

## The Tribulation Judgments

Approximately six centuries before Christ, the people of Israel were thrown into Exile because of unfaithfulness to their God, mainly disobedience and persistent idolatry. The Northern Kingdom went into Exile first, in 722 B.C. and then the Southern Kingdom (Judah) went in 586 B.C. That began the “Times of the Gentiles,” when Israel would no longer exist as an independent nation, and there would be a succession of Gentile nations controlling the known world. That Exile of Israel reversed the Exodus, returning the people of Israel into the grip of the Gentile nations. The Exile could have ended if the people of Israel had accepted Jesus as their King/Messiah when He came, because His offer of the Kingdom was genuine. But, tragically, they rejected Him. So the Exile continues, and we are still in the Times of the Gentiles. We are also now in the Church Age, which is running simultaneously with the Times of the Gentiles. But Christ will return to end the Exile, bringing the Kingdom to the repentant people of Israel as promised, ending the Times of the Gentiles.

But what will cause the Jews to repent? Tribulation! *Severe* tribulation, persecution that will threaten to extinguish them all so that there’d be no Israel ever. And at the same time that God is sending tribulation to His beloved people, He’s also bringing the Times of the Gentiles to a bitter end with horrible judgments upon the world. It will be just like another Exodus from Egypt – except that it won’t be Egypt from which the Jews are loosed, but all the Gentile nations of the world into which they had been thrust. And those judgments will be not only more severe and more numerous than the plagues upon Egypt, they will be global. It will also be another Conquest, except not just the Land of Israel, but the entire world. (That’s why there are so many 7’s in Revelation; think Jericho! See Joshua Chapter 6.)

The Book of Daniel prophetically describes the Times of the Gentiles up to a certain point in history. Then Daniel abruptly closes with the command to seal up the vision (Dan 12:4,9). The scroll is to be sealed until the time of the end. The Book of Revelation continues that vision with the unsealing of the scroll (Rev 5). And with the unsealing of the scroll, the Tribulation period ensues, with all its terrible judgments upon the godless Gentile people on earth. The seal, trump and bowl judgments are hard to track in Revelation’s subsequent chapters, so I’ll try to make sense of John’s vision.

What follows opening of the scroll is a (yet future) period of seven years of terror. The Church will be removed from earth before this period begins because the Tribulation period is a time of judgment, and the Church has already been judged (at the cross). The saints of the Church Age, in other words, are all safe in Christ, just as Noah and his family in the ark were safe from the judgment of the Flood. During this future seven-year period, the wrath of God will be unleashed, Satan’s fury will be unrestrained, and the utter sinfulness of humanity will be on full display. Many will be saved by God’s grace during this period but most of humanity will experience horrible wrath. It will be a period during which people know that God is furious, and they need to choose to believe in God, and suffer persecution and martyrdom because of it, or continue to reject God in hatred and trust instead in an Anti-Christ.

The seven-year period is divided in two parts, each 3½ years long. During the first half, the Anti-Christ is revealed and makes a covenant of peace with Israel. At the half-way point, however, he breaks his covenant and begins persecution of Jews, persecution so terrible their very existence seems unlikely. During that 2<sup>nd</sup> half, called by Jesus “the great Tribulation,” the horrors described below unfold and a massive army is called up to totally annihilate Israel. That’s when Christ returns to rescue His people by destroying that hostile army, and He will then establish the promised millennial Kingdom. There are lots of other details regarding this eventful period described in Revelation, but we don’t need to review them here. Let’s instead just try to sort out the seal, trump and bowl judgments – a difficult enough task. There are seven of each, but that doesn’t mean that there are 21 (7 x 3) judgments. Let’s look at them.

1. The Seal Judgments. These are the first of the three clusters of judgments when the exalted Jesus, the Lamb of God, opens the scroll that Daniel had sealed. **The First Seal:** a white horse/conquest. This may refer to the advent of Anti-Christ, who “conquers” by means other than warfare, e.g., diplomacy and/or charisma. **The Second Seal:** a red horse/violence. Global warfare or government-created violence is in view here. **The Third Seal:** a black horse/economic disaster. Probably global famine and death due to famine will result. **The Fourth Seal:** a pale horse/death due to global famine, warfare, disease and wild beasts. One fourth of earth’s inhabitants will die. **The Fifth Seal:** unclear, probably martyrdom of saints. **The Sixth Seal:** global violent disasters of the physical world (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, meteors, and worse). Earth’s inhabitants will be terrified. **The Seventh Seal:** seven trumpet judgments (see below),

along with a great earthquake, thunder and lightning. There is progressive escalation going from the 1<sup>st</sup> seal, which is non-violent, to the last, which incorporates seven further horrors.

God owns His creation; it's all His and He has the right to dispose of it as He pleases, according to His holy will, wisdom, justice and goodness. God's wrath upon earth's rebellious inhabitants has begun. It will be horrible. There will be those saved during this period of tribulation, but they will suffer persecution from the Anti-Christ and his minions. The vast majority of people, having ignored or deliberately rejected Christ during the Church age, will experience God's fury.

2. The Trumpet Judgments. These extend out from the 7<sup>th</sup> seal, like a telescope being stretched open. A trumpet was used to announce an event of great importance. These trumpet blasts are by angels, which means they bring these judgments. Several of these resemble the plagues on Egypt narrated in Exodus, although of vastly greater scale and extent. They all come from heaven, indicating it's God Himself who is punishing earth's inhabitants, similar to the hailstones God threw against the Canaanites in Joshua 10:11. **The First Trump:** Hail and fire mixed with blood. This fire from heaven burns up a third of the trees and grass on planet earth. It's like the fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, except it's global. **The Second Trump:** Some massive object, like a mountain, ablaze with fire, is hurled from heaven into the sea, resulting in a third of the sea turning into blood, killing its sea-life and destroying the ships sailing on it. **The Third Trump:** Something massive, like a star, ablaze with fire, is hurled from heaven onto the earth's waterways (rivers and springs), causing the water to become bitter and deadly poisonous. **The Fourth Trump:** One-third of the sun, moon and stars cease to give light; a third of the day becomes dark as does a third of the night-time. **The Fifth Trump:** The abyss is opened so that hideous locust-like/scorpion-like creatures emerge to inflict horrible, torture-like pain – but not death – upon earth's unbelieving inhabitants for a 5 months' period. **The Sixth Trump:** Four demonic beings are released upon Earth to kill one-third of its inhabitants, but the killing agents are 200 million unique but monstrous creatures that belch fire, smoke and sulfur and have snake-like biting tails. **The Seventh Trump:** This trumpet blast evidently anticipates the immediate Return of Christ. But out of this seventh trumpet judgment will come seven more judgments, the bowls of God's wrath.

These trumpet judgments actually devastate one-third of the earth. Everything in this vision should be understood as literal and horrible, too horrible even to imagine. All humanity is at risk of being wiped out by the most hideous means. These trumpet judgment, like the seal judgment, escalate in crescendo fashion, each successive one more fearful than the one prior. Although they recognize these horrors as God's wrath, Earth's inhabitants remain wicked and unrepentant, deserving of the judgments they receive.

3. The bowl judgments. A bowl was for collecting something. So these "bowls" have been, since the rebellion in Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel incident, collecting God's wrath and are now full to the brim. In the same way that the trumpet judgments come out of the 7<sup>th</sup> seal, these bowl judgments come out of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet judgment. These bowl judgments, even more severe than the previous, evidently come in rapid sequence, escalate in severity, and quickly reach to a climax. It's like, Wham, wham, wham, until, suddenly, it's over. **The First Bowl:** ugly, painful sores. **The Second Bowl:** all seas turn into blood and all sea-life perishes. Imagine the stench! **The Third Bowl:** all earth's waterways turn into blood. There will be no water to drink! **The Fourth Bowl:** the sun becomes super-strong with lethal heat. **The Fifth Bowl:** darkness on earth. **The Sixth Bowl:** the gathering of a massive army from all the nations on earth. **The Seventh Bowl:** a severe earthquake topples earth's cities, islands disappear, mountains collapse, and huge hailstones fall from heaven. At this, Christ returns, annihilates the massive, gathered army and establishes the millennial Kingdom.

Why all these horrors? Because it was on earth that humanity rebelled and blasphemed their Creator God. God had to curse His physical creation because of the entry of sin. So it's on earth that these judgments fall. Yet unrepentant rebels are still subject to a further judgment even after having been raised from the dead. That's the Great White Throne judgment and being cast away from God's presence, away from blessing, into hell for an eternity of punishment.

John's vision is here precisely so that all humanity is warned: Don't ignore God and His will. The time to repent and honor God by trusting the Son is *now*. If you're a believer, you know what's coming. So if the love of Christ indwells you, this vision implores you – *requires* you – to commit your life to reaching out to people with the Gospel so that they might respond with faith and be delivered from the horrors that await.