bathrobes, waiting for their bodies to be resurrected, and for you to join them in heaven. But all that is an accommodation of eternity to time conditions. We are locked into the idea that heaven is an eternal continuation of the conditions of earth; that future and past are as much to be experienced in heaven as they are on earth. But that is not so. Eternity is always now! In eternity events occur when people are ready for them, not in a certain prescribed sequence. I do not have time to enlarge on that but if you want more on this I would refer you to my book *Authentic Christianity*, where I have a chapter on "Time and Eternity" that will explain this at greater length.

But notice the prayer these martyrs pray. It is a call for vengeance. That is quite different from the prayer Christians are expected to pray for their enemies, is it not? Jesus told us that we are to pray for those that spitefully use us and persecute us, and our prayer is to reflect the prayer that he

prayed on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," {Luke 23:34 KJV}. When Stephen, the first martyr, saw the Lord as he was being stoned, he said to him, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," {cf, Acts 7:60}.

He is asking that his murderers be forgiven for they do not know what they are doing. That is to be the prayer of believers today for those who persecute them or take unfair advantage of them.

Last week I heard on the radio a very interesting interview with Rachel Saint, the sister of Nate Saint, one of the five men martyred in Ecuador in 1956 as they attempted to communicate with the Auca Indians. Later Rachel Saint and her companions went back to that tribe and lived among these killers. They served them, and loved them, and taught the gospel to them until they won to Christ the very man who had killed Rachel's brother. The interviewer asked her, "Why did you go back into this tribe?" She said, "Because in the Indian culture they lived for vengeance, but as a Christian, I knew that forgiveness is our message for those who injure us." Most of that tribe became Christians through the faithful ministry of these women. Someone told me today, however, that young people are leaving the tribe, and are caught up with the lies of the world around, and many of them are thus losing their Christian heritage.

But these martyrs under the fifth seal are not living in days when God patiently endures the injustices of men. These are days of judgment; days when wrong doers are being called to account, the time of vengeance. The prayers, then, of God's people reflect the mind of God at that time. Led of the Spirit, they pray for what God intends to do during the last days.

Now we come to the sixth seal.

**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, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. {Rev 6:12-14 NIV}**

It is a vivid description of chaos in nature! The whole natural world goes on a rampage. Again,

in Matthew 24 Jesus describes this same event, in Verses 29-30:

**"Immediately after the distress of those days [He is talking about the great tribulation],  
'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.'**

**"At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory." {Matt 24:29-30 NIV}**

These six seals have carried us almost to the very end of the whole seven-year period. We have been swiftly moving through this dramatic period. After the great tribulation, nature will be upset by some cosmic phenomenon. Perhaps it is the approach of an undetected heavenly body that will upset the gravity of the earth. Volcanoes will begin to spout lava; great earthquakes, much larger than the one we just experienced, will rumble through the earth; the stars will appear to be falling from the sky; the darkening of the sun and the moon will result from the ashes and dust caused by these phenomena.

Listen also to Luke, in Chapter 21 of his Gospel, as he describes this same event:

**"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." {Luke 21:25-27 NIV}**

It will be a time of terror and anguish throughout the earth. What will be the effect of this on the people? John now sees the final scene under the sixth seal.

**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. 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! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" {Rev 6:15-17 NIV}**

Who can stand? That is the question left hanging in the air.

Of course, no one can stand. It is the end of civilization as we know it. All people who have not yet believed in Christ, who have refused his offer of grace, are the subjects of this terrible catastrophe and cry out in desperate fear. It is clearly the scene described in Isaiah 2, when “men shall go into the clefts of the rocks and cry for them to fall upon them,” {Isa 2:21 KJV}. Also, in Isaiah 26:10, the prophet says,

**Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and regard not the majesty of the Lord. {Isa 26:10 NIV}**

In that day, those who refuse to believe have reached a stage where they cannot believe. They do not repent and pray to the Lord for salvation. Rather, they feel a terrible fear and pray to the rocks to destroy them. They will manifest openly and publicly what they feel privately and secretly today. It is a strange phenomenon, but it is easily confirmed, that every unbeliever is convinced in his own heart that death is somehow an escape into oblivion! Somehow they think they can escape the terrible consequences of their evil by dying. That is why people commit suicide. They believe they are escaping their problems, that there will be no consequences beyond death. But the Word of God assures us this is not true: “It is appointed unto man once to die and after this the judgment,” {Heb 9:27 KJV}.

Why are we told these terrible truths? If we belong to the Lord now and are members of his body, the true church, we will not be a part of this scene. This is the great promise we have heard several times in Revelation up to this point. This whole terrible scene is specifically sent to the seven churches of Asia to read and understand.

Why?

It is not only to make us earnest in our witness; it is also intended to show us where the forces and movements which surround us at the moment are going to end up. We are told this so we can recognize evil while it still looks good, and thus be able to judge what to give ourselves to and what to reject.

One verse in John’s Gospel, Chapter 3, Verse 36, tells us the whole story:

**“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” {John 3:36 NIV}**

Isaiah puts his finger on the reason for these judgments. It is, he says, that “the pride of men shall be humbled,” {Isa 2:17 NIV}. The pride of man -- this terrible lust within us to be in charge, to be in control of our lives and of other people’s lives, to run everything, to be the center of our own little universe and to judge everything as to whether it pleases us or displeases us; that is the pride of man. Grace can humble it. The sight of God’s Son dying in our place ought to make us see the evil of our hearts. But, if grace does not humble us, ultimately judgment must.

Here we must leave this.

I do not like preaching on these passages. I much prefer the wonderful views of the throne of God in heaven, with the angels singing around the throne the song of the redeemed. But if we are faithful to the Scriptures we must recognize that there is coming a day when the wrath of God must be poured out upon the unrighteousness of men and it is to that day we have come.

Let us be sure that there is in none of us an evil heart of unbelief.

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# LESSON 6B

## TO JEW AND GENTILE

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BY RAY C. STEDMAN

Everyone knows that the tiny nation of Israel, with a population of less than four million people, nevertheless receives enormous attention in the world's media, far beyond what its size would warrant. The only explanation for that extraordinary fact is that it indicates the central place that Israel has in the program of God. God will not let the world forget Israel!

In the Old Testament, of course, Israel is always center stage. Everything centers around this nation. God has recorded the history of the world only as it relates to Israel, the nation that came from the loins of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Even when you come to the Gospels in the New Testament, Israel is still the focus of attention. Jesus insisted that "salvation is of the Jews," {John 4:22 KJV}. He corrected people when they misunderstood that principle. He sent his twelve disciples out and told them, "Go not to the Gentiles, but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," {Matt 10:6, 15:24 KJV}. Even in the epistles of the New Testament, primarily written to the church, nevertheless the Apostle Paul in his great masterpiece, the letter to the Romans, devotes three chapters to Israel. He points out in Chapter 9 how God has dealt with them in the past, in Chapter 10 he states the present condition of Israel, existing in unbelief among the nations of the world, and in Chapter 11 he clearly foretells the time when God will restore Israel again to prominence among the nations of earth. God has a great future yet for the Israelis.

I find it very strange that many commentators on the book of Revelation and other passages of Scripture virtually ignore this remarkable future that God has predicted for his ancient people. Although

God has saved these commentators by sheer grace, yet they refuse to believe that he will yet show equal grace to Israel. But God declares plainly that is what he intends to do. How he will do it is made known in Revelation 7. That is where we have come today.

The next prophetic event that the world will experience is the rapture of the church, the departure of dead and living saints, all born-again people, to be with the Lord. It is described in detail by the Apostle Paul in First Thessalonians 4. It is a stunning event wherein God suddenly removes from the earth a great host of people. You can imagine what an effect that will have on those left. That is how the long-predicted "last days" starts. After that, God begins a program of judgment in which Israel is at the center.

During our study of Revelation 6 last week, we were all glued to our chairs as we watched the unrolling of the seven-sealed scroll held in the hands of "the Lamb who had been slain," {cf, Rev 5:6, 6:1-17}. We saw the four terrible horsemen ride out through the earth, leaving devastation and terror in their wake. Then we were shown the slaughter of thousands of martyrs who lost their lives in a great bloodbath during this terrible time of judgment to come. Finally, we read the description of the great upheaval in nature that will take place in the last days, when every mountain and rock is moved and shaken, and the people of the earth cry out, "Fall on us and hide us from the wrath of Him who sits upon the throne," {Rev 6:16a NIV}

To many who read that, it seems like an unwelcome pronouncement of doom and gloom, but we must remember that, all through the Bible,

it is part of God's announced program for the end times. It leads beyond the darkness and despair to a time of great peace, victory, and blessing upon the earth. Christians are not pessimists -- they are optimists -- but they recognize the reality of a time of judgment to come.

We have now seen six of the seven seals opened, but before the seventh seal is opened God, as it were, declares an intermission. We are ready for it after the judgments of Chapter 6, are we not? It is hard to listen to those terrible scenes. But in a beautiful interlude here in Chapter 7, which is in the nature of a flashback, God shows us something else that takes place during this period of time.

Sometimes a movie will flashback to the central character's childhood and depict an event that has significance for the film story. That is the kind of thing we have in Chapter 7.

We are taken back to the beginning of the judgments of this last seven-year period to see another aspect of God's working during this time. What we will see is the selection of a special group of Jews whom I would call "Christ's Commandos," to operate in an uncommon way during those days.

This is introduced to us in Verses 1-3: John says,

**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. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east [literally, "the sun rising"], 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: "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." {Rev 7:1-3 NIV}**

We are told in the opening chapter of Revelation that much of it will be made known to us by symbols. The book is an unusual blending of literal and symbolic things and events. There are certain symbols here in the opening of this chapter.

The "four corners of the earth," for instance, stand for the four cardinal directions. Skeptics laugh at the phrase "four corners" and say the early Christians believed the earth was square and literally

had four corners. Yet today people frequently use the expression "the four corners of the earth" as a figure of speech to indicate far-off regions. But here it means the four directions, north, south, east and west.

Here four angels are seen withholding something that is about to come upon the whole earth. What is it that they are restraining? They are told to hold back the four winds that are about to blow upon the earth. Winds are a symbol of devastating and destroying power. The TV pictures of the terrible devastation left behind by Hurricane Hugo when it blew across the southern states of the East Coast recently leave us in no doubt how apt it is to use wind as a symbol of judgment. The same destructive power is seen in one of these whirling dervishes, called tornadoes. Here, then, is a picture of terrible judgment that is about to fall on the earth, a devastating power or force that is to be released soon.

The land, the sea, and the trees are also used as symbols here. The land or the earth, is used frequently as a symbol for Israel throughout the Old Testament. Israel is viewed as a nation with stability because it had God as its head. It had structure, order, and foundation, and so it was depicted as "land." But the sea is used many places in Scripture to describe the Gentile nations (pagan nations, by and large), which had no inner stability because there was no recognition of the authority of God. They worshipped idols and held to pagan concepts which rendered them unstable and uncertain in their conduct of human affairs. Individuals are described in several places in Scripture as "trees." The very first Psalm, speaking of the righteous, says, "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of waters, that brings forth its fruit in its season," {cf, Psa 1:3a KJV}. Trees are symbols of influential men and women, people of authority, who stand out from the crowd like tall trees in a forest.

These four angels are identifiable as the first four of the seven angels that will blow their trumpets in succeeding chapters. If one carefully compares what happens under the judgments of the seven angels you will see that the first four affect the land, the sea and the trees. At this point they are told to hold back until a very important group of individuals are sealed by God.

The great angel that seals them is linked here with the rising of the sun. That is an allusion to the prophecy of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament. The prophet predicts that “the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings,” {Mal 4:2}. That is a poetic description of the coming of Christ in great glory and power. So, it is in relationship to that coming that this special group are marked with the seal of God’s ownership.

We do not have to guess at what the seal of God is, because believers today are also sealed by God. Paul tells us in the letter to the Ephesians, “You were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise,” {cf, Eph 4:30}. The presence of the Spirit of God in every individual Christian is the unmistakable mark of God’s ownership. Paul declares in Chapter 8 of Romans, “His Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God,” {cf, Rom 8:16 KJV}. The Holy Spirit himself, then, is the seal of God.

This indicates that this group which is to be sealed are Spirit-filled individuals. The seal is placed upon their forehead which indicates the Spirit is especially related to their minds. It means that in some evident sense they are governed by “the mind of Christ.” In Chapter 2 of Philippians the Apostle Paul writes, “Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus,” {cf, Phil 2:5 KJV}. He describes it as the mind of one who, though possessing inherent glory and dignity, is willing to lay it aside and become a servant. That is the mind of Christ. Notice that these people are specifically called the “servants of our God.” They serve with that same wonderful willingness to give up themselves for the sake and benefit of others.

We are told exactly who these are in Verses 4-8:

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

**From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,  
from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,  
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,  
from the tribe of Asher 12,000,  
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,  
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,  
from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,  
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,**

**from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,  
from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,  
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,  
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000. {Rev 7:4-8  
NIV}**

I have deliberately read the names of each of the tribes because I want to emphasize what the text emphasizes: It is Israel and only Israel that is in view!

I recently listened to a commentator on Revelation, teaching on the radio here in the Bay Area, who labored with diligent effort to prove that these people were the church, but when God says Israel he means Israel; he does not mean the church. He is talking about Jews. Teachers who twist Scripture like that man did can convince others that black is white, sugar is sour, and Adolph Hitler was one of the great saints of all time! There is much such twisting of Scripture going on, but if one stays with the simplicity of the Scripture itself, all is clear.

These are, then, the well-known 144,000 Jews of the last days.

In their earlier days, the group known as Jehovah’s Witnesses claimed they constituted this select band. They misappropriated this Scripture and applied it to themselves, though they are not Jews and never were. They ran into difficulty, however, when the group grew beyond 144,000. They did not know what to do with the leftovers, so they started another category of 144,000. They taught there was an earthly band of 144,000 and a heavenly band, and if you believed their doctrines in the early decades of this century you could belong to the heavenly band. But now, again, they have a problem because they number more than 288,000 today, so they have created still a third band called “the servant band.” If you join the Jehovah’s Witnesses today you must come in at the servant level. That is just one example of the many ways people can twist Scripture to make it fit a program of their own devising. But God clearly identifies these people for us here.

You may have noticed that two of the tribes of Israel, that of Ephraim and of Dan, are not mentioned here. Though Ephraim is not named, his brother-tribe, Manasseh is included. Ephraim

and Manasseh were the two sons of Joseph, the next to the youngest of Jacob's sons. Because of Joseph's role in the history of Israel, and his preservation of the nation in Egypt during the days of famine, his two sons were adopted by Jacob to be given an inheritance with the rest of Joseph's brothers. That really makes thirteen tribes of Israel. When they came to divide up the land Levi was left out because he was called to be the priestly tribe. Ephraim actually does appear here under the name "Joseph." So Manasseh and Joseph are really Manasseh and Ephraim.

But what about Dan? The tribe of Dan is not included here, I believe, because they are the tribe that introduced apostasy into Israel. The closing chapters of Judges give an account of the sordid way the tribe of Dan led Israel into terrible apostasy, involving homosexuality and idol worship in its grossest forms. This was in line with Jacob's prediction concerning Dan. In the 49th chapter of Genesis Jacob predicts the future of his twelve sons and he says, "Dan will be a serpent by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse's heel so that its rider tumbles backward," {Gen 49:17 NIV}. It is a poetic portrayal of the treachery of Dan in introducing apostasy. In the millennium, however, Ezekiel tells us that Dan has a portion in the distribution of the land in that day.

There is a statement of Jesus in the 24th chapter of Matthew, which relates to these 144,000 Jews, and is often misunderstood and misapplied, in my judgment. In unfolding the events of the future, Jesus had said, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached to the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come," {cf, Matt 24:14 NIV}. The gospel is always the same in every age. It is the story of God sending a Savior to die for the sins of men. Whether it is told by means of symbol, such as the sacrifice of animals, or by the ritual of the tabernacle, or whether it is the historic announcement of the Lord himself and the disciples in the early days of the church, the gospel is always the same. It is the death of a Savior on behalf of sinners. That is the good news. There is no other.

But when one adds the phrase "of the kingdom," then it is a reference to that gospel applied in a specific relationship. John the Baptist and Jesus

both preached "the gospel of the kingdom" to Israel. They announced that the messianic kingdom, long predicted by the prophets, was at hand because the King was in their midst. Jesus announces that he is a King, not the kind the Jews expected -- a conqueror who would deliver them from the Romans -- but that his kingdom would deal with sin and the terrible evil of man. It must begin on that note. But he was their long-expected King. He deliberately fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah, "Behold, your king comes unto you, meek and lowly and riding upon an ass and upon a colt, the foal of an ass," {cf, Zech 9:9 KJV}. That was fulfilled on the day we call "the triumphal entry," when Jesus rode a donkey down the side of the Mount of Olives and was greeted by the people as the promised King of the Jews.

This group of 144,000 select men from Israel, will fulfill the word of Jesus that this "gospel of the kingdom" will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the final judgments of God will come. This group proclaims the gospel during that seven-year period that we call "the last days" of this age. It is a band of Spirit-filled Jews, converted after the church has been taken out of the world. Like 144,000 Apostle Paul's, they preach the gospel throughout the earth during the judgments of the end times.

There is a most extraordinary passage in the 10th chapter of Matthew which confirms this concept. It describes the Lord sending out his disciples to preach the gospel to Israel in the days of his flesh.

**These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions, "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give." {Matt 10:5-8 NIV}**

Then Jesus goes on to give further instructions in that ministry of the twelve, and warns them that they will not be welcome in every place. But when we come to Verse 21 he apparently skips over the centuries to these last days when the gospel will be preached to Israel again:

**"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men**

**will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”**  
{Matt 10:21-23 NIV}

There is no record of Jesus coming to the twelve when he sent them out to minister to Israel. Rather they came back to him and reported on what they had been doing. Our Lord seems to leap over the whole of the present age to the day when a group of Jews (not twelve but twelve squared, times the cube of ten -- 144,000), will be sent out into all the world. He says to them, “You will not even have finished preaching through all of Israel until the Son of Man comes.” It seems to be clearly his prediction of this ministry of the 144,000. We will meet them again in Revelation 14, ministering under the direction of the Lamb himself, but on earth, and beginning with Israel. What is the result of their preaching? We are told in Revelation 7:9-14:

**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. And they cried out in a loud voice:**

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

**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, saying:**

*“Amen!*

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

*Amen!”*

**Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes -- who are they, and where did they come from?”**

**I answered, “Sir, you know,”** *[By now John has learned that these elders are party to the mind of God; they know what God is planning.]* 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.”  
{Rev 7:9-14 NIV}

Because John is in heaven he sees these things from an eternal point of view, and, as we have seen before, there is no sequence or time limitations, no past or future in heaven. From our standpoint of time, John sees things that are happening at the close of the seven-year week. He sees ahead, as it were, to the end of the seven years, and sees this great multitude that have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, and they have palm branches in their hands.

When did we last find a crowd of people with palm branches in their hands, welcoming Jesus as a King? It was, of course, when he rode down the mountainside into Jerusalem. The prophet is linking that event with this. Then, Israel had the opportunity to receive their King, but the leaders of the nation rejected him. At this event, in the end times, they are welcoming and worshipping their King, still with palm branches in their hands. So this great multitude of Jews and Gentiles is particularly associated with the restoration of Israel.

These are all martyrs. They have died for the sake of Christ during the tribulation, and they now appear before the throne of God as victors over death and hell, and join the worship of angels around the throne.

Is it not wonderful to think that, in earth's darkest hour, yet to come, the greatest harvest the world has ever seen will take place? Millions of those who have never heard the gospel today will be saved. I do not think there is any possibility that those today who hear and reject the gospel will be any part of this number. It is a harvest of those who have never heard.

During these terrible days of judgment, when the witches of war ride their nuclear brooms across the darkening skies of the world's last night, thousands who have never heard before will hear the gospel of the coming kingdom of God announced, and will turn to Christ. It will cost them their lives. As we read on in Revelation we will see that the anti-Christian powers of that day, powerful and tyrannical, will massacre anyone who does not bear “the mark of the beast.” These believers must give up their lives because of their testimony for God. We will meet them again when we come to Chapter 20. There we

are told that those “who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God” {Rev 20:1 NIV} will be raised from the dead to serve the Lord throughout the thousand-year reign of Christ. It is the same multitude as here. John sees them in heaven at this point, but they are given a spiritual ministry on earth during the thousand-year reign of Christ.

That is suggested in the closing description of their ministry, beginning with Verse 15:

**Therefore,**

**“they are before the throne of God  
and serve him day and night in his temple;  
and he who sits on the throne will spread his  
tent over them.  
Never again will they hunger;  
never again will they thirst.  
The sun will not beat upon them,  
nor any scorching heat.  
For the Lamb at the center of the throne will  
be their shepherd;  
he will lead them to springs of living water.  
And God will wipe away every tear from  
their eyes.” {Rev 7:15-17 NIV}**

Notice the throne and the temple. In fact, there are two thrones in this passage. There is, first, the “throne of God,” which is the throne of the Father, reigning over all the universe, as we have seen throughout this book thus far. But the second mention of the throne, “He who sits on the throne,” is a reference to the throne of Jesus on earth. Remember that in 3:21, in the letter to the Laodicean church, Jesus said, “He who overcomes I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.” This is “the throne of his father, David,” which was promised in the annunciation to Mary, recorded in Luke 1:32.

The fact that a temple is mentioned here, is, I believe, a reference to the millennial temple which is yet to be built in Jerusalem; the one which Ezekiel describes in the closing chapters of his great prophecy. It will be the place where the nations come to worship in the days when Christ rules over the earth. There is a beautiful description of it in the prophecy of Micah 4:1-6: There the prophet describes the government of God as centered in Jerusalem; justice will flow out from there to all the

earth; the nations will bring their tribute; and men shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and will make war no more. Peace will come at last over all the earth.

Here we are told that “they serve the Lord day and night.” There is no day or night in heaven. This is clearly an earthly scene. He who sits on the throne (the throne of David), will spread his “tabernacle” (literally), over them and never again will they hunger or thirst, etc. It is a beautiful description of the blessings of that millennial day. Many other passages in the prophets also describe it.

This is the fulfillment of the dream of the prophets of the past. Israel shall blossom as the rose and shall fill the earth with blessing. The nation will be like a beautiful, fruitful, vine that runs its branches throughout the earth and blesses the nations, just as Abraham had been promised, “All nations shall be blessed because of you,” {cf, Gen 22:18}. Associated with them will be thousands of Gentiles who likewise serve the Lord day and night in relationship to the temple, ministering throughout the whole earth. You can read of that in the prophecy of Isaiah, Chapter 66, Verses 20-21.

All alike, Jews and Gentiles, are under the care of the Great Shepherd of the sheep. Christians are grateful for the shepherd care of Jesus to us now. He is the Great Shepherd of the sheep, but he has more than one flock. On one occasion he said to his disciples, “Other sheep have I that are not of this fold. Them also must I bring that there will be one flock and one Shepherd,” {cf, John 10:16 KJV}. That is what we see here. He is bringing another group, saved by his blood -- “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” -- but with an earthly ministry, yet he leads them also to refreshment and blessing, with every tear of sorrow wiped away.

There is a great hymn we often sing, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” that reflects the concern of the church for her sister people Israel. Paul’s word of promise about Israel will be fulfilled, “All Israel shall be saved” {Rom 11:26 NIV}, i.e., all the generation that are on earth when Jesus returns shall be redeemed. Zechariah gives us a vivid picture of it. The church today ought to know this truth and understand the future God has for his people Israel.

We should often sing,

*O come, O come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here,  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel!*

Title: To Jew and Gentile

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# LESSON 6C

## ANGELS OF DOOM

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BY RAY C. STEDMAN

In our studies in the book of Revelation we have been following the unrolling of the seven-sealed scroll which the Lamb of God won the right to open by his death upon the cross. The title of that scroll is “The Mystery of God,” and when we come to Chapter 10 we will read that that mystery -- exactly how God is going to bring about universal peace and joy to a sinful, angry, and murderous world -- is completed.

God is doing that very thing with individuals even today. Many of you here have experienced the peace and joy which God gave you in the midst of the struggles and trials of your life. He does that by grace, by the offer of total forgiveness of sin. But to a world that rejects grace, God can only bring peace through judgment. That is what we are seeing in this book. Six of the seven seals have already been opened when we come to Chapter 8, and we have watched the waves of successive judgments roll across the earth. We learn from the prophet Daniel that these cover a seven-year period in the last days of this age. Under the seals, it is covered from one point of view, i.e., what happens when man is allowed to have his own way. All God does is to take away the restraints and let human evil find wider expression. It is limited slightly (to a fourth of the earth), but it finds far greater expression than it does today.

That brings us then to the seventh seal which is now opened to us, in Chapter 8:

**When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.**

**And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.**  
{Rev 8:1-2 NIV}

It must indeed have been an embittered and chauvinistic commentator who first suggested that this half an hour silence proves there will be no women in heaven!

That, of course, is not the reason for it. This word about silence reminds us of the prophet Habakkuk's cry, “The Lord is in his Holy Temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” {Hab 2:20 KJV}. This silence comes as a dramatic contrast to the shouting of praise and the playing of harps that has been going on in heaven up to this point. Millions of angels, hosts of redeemed humans, and other heavenly creatures have been crying out before the throne of God, and singing praises to him. But now suddenly everything ceases. When the seventh seal is opened there is total silence. It is a most dramatic pause. It reminds one of that moment of silence just before the last great “Hallelujah!” in the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's Messiah. This is the silence of mystery, a silence of intense anticipation of what is about to happen.

Our good friend, Earl Palmer, in his commentary on Revelation says, “It communicates in a dramatic way the full and awesome authority of God. Everything must wait for his kingly move.”

That move begins, as this account tells us, with seven angels being given seven trumpets to sound. It is all part of the opening of the seventh seal. These are impressive angels indeed. We are told they are the angels “who stand before God.” That calls to mind the story in Luke 1:19 of an angel sent to Joseph to tell him that Mary will be the mother of a child. The angel identifies himself as “Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God,” {cf, Luke 1:19 NIV}.

These seven angels are probably archangels, and they are given an extremely important task in the sounding of these trumpets. They doubtless include Michael the archangel, who appears also in the book of Daniel. In fact, the apocryphal book of Enoch, an ancient book which is not part of our Bible, gives the names of all seven angels. They are Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sarakiel, Gabriel, and Phanuel. Notice, their names all end in "el," which is short for the name of God. These are "angels of God," powerful angels, who are given these trumpets to sound. Before they blow the trumpets another dramatic scene is recorded.

**Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. {Rev 8:3-5 NIV}**

Many of the expositors of Revelation identify this angel as Jesus himself. The reason is that in the Old Testament, while Israel is marching through the wilderness, they are led by a great angel called "the Angel of Yahweh," or, "the Angel of Jehovah." Most Bible scholars feel that it was an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ, i.e., the Son of God himself, leading his people through the wilderness. Since Israel is in the forefront again in this book of Revelation, then it would make sense that the Angel of the Lord appears again in connection with that nation.

The New Testament also teaches us that Jesus is a great High Priest for his people. The book of Hebrews, and a reference of Paul in Romans 8:34, tell us that Jesus is now a High Priest who "makes intercession for the saints," {Heb 3:1, et al, Rom 8:34 KJV}. This is clearly what this angel-priest is doing here. He takes fire from the brazen altar, adds to it incense, along with the prayers of the saints, and offers them on the golden altar of incense before God. It is a wonderful portrayal that tells us much about the function of prayer.

Do you ever feel that your prayers are not even heard, let alone answered? According to this, the

prayers of saints, especially intercessory prayers (those we pray for others), are like fragrance in the nostrils of God. They delight him. He smells in them a remembrance of the character of Jesus, the One who gave himself for others. As these prayers are mingled with the incense provided by the great angel himself, (who may indeed be Christ), they delight God. But, more than that, they move God to action. If burning incense is symbolic of the prayers of saints who are imploring God to act -- then returning that fire to earth is a symbol of answered prayer. In other words, we have now come to the time when God will answer the prayers of his people.

What is the result? We read, "there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake." You may remember that in 4:5 these were the first sounds that John heard coming from the throne of God in the opening scene in heaven. He heard "flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder," {Rev 4:5b NIV}. Here an earthquake is added to that as well. These sights and sounds mark the close of man's age, and the opening of God's kingdom upon earth.

In Chapter 11, at the last of the blowing of trumpets, we learn that when the seventh angel blows his trumpet the same sounds are heard and an angel proclaims that, "the kingdoms of men have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ," {cf, Rev 11:15b}. The scroll is then fully unrolled. These sounds come at the end of each of the series of seven: The seals, the trumpets, and the bowls of the wrath of God. Thus we learn here at the opening of this seventh seal, when the great Angel casts the fire of God back upon the earth, that the day has come when God answers fully the prayers of his people.

There is one prayer that the people of God in all ages have been praying that has never yet been answered. It is clear from the Scriptures that this prayer was prayed by the saints of God from the dawn of the race. Adam probably prayed it when he left the Garden of Eden. Noah undoubtedly prayed it when he came out of the ark into a new world after the flood. Abraham surely prayed it as he looked for a City yet to come. King David prayed it, and, when we come to the New Testament, all

the apostles, including Paul, prayed this prayer. It is the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," {Matt 6:10, Luke 11:2 KJV}. That prayer has never yet been answered. We have not seen God's kingdom visibly on earth. Invisibly it is present in the church and is seen in the rule of God over the affairs of men, but visibly the prayer has never been answered. But when we come to the end of these three series of judgments we will find that the prayers of men are at last to be fulfilled.

Let us come back to the seventh trumpet which probably begins what Jesus called in his Olivet Discourse, "the great tribulation." In Matthew 24 he says, "For then there shall be great distress [tribulation], unequaled from the beginning of the world until now -- and never to be equaled again," {cf, Matt 24:21 NIV}. It is the very acme of judgment.

At Revelation 8:6 we come to one of the most difficult sections of the book to interpret. There is much debate as to whether these judgments are literal, reflecting some physical judgment upon the earth, or symbolic, a picture of something else much worse. My own view is that they are both! This is how God frequently works. He pictures something invisible by means of a literal event. For instance, the sun is, of course, literal. It is a great shining star that warms our earth and keeps the whole solar system working. But it is at the same time symbolic, and is so used throughout Scripture. We refer to it in everyday life as a symbol of light, knowledge and truth. Fire, too, is literal. You can burn yourself badly with fire -- but it is also symbolic of torment, torture and judgment.

The prophecy of Joel in the Old Testament opens with a vivid description of a plague of locusts that came upon the earth and ate up every green thing. Joel describes them in dramatic and accurate terms but his description soon becomes a description of the invasion of a great army from Babylon that will soon come into the land.

Israel, throughout its history, used literal trumpets to indicate public warning of imminent action. So, through this series of seven trumpets we are hearing God's public announcement of severe judgment that is about to take place. These

judgments are not something new in history. God has often acted in judgment upon men. Even today he is speaking to us of terrible moral failures by using actual literal events.

Take, for instance, the drug scourge which is such an enormous problem in our day, especially among our youth. Drugs destroy the mind, burn out the brain, and turn people into worse than beasts and animals. What is this scourge saying? Not only is it literal, but it is symbolizing the terrible danger of self-indulgence -- the philosophy of self-fulfillment that is widely advocated in the media today. Self-indulgence, like cocaine or crack, lures us on by giving a sense of fulfillment and immediate pleasure. But the user is drawn on into a continuing orgy of self-indulgence until he finally finds himself living in the suffocating atmosphere of total self-centeredness. The drug scourge is the visual aid that God has given our generation to make us see what is happening to us at the root of our being. How blind we are to it! Jesus once rebuked the Pharisees of his day because they could interpret the signs of bad weather ahead, but they did not know how to understand the times.

The AIDS epidemic is a very literal, frightening plague that has come upon us. It is consuming life after life in many countries today. I talked the other day with a doctor friend who has been recently in Africa. He told me that 50% of the women and 30% of the men in Uganda have AIDS. That country is facing almost total annihilation because of this fearful plague. We know how widespread it is here. It is literal, but what does it also symbolize? Just as AIDS robs people of their immunity against other infections, so, the Bible says, indulgence in sexual promiscuity robs us of any defense against the widespread theological and moral errors of our day. That is why people go for strange cults and strange teachings on every side today. They are easy prey because their moral defenses have been torn down by sexual promiscuity. They have no moral immunity left. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he lists certain wrongful sexual activities, and says, "Because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient," {cf, Eph 5:16 NIV}.

The terrible scourge of abortion today, this awful murdering of unborn children, is obviously

literal. The whole country is being torn apart over this issue at this present hour. But what is it saying, what is it picturing to us? I think it pictures the moral sacrifice of our children, the loss of a whole generation of young people who are not being taught the truth about God. Watch them on the streets and in the ghettos of our great cities. Look into their listless, dull eyes. We are losing them. Like the ancient people of Israel, we are throwing our children into the vast burning yaw of the god Molech, deliberately sacrificing them to our self-centeredness. Abortion makes it horribly visible to those who wish to see.

Now let us look at these trumpets and see what they portend.

**The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. {Rev 8:7 NIV}**

This is very similar to the seventh plague that fell on Egypt during Moses' confrontation of Pharaoh, when hail and lightning came upon the whole land. Here, it is mingled with blood. This is not a new phenomenon. Scientists have recorded other times when red rain fell from the sky. They never could explain it fully, but it actually left great puddles of water that were as red as blood. Here is the same plague hitting the earth. It brings terrible destruction of the natural world. Notice that the plagues of the first four trumpets all fall on creation. This is, in a sense, God's judgment upon a race that destroys its environment. He is saying, in effect, "You want a destroyed world -- then you shall have it." This is fully in line with his methods of judgment.

But the destruction is not only literal, it is also symbolic. It is teaching something invisible to the eyes of men at that time. As we have already noted, the earth is used in Scripture as a picture of Israel, the intended model nation under God. Here is depicted a judgment upon Israel, both on its leaders (the trees), and upon its people (the grass). The prophet Jeremiah and other prophets of the Old Testament call attention to a time when God will judge his people Israel. Let me read such a prediction from the prophecy of Zephaniah. God says:

**"At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, 'The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad.' Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine." {Zeph 1:12-13 NIV}**

Jeremiah calls this, "the time of Jacob's trouble," {Jer 30:7 KJV}. That is the effect of the first trumpet.

The second one follows:

**The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. {Rev 8:8-9 NIV}**

The first trumpet judgment attacked the earth but this attacks the sea. A great blazing mountain is seen falling into the sea. Perhaps it is a volcanic eruption. It may be Mount Etna on the island of Sicily which volcanologists say is ready to blow its top, like Mt. St. Helens. Many scholars feel that the sea on which this judgment falls is the Mediterranean. Or perhaps it is a meteor falling out of space into the ocean. At any rate, the sea literally becomes blood red. Once again, this is not unknown. Every now and then the papers report what is called a "red tide" which appears in the sea and turns large areas of the ocean blood red. A tiny marine organism, red in color, multiplies at such an enormous rate that it makes the water look like blood. This plague destroys many of the living creatures in the sea; the ships are destroyed and the commerce of the ocean reduced by a third.

But if it is literal, it is also symbolic. The symbol of a great mountain blazing with fire is that of a kingdom aflame with revolution. Jeremiah, for instance, describes Babylon as just such a mountain. He calls it a "blazing mountain" which is the destroyer of the earth {cf, Jer 51:24-26}. It probably pictures, as we gather from other Scriptures, the rise of what is popularly called "the revived Roman Empire," the ten-kingdomed coalition of Western Europe and the Western allied nations under the antichrist, which conquers the other nations of the earth. The sea is used frequently as a picture of the Gentile nations of earth.

Again, it is limited to one-third. Notice the repetition of this word “the third” all through the series of trumpet judgments. Under the seals the limitation was one-fourth of the earth. That is very meaningful. Four is the number of human government, and under the seal judgments God is saying that he uses human government to limit the onslaught of the four terrible horsemen of Chapter 6. Human government still retains some vestige of restraining power during those days. But here, even that is gone, and under the trumpet judgments only God himself restrains. Three is the divine number and this is declaring that only God’s mercy and God’s grace limits these awful judgments to one-third of the earth.

Now we come to the third trumpet,

**The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water -- the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter. {Rev 8:10-11 NIV}**

This great star which falls into the rivers and the fountains of earth, is very likely a comet which breaks up when it enters the atmosphere and scatters itself throughout the earth, falling into the rivers and springs and poisoning them with what is probably a form of radiation. We have had, perhaps, a kind of a foregleam of this and a note of warning from God, in the terrible atomic accident that happened in Russia some years ago. It occurred at a city named Chernobyl -- and Chernobyl is the Russian word for Wormwood!

I read in the paper yesterday that a new comet has been spotted in the skies. It has been given the name “Austin,” and will become in April the brightest object in the night sky. These comets flash into our solar system unexpectedly at times. No one knows where they come from or when they will arrive, and a new one has now been spotted. I am not saying it is the great star predicted here, but it indicates the suddenness by which such comets can appear.

At the same time that this physical event takes place, it will also symbolize something to happen in the invisible realm of man’s internal life. Rivers, of course, symbolize masses of people moving in the same direction - whole peoples who are caught

up with one idea and moving like a river does in a predictable direction. The fountains denote the sources of moral or philosophical leadership, and a star is in Scripture the symbol of a prominent leader. It appears that some great personage, widely recognized as a leader, suddenly reverses his policy - he “falls” in that sense. Many people are embittered by this and set against one another, resulting in widespread moral death. That is exactly what will be described later in Revelation under the rule of the Beast that comes from the earth, as we will see. We will find a similar “star” in Chapter 9 when we hear the fifth and sixth trumpets of judgment. I will leave it at that for the moment.

The fourth angel sounds as recorded in Verse 12:

**The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night. {Rev 8:12 NIV}**

Without preliminary comment I would like to read to you our Lord’s word, recorded in the 21st chapter of Luke, where Luke gives his account of the Sermon on the Mount of Olives. There, Jesus says:

**“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” {Luke 21:25-26 NIV}**

That clearly is a reference to this same event under the fourth trumpet. But not only is it literal -- the sun and the moon and the stars are, for one reason or another, darkened and fail to give their light for much of the time -- but it also symbolizes something. Sun, moon and stars are used in various places in Scripture to typify earthly authorities. The highest, of course, is the king or president. He would be portrayed as the sun, and those under him would be as the moon and the stars. They symbolize a hierarchy of authority. But what does this darkening mean, metaphorically? It pictures light withdrawn from the authorities of earth. They are morally darkened and no longer display moral judgment. They are not governed by any sense of ethical restraint but become characterized by increasing deceit, treachery, merciless cruelty and a total lack

of justice. Yet by the grace of God this darkening is still limited to one-third. Some restraint of evil is yet possible, but only by the sovereign grace of a sovereign God!

Verse 13 now warns us of an eagle who comes to declare that there is much worse yet to come. If you have a King James text, it reads “angel,” but the better manuscripts use “eagle” here.

**As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: “Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!” {Rev 8:13 NIV}**

Three great disasters are yet ahead, and these “woe” judgments are to fall upon the “inhabitants of the earth.”

That is not a very accurate translation. It is, literally, “those who make their home on earth.” It does not mean people who live on the earth, because there are many of those, as we have already seen, who will be redeemed. But these judgments fall upon a moral class, those people who live only for earth and its advantages, who are merely concerned for this life and care nothing about the life to come. Someone has well described them in this bit of doggerel,

*Into this world to eat and to sleep,  
And to know no reason why he was born,  
Save to consume the corn,  
Devour the cattle, flock and fish,  
And leave behind an empty dish!*

Do you know people like that? All they seem to think about is eating, sleeping and meeting their needs. They have no thought for the purpose of life or of any meaning to their own existence.

What we are told here is that these last three trumpets, two of which we will take up in Chapter 9, give us insight into the full extent of the moral disaster that the first four have brought upon the earth.

We have seen in each of the series this division into four and three. In the seals, you will remember, there were four horsemen who rode through the earth, and then we were given, under the next three seals, insight into what was going on behind the scenes, as it were. Here there are four trumpets that sound, and then we get a deeper insight in

the last three of the terrible impact of these awful judgments. In the bowls of wrath that will come, we have again the same division of four and three.

These series seem to reflect the three common degrees of comparison. Everyone knows that there are three ways to indicate increasing value, meaning, or even material size. First, it is “big.” That is the positive, the comparative is “bigger,” and the superlative is “biggest.” With reference to evil, there is “bad,” “worse,” and “worst.” This is what we have in these series: a climaxing of judgment, a crescendo that ends at last with the pouring out of the bowls of the wrath of God, the worst of all.

If I took a poll of this congregation this morning, and asked you how you felt after hearing this, most of you would say, I’m sure, that you feel uncomfortable.

Why is that? Why do we feel uncomfortable when we read of judgments like these? Let me share these words on that theme from Eugene Peterson. He says:

*We do everything we can to make light of judgment. We use every stratagem we can find to avoid dealing with the consequences of sin. But God will not let us off. He will not indulge our inattention. He will be taken seriously. In a pause between trumpet blasts an eagle cries its warning. However practiced we become at tuning out sounds that we do not want to hear, including the sound of God’s displeasure at sin, God finds new ways to penetrate our defensive deafness. The eagle cry catches us off guard.*

What we are seeing here in the judgments of the last days is really nothing new. It is simply commonly experienced penalties for evil increased in amount to an incredible degree. God has been sending judgments like this all through the history of mankind. There have been volcanic eruptions, meteors falling upon the earth, red rain from the skies, poisoned waters, etc. All these terrible disasters have struck before, but now they grow to a climax. Yet we must not misunderstand them, for they are for our own good.

I list for you five effects of judgment upon us since we are all being judged in some degree, more or less. Hardships, trials and difficulties are all a part of the judgment of God upon human evil, and we all experience it.

1. First of all, judgments frighten us. They are intended to. They are sent to arrest our attention. They chill our blood. They alarm us. They scare the living daylights out of us. Like children at a horror movie we are fascinated by them but we want to hide our eyes from them and not look fully at them. That is the first effect of judgment. It arouses fear.
2. Then, because it terrifies us, judgment also sobers us. How many people in the Bay Area immediately rearranged their priorities five minutes after the earthquake hit on October 17? We heard many testimonies during that time of people saying, "I'll never take life as lightly again. That taught me a lot. I began to see what is really important." That is also what judgments do. They help us reassess our lives. They change our priorities. C. S. Lewis well says that fear or pain or judgment is "God's megaphone to reach a deaf world."
3. And so judgments correct us. They force us to face unpleasant facts about ourselves. We do not like that. We do not like to be told that we are not perfect. We know we are not, but we do not like anyone else to say so. We are uneasy at having these things pointed out. But judgment strips away our illusions. It restores us to reality. We begin to think accurately, clearly, as God thinks. We plan more carefully. We live more thoughtfully. That is why God sends judgment.
4. And fourth, judgment humbles us. We begin to see that we are really not in control. We do not run everything about our lives. We are not autonomous creatures. We are not little gods, capable of making anything we want to of ourselves, as the media keeps trying to tell us. We are not in charge. We see how foolish we have been in the past, that we have made many mistakes when we thought we were right. We begin at last to welcome guidance, to listen to others, and especially, to seek out the wisdom of the Word of God.
5. Finally, judgment reassures us. It comforts us. It answers Habakkuk's great prayer, "In wrath, remember mercy," {Hab 3:2}. We learn

that God does not like judgment either. He calls it, in Isaiah 28:21, his "strange work." He keeps it as brief as possible. He gives ample warnings before it gets unbearable. He sends anticipations of it, forceful reminders, that this kind of thing can happen so that we might pay attention and act before it gets out of hand.

All this supports the view that the Bible gives everywhere of a loving God, "slow to anger and plenteous in mercy," {Psa 103:8 KJV}. Is it not strange that people who do not read the Bible very much almost invariably say, when you talk about judgment, "Well, the God I worship is a loving God; he would never do anything like that!" My friend, it is the very love of God that makes him judge! God must judge in order to eliminate evil once for all from his creation and bring about the world of universal blessing which men have longed for throughout all of human history.

Last night I spent a quiet evening at home. The rain was falling, and that is always a comfortable sound. It was warm and cozy inside and quiet and peaceful without. There was no danger threatening me or my family. I spent a delightful time listening to good classical music. I had just been working through this passage of Revelation and it suddenly struck me how wonderfully protected I was.

- If you and I were living in Calcutta we might feel much closer to these scenes in Revelation than we do here in California.
- If we were living in a ghetto of one of our great cities, where violence stalks the street right outside the door and you dare not go out, we would identify much more readily with these judgments.

How wonderfully God has spared us, protected us and watched over us. All one needs to do to turn earth into the scenes we have here is to take the restraints off human evil for a little while. It could be like this tomorrow! But God has spared us, watched over us, loved us, guarded us, believers and unbelievers alike. How thankful we all ought to be for that! And how ready to hear and heed the eagle's cry!

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# LESSON 6D

## ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE

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BY RAY C. STEDMAN

Chapter 9 of Revelation presents the judgments of the fifth and sixth of the seven trumpets which were introduced in Chapter 8. These two trumpets are also identified as the first and second of three great “woes” that will come upon the earth. I want to stress that the judgments of this book are real. They are terrible, horrible disasters, and there is both a literal and a figurative dimension to them.

I received an unsigned note in the offering last week which I will read to you exactly as it was written: “Kindly see to it that your sermon presentation is more entertaining and concise.” I am sure that note was sincere and well-intentioned. Probably many of you feel the same way about my messages. I, too, strongly sympathize with those sentiments. I wish there was some way to make these messages more entertaining, and, although I struggle to make them concise, I probably could use some improvement in that area. But I remind you that we are dealing now with what the Old Testament prophets called “the great and terrible day of the Lord.” I find it difficult to make such messages amusing or entertaining. It strikes me that to attempt it would be somewhat analogous to hiring a comedian to entertain the witnesses at a public execution! This is not entertaining material, I grant you, but it is true! And we have to face unpleasant truth at times.

Some of you may also be having trouble with the timing of these various events of Revelation. I have been asked, “Are these seals and trumpets and bowls of wrath chronologically sequential, or do they occur simultaneously?” I must admit that that is difficult to determine. As we have seen all along, the Apostle John is given this vision of what is to take place in the last days, from the vantage

point of heaven. Thus he is looking at these events from the standpoint of eternity -- and the one great characteristic of eternity is that there is no time there. In heaven there is no sense of past or future. Everything is present -- now! That is why it is so difficult in this book to tell exactly when events occur when they are brought into time.

We are seeing here, then, not chronology but degrees of intensity. It is as though God keeps probing deeper and deeper into the events of the last days. The judgments of the seven seals give us a quick trip through this seven-year period that Daniel identifies as the last days. The trumpets, however, return as it were to a section of the last week and give us a different facet of judgment. That is what we are looking at in Chapters 8 and 9. When we come to the bowls of the wrath of God we will see still greater depths of earth’s agony, but just how to fit it all into a time sequence is difficult.

This is made still more confusing by the fact that certain break-off periods -- intermissions I have called them -which focus on events of special interest, are occurring during this time. We have already seen one of these in Chapter 7 and we will find others as we go on in this book. We could liken the events of Revelation to a missile launching at Cape Canaveral. The countdown proceeds normally and seems to be nearing the end, when suddenly there is a break. The countdown ceases while something is checked out or repaired, and then it resumes right where it left off. That is also somewhat the structure of this book. Perhaps that image may help you in understanding this.

Now in Chapter 9 we arrive at the fifth trumpet, presented in the first six verses:

**The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them. {Rev 9:1-6 NIV}**

This remarkable passage begins with the falling of another great star, not into the sea this time, as we saw under the third trumpet, but onto the earth. Again, this probably speaks of something literal. It is perhaps a great meteor falling from the skies. Many times in history such meteors have fallen to earth and created some degree of havoc and chaos. But here a second star falls. Yet the text clearly indicates that this is not just a literal star, it is also symbolic. It pictures an individual who is given a key by which he opens up the gateway of hell, the Abyss. When once Jesus visited the shores of Gadara on the Sea of Galilee he cast a legion of demons out of a man. The demons begged him, "Do not send us into the Abyss [the same word as here ], but allow us to go into the great herd of swine that are feeding on the hillside," {cf, Matt 8:28-32, Mark 5:1-11}. Jesus permitted them to do that, and the swine immediately ran over a cliff and plunged into the sea and perished. It is a strange story, but it portrays the fear demonic beings have of being cast into this great Abyss.

We learn from other Scriptures that demons have already been incarcerated in this Abyss. The book of Jude tells us that there are angels that have been "kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day," {Jude 1:6 NIV}. Apparently we have come to that Day here for as this strange individual opens the Abyss, out of it comes a great cloud of locusts looking like smoke that fills the sky. Once again we are being presented with something literal and symbolic at the same time.

One summer when I was a boy in the state of Minnesota, we were visited with a great plague of locusts. They came in a cloud that actually darkened the sky. I remember hearing them descend onto the standing fields of grain, and it was like listening to a hail storm. As they munched away at the vegetation, the noise was like a rushing river. They destroyed everything in their path, leaving the farmers with no crops at all that year.

It is something like this that John sees when this fifth trumpet blows. But along with this literal visitation of locusts, invisible demons are also released from the very pit of hell into the earth. We must ask ourselves, who is this powerful personage who is permitted to unleash the powers of hell? This links closely with what we saw under the third trumpet when the other great star fell. He was identifiable as a powerful political leader who would change his policy in the midst of the week and thus embitter whole classes of people. If that was a political leader who thus "fell" then here we have a Jewish religious leader who turns apostate, and, by that means, introduces demonic forces upon the earth.

I believe he is Jewish because of the clues that are given in this passage. These demons were told not to harm "the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads." Clearly grass, trees and plants represent people, as we have already seen in Chapter 7, and they specifically symbolize Israel. Yet there is a certain group of them -- 144,000 that were sealed of God -- who are guarded and protected from this demonic control of human thought. The other people are not allowed to be destroyed but only tormented for a period of five months.

What we are doubtless seeing here is what Paul refers to in his Second Thessalonian letter as an important personage who arises in the last days and whom he calls "The Man of Sin" who sits in the temple as God and claims the worship of Israel, and of the whole earth. In other words, here is that great antichrist of the last days, foretold in many Scriptures.

His propaganda is described for us here under the figure of a "scorpion's sting." That will be the effect of his teaching upon those who believe it. It

is like a scorpion's sting, producing great agony of mind and heart.

I was in Vietnam in 1960 and one afternoon I lay down to take a brief nap. As I did so I noticed something run across the top of the doorway. It ran down the side of the casing and onto the floor, and there I saw that it was a black scorpion about six inches long. It stood up on its rear legs, defiantly staring me in the face, with its tail curled up over its head, ready to sting. I looked around for something to hit it with, but it ran off and disappeared. I never saw it again, but I was never comfortable in that room! I asked my Vietnamese friends what would have happened to me if it had stung me, and they told me I would have suffered incredible anguish for 24 hours. Nothing would have relieved it, they said. A pain killer would only have made it worse. I would have had to endure it for 24 hours and then the pain would gradually disappear. That is a scorpion's sting, and it is used here to picture a terrible mental torment.

Years ago I had a home Bible class here in Palo Alto, and a young woman who attended told me that when she and a companion had been in Alaska teaching they looked for something to while away the long winter months. They began to play around with a Ouija board, thinking it was just entertainment. But that led them into reading horoscopes and astrology. After several weeks of this she began to hear voices in her head at night, insisting that she get up and write obscene, filthy words on a piece of paper. She could get no relief until she got out of bed and wrote. She would have to write for several minutes, and then she could go back to bed and go to sleep. But it kept getting worse and worse. The sessions grew longer and longer until she would actually have to sit and write for hours before she could get any sense of relief. It became an almost unendurable anguish. This was still going on in her life in California and she asked me what she could do about this. I read to her the Scriptures on demonic possession and prayed with her. We did this on several occasions, and I am happy to announce that she was delivered from this obsession. I have seen her since and she told me that it was a permanent deliverance. But this is the kind of mental anguish described here -- this horrible torment that seizes upon people's minds

who open the door to the occult and unknowingly permit the intrusion of demonic forces into their lives.

That delusion is metaphorically described in Verses 7-11:

**The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon. {Rev 9:7-11 NIV}**

This describes the nature of the propaganda that this leader will unleash upon the world and the effect of it upon human minds. It is given, of course, in symbols, as is much of the book of Revelation. These are not difficult to interpret. "Crowns of gold" speak of something authoritative. As people hear the teachings and claims of this charismatic, leader he impresses them as having great authority and power. "Human faces" speak of intelligence. This teaching will appear reasonable and will seem intelligent, making its appeal to the mind. "Women's hair" describes that which is alluring and attractive. Many will believe the propaganda because it appears to offer much personal advantage.

But it will also be like "lions' teeth" -- a symbol of that which is penetrating, cruel and frightening. That is what begins to happen as those who follow this teaching succumb to its delusion. They find it becomes cruel and vicious. "Iron breastplates" speak of callousness of heart. The demonic powers will be heartless, without mercy. Once the torment begins no appeal can relieve it, there is no way of escape. And it will come with an overpowering sound. That speaks of something which is widely popular. There will be tremendous peer pressure to believe this teaching, so much so that it seems irresistible and overpowering. The "stings in the tails" speak of the terrible aftermath, the mental torment that follows this awful teaching.

Then we are told clearly that it is all under the

leadership of an invisible demonic king, the very angel of the Abyss himself. This, of course, is a figure for Satan. This whole account depicts an infusion of demonic forces upon the earth under the leadership of Satan himself in these terrible last days.

The world saw something like this in the days of Hitler and the Nazis. People today who see films of Hitler's frenetic harangues to the German people are amazed that anyone could believe the things he said. It is still an unexplainable phenomenon in history that a whole nation could be carried away by the strange teachings of this deluded and demented man. But it was a mere foregleam of what is coming.

Paul warns young Timothy in his first letter, "In the latter days some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons," {1 Tim 4:1}. Clearly this has been foretold in other parts of Scripture.

We are seeing foregleams of this in our own day. In the '60s there seemed to be a terrible breakthrough of evil into the world. Strange, demonic teachings were introduced and people began to throw overboard long-obeyed customs and moral standards. We saw many revolutionary movements affecting men. Perhaps even now we are seeing much of the same thing in the delusions of what is called the New Age Movement. There are some things that are good and attractive about it, but much of it is a return to occult practices, and to being controlled by spirits that are supposedly teachers of truth. We are being told that the masters of the minds of men of the past are now available also to us through this kind of teaching. But when one begins to follow such teachings, it has a terrible effect. It leads at last to sheer despair and mental torment. It is, of course, not what is being described here for these powers are greatly limited in our day, but there is something worse of the same nature coming, something that will be permitted wide expression upon the earth.

In Verse 12 we hear the sixth trumpet giving its sound:

**The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come.**

**The sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar**

**that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number. {Rev 9:12-16 NIV}**

John now hears a voice that comes from the horns of the golden altar. That altar has already come before us in Chapter 8. There we saw the altar of incense on which was offered before God the prayers of the saints who were then on earth. An angel took the fire from the altar and threw it back on earth and fire and judgment followed. What now happens under the sixth trumpet is an answer to the prayers of the saints of that day.

We have already been told what they are praying. A great crowd of martyrs are heard crying out, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" {Rev 6:10 NIV}. This second woe is God's specific answer to their prayer. Notice the answer takes the form of releasing four powerful fallen angels who have been bound for centuries at the river Euphrates. But note also the sovereign control of God. It is a precisely-timed event. They are released at the very "hour and day and month and year" that God had long ago predetermined. No human or demonic power could change that timing!

This is all linked with the Euphrates river, once the ancient boundary between the East and the West. The Euphrates flows out of the mountains of Armenia down through the present lands of Iraq and Iran and on to the Persian Gulf. In the ancient world it formed the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire. The Romans lived in constant fear of the Parthian hordes who lived on the other side of the river. Earlier, Israel had also lived in fear of invasion from across the Euphrates because Assyria and Babylonia both had sent their armies down from the north across the river and into Israel.

Many of the commentators have claimed that this army of two hundred million is entirely composed of soldiers from the Eastern nations -- India, China, Japan, Indochina, etc. It is true that the reference to the Euphrates river indicates that a

barrier is being removed so the Eastern armies can come into the west, but I do not believe that all two hundred million of these come from the East. The commentators have failed to note that there are four angels released who control this event. Four is the number of worldwide human government. It is a picture of the four directions of earth -- north, south, east and west -- and these soldiers come from all of these directions. It would be almost impossible for any one nation today, or even several of them (such as in NATO), to field an army of that size. No army on earth today has much more than five hundred thousand troops. To field an army of two hundred million would be logistically impossible, even for China. But they do not all come from the east. They come from all directions, and they will gather to one place. In Chapter 16 that place is named for us. There we find the Euphrates river appearing again and this time it is linked with the Mount of Megiddo in Israel, or Armageddon. So this is the first glimpse we have in Revelation of the great armies of earth that will come from all directions, east, south, north and west, and gather in the plain of Megiddo in the land of Israel for the great battle of the last days.

This gathering of armies is further described by symbols, in Verses 17-19:

**The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur [or brimstone]. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury. {Rev 9:17-19 NIV}**

What can this be? Let us remember that we are reading an ancient book in which are described events that are still future to us. What we have here is modern warfare described in military terms of John's day. "Breastplates" of various colors suggest armored chariots -- i.e. tanks, missile launchers, and other vehicles of war, that are camouflaged with various colors (or perhaps are identified by national colors, since this is a conglomeration of armies coming together). "Lion's mouths" that are spouting fire and belching smoke suggest cannons and mortars -- even nuclear missiles -- killing with

fire, radiation, and poisonous gases. Tails like snakes that do injury perhaps describe modern helicopters, gunships, which have a rotor at the tail where also machine-guns and missile launchers are located. This may even depict weapons not yet invented. I recognize it is difficult to say precisely what all this means, but it is obvious that here we have a great military campaign, which results in monstrous slaughter of enormous scope. We are gradually being informed of what is about to happen, and we will see other pictures of these same events as the book continues to unfold.

The final scene under the sixth trumpet is the reaction of mankind to these strange and disastrous things.

**The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood -- idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts. {Rev 9:20-21 NIV}**

Observe that worshipping demons is put first. That is the explanation for this lack of repentance. Here are people who have believed a Satanic lie. It is what Paul calls, in Second Thessalonians, "a strong delusion" {2 Th 2:11 KJV}, a lie from the devil. They have believed this, and therefore they are rendered finally unable to repent. It is because they have begun, unknowingly perhaps and innocently, to worship demons.

We see something of this in the rise of Satanism in our own day. The authorities of this area are very disturbed about the attempts that we hear of to kidnap children. They are concerned not only because they want to protect children, but because they fear that these are attempts on the part of Satanists to obtain children to offer as living sacrifices. That has been proved to have happened in several instances.

The worship of demons finds its expression, we are told here, in idols. These are probably in the form of medals, ritual objects or figures, perhaps even crystals, that people wear around their necks. There is a touch of sarcasm here in the words, "idols that cannot see or hear or walk." These things do nothing for people no matter what they think about them.

This superstitious submission to strange teaching is characteristic of the last days. These people would not change their lifestyles even under these terrible judgments. They continued their murders, (which probably includes abortion). It does not look like we are going to make much progress in this terrible, murderous aborting of babies that takes place so frequently today.

They also continued their “magic arts.” Actually the word here is an interesting one. It is *pharmakeia*, from which we get our word “pharmacy.” It really means drugs.

The awful drug traffic of today is unexplainable, is it not? Why can we not get rid of it? Surely you have asked yourself, why do people do this! In the face of the widespread warnings that we hear today, and the revelation of how damaging this can be, why do people do drugs? Why do they ever start? It is because drugs is a form of magic art. It is a part of the sorceries of these days, yet to be seen in even worse forms.

Their sexual immoralities also continue. Again, we have been subjected to an explosion of this in anticipation of this coming time. Also, of course, thefts, i.e. embezzlements and attempts to steal money from trusted funds. These fill our papers today, all foregleams that God has given us for the days to come. We have not yet reached these days, but these events are warning us of the nature of things yet to come. Even after the awful bloodbath of a nuclear war, where one out of three die, still there will be no change of heart.

In the face of this obdurate refusal to change, we must ask, “Why judgment?” What is judgment for if it is so ineffectual in producing change? Let us not forget that the book of Revelation has already told us that millions will repent. Let us not ignore that “great multitude which no man can number” {cf, Rev 7:9 KJV} from every tribe and nation and language who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They come out of the great tribulation and appear before the throne of God. They have repented in the midst of judgments. They have believed, and have received the grace of God.

But here is a great number that judgment has not affected in that way. Judgment does not make

them listen because their hearts are hardened. They are the impenitent -- unable to believe. They are no longer able to heed because they have refused the grace of God. That is what produces this kind of hardness of heart. God never expected to convert the world through judgment. He knows that well. What judgment does is to make us listen to grace. It makes us take seriously what God is offering as the way of escape. In these terrible judgments we see the power, the majesty, the might, the inescapability of God, and we must ask ourselves, “What can I do to be saved?” That is the effect of judgment. “What shall I do? How can I escape? Is there no way out?” What God then provides to those who feel their peril is a message of grace. It is not when judgment threatens that we turn to God. It is when we see a suffering love that gives itself for us, that bears the hurt and agony and pain -it is that that breaks and melts our proud hearts, silences our excuses and opens the door to salvation. But then to reject that grace when it is clearly understood to be offered, to turn one’s back upon it, is to render the heart unassailable and to make repentance impossible. That is the message of Hebrews 6.

That is where this passage leaves us and I want to leave it at that point. I have been writing a commentary on the book of Hebrews and I have been struck by a question that the writer asks in the second chapter which is really the theme of Hebrews. He asks, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” {Heb 2:3 KJV}. How can you escape if you neglect the offer of the grace of God? God does not want to judge men. He does not like judgment. We saw that last week. But that is all that is left for those who reject the way of escape which the grace and mercy of God supplies.

We have been singing this morning, quite properly, of the mercy and the grace of God. We sang:

*And when I think that God his Son not sparing,  
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in,  
That on the cross, his burden gladly bearing,  
He bled and died, to take away my sin;  
Then sings my soul, my Savior, God, to thee,  
How great thou art; how great thou art!”*

That is incredible, is it not? We see how wonderfully tender and gracious God is, how much

he wants people to be delivered from judgment, but in the end we must ask, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?"

There may be some among us here who have been coming for months, and years, and have never received the grace of God through receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In the face of judgments such as these that are even now present in our land, judgments that speak eloquently of far worse yet to come, we must face this question, "How shall I escape if I neglect so great salvation?"

I leave that question in your mind and heart for you personally to answer in your own life.

### Prayer

*Father, we are sobered by these revelations of that which is yet to come upon the earth. We see something of your holiness, your power, your majesty, your displeasure with human sin. And yet, always against the background of that, we see your wonderful grace that offers a way of escape. We pray for all who are here this morning, that they will have opened their hearts to the saving grace of Jesus. We pray that life from above may be imparted to them; that they will know the wonderful promises of grace to fill our life with joy and put songs in our mouths and make us rejoice in a destiny quite different from what we see described here. Help us now and strengthen us to live in the light of these revelations this very day. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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