

## **Revelation: Tribulation**

### **By David Feddes**

Tribulation is a word that just means trouble and lots of it. The book of Revelation does portray tribulation and various kinds of trouble, but we always have to keep in mind the other, joyous visions of Revelation as well. Revelation 6 is what we're going to be focusing on, but first let's consider what's in Revelation 4 and 5.

### **Throne vision**

Revelation 4 is a vision, and John says, "After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like an angel said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, of precious stones. A rainbow resembling an emerald encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were 24 other thrones, and seated on them were 24 elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder. Before the throne seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, and the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures was covered with eyes, had six wings, and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. And day and night they never stop saying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.' Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, the 24 elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say, 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being'" (Revelation 4:1-11).

So Revelation 4 has this great vision of God and his throne attendants. It resembles in many ways Isaiah 6, which says, "I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and his glory filled the temple. And there were the seraphs with the six wings, and they're constantly calling, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty'" (Isaiah 6:1-3). So this is a vision very similar to that, an opening of heaven in a visionary way to John.

### **Scroll vision**

Then having seen God and his great throne attendants and the 24 elders, who may represent angelic beings who look out for God's people, then he has a vision of a scroll. And when he sees this scroll, he sees seven seals on it: "I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with seven seals with writing on both sides. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?' But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it" (Revelation 5:1-3). The angels can't. The 24 elders can't. The four living creatures can't. Nobody on earth can do it. Nobody is worthy.

So he says, "I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside" (Revelation 5:4).

Near the end of the book of Daniel, it speaks of a scroll. This scroll was sealed until the last time. Nobody can open this scroll, this plan of God for the final chapters of history. John weeps because nobody can open it.

"Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals'" (Revelation 5:5). The Old Testament had spoken of a lion coming from Judah, and Jesus was the fulfillment of that great promise. So the Lion of the tribe of Judah is going to be able to do it.

"Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne. It had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the Lamb. And they sang a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth'" (Revelation 5:6-10).

"Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!' Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!' The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshiped" (Revelation 5:11-14).

So there is somebody who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll: the Lamb. In Revelation 6 we get to the opening of the scrolls, but I spent some time in chapters 4 and 5 because it's too easy to dive into the four horsemen of the apocalypse and forget who's running the show, forget who is breaking the seals and sending them in the first place.

### **Opening the seals**

"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.

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.

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!'

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. 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" (Revelation 6:1-8).

These are often called the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The word *apocalypse* is just the Greek word for revelation. So these are the four horsemen of Revelation.

The white horse represents conquest and conquering. Whenever you get ambitious rulers who want to take over more territory, you get war. And so you get the rider on the red horse, representing war. When you get war, you get supply chain disruptions, you get shortages, you get problems, and you get the black horse, which represents famine. Food gets really expensive, but somehow there's always enough wine and oil for the rich people. That's how war goes. The rich people still get their luxurious lifestyle, but poor people are paying ten times as much for their groceries. And then you have the rider on the pale horse, representing death in all its forms, especially death by illness and disease, but also death from wild animals, death from war, death in all of its forms. So these are the riders that are sent out by the opening of the first four seals and by the words of the four living creatures.

"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" (Revelation 6:9-11). So there's a set number of Christians who are going to be killed, and until that number is full, history is going to keep unfolding.

"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. 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?'" (Revelation 6:12-17).

## **Interpreting**

- Scripture interprets Scripture
- Different forms, same truths
- Pictures symbolize realities

- First coming launched last days
- Visions overlap, same story
- Partial fulfillments, then final

When we read the book of Revelation, we need to hear what God says to us, but we need also to be willing to think very hard as these images come at us. We need the Lord's power and the Spirit's secret influence working on us. At the same time, we want to grasp a little better with our minds what's going on. So before diving into this passage, here are a few thoughts on how we interpret Revelation in particular, as well as interpreting the Bible as a whole.

### ***Scripture interprets Scripture***

The first thing to think about when you look at the book of Revelation is that Scripture interprets Scripture. If you want to understand the book of Revelation, you can't take it by itself. You need to familiarize yourself with the whole Bible, because Revelation is part of God's entire revelation in Scripture, and because so much of what it says is linked to other parts of the Bible.

There are some who say that when you read the New Testament, you need to just focus on that, because the Old Testament is out of date. One of the most famous preachers to say that is Andy Stanley. He says we should unhitch the New Testament from the Old Testament. We should unhitch it.

Now it would be very hard to unhitch Revelation from the Old Testament. The book of Revelation has a grand total of 404 verses in it, and of those 404 verses, 270 have a reference to the Old Testament. If we don't just count direct references, G. K. Beale says there are more than 500 allusions to the Old Testament in the book of Revelation. Good luck unhitching! You cannot read a sentence from the book of Revelation without having it linked to something that is stated in the Old Testament part of the Bible. We've got to remember that all Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable (2 Timothy 3:16), as the New Testament says of the Old Testament. So we need to keep in mind that we need Scripture to interpret Scripture. As we do that, we don't unhitch one part from another.

Also, when we get to a very difficult portion of Scripture, let's look at what a clearer portion says, and it might help us make sense of the more difficult part. When we're dealing with parts that we struggle with, let's look at the parts that are easier to understand.

### ***Different forms, same truths***

A second thing that's important for interpreting the book of Revelation is this: different parts of Scripture use different forms to communicate the same truths. I don't think Revelation says hardly anything new that isn't already said elsewhere in the Bible in a different form.

Sorry if that's a big disappointment to you. You might say, "Well, then, what's the use of Revelation? Why don't we just chop off the last book of the Bible if everything in it is already said elsewhere in Scripture?"

Just about all the things that are revealed in Revelation are also revealed in other portions of the Bible, but Revelation reveals it in a different manner. An epistle, a letter, may state things in a pretty straightforward manner. That's one way of communicating. A historic chronicle describes events that occur. That's another way of communicating. And visions and symbols are another way of communicating.

Why does the Bible use different forms of communication to reveal the same realities? God wants to communicate with our mind, with our logic, with our sense of truth and fact. He also wants to communicate with our imagination and stir our whole being. Revelation does that in ways that might not get through from some of the other portions of the Bible.

I don't think Revelation is actually revealing a whole lot of doctrines and truths that aren't revealed elsewhere, or even a whole lot of facts about the end times that aren't revealed elsewhere. You can learn about the antichrist, the man of sin, from 2 Thessalonians 2. It's stated in more straightforward ways there. In John's letter he says, "Many antichrists have already gone out into the world. You've heard he's coming. There are a lot of them already here" (1 John 2:18). When John is writing in more symbolic language in Revelation, he sees a vision of a weird-looking beast. And all of those things are showing us something about the forces of antichrist.

So you get straightforward descriptions in letters. You get visions and symbols in other kinds of communication. God has his purposes for using different forms to convey the same truths.

### ***Pictures symbolize realities***

We need to understand that in Revelation, pictures symbolize realities.

As I said before, we need to study passages that are clear before we get into the difficult ones, and we need to sometimes study the literal passages before we get too crazy with the figurative passages. When you get into figurative symbols and you just let your imagination run wild, you can come up with just about anything. G. K. Chesterton said, "The book of Revelation contains many strange monsters, but none so strange as some of its interpreters."

So when we're dealing with the pictures in Revelation, we need to realize they symbolize realities and be careful not to take some things too literally. I'll take some obvious ones. Jesus is not a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. Jesus is God become human, not a lamb that looks kind of freaky. But the image of a lamb conveys that he died for the sins of the world. The horns convey his power. The eyes convey that the Spirit of Christ is all-seeing and goes throughout all the earth.

The Holy Spirit is not seven different spirits. When you read in Revelation you'll hear again and again about the seven spirits before the throne. You might wonder, "Is the Trinity off? Is there one Father, one Son, and seven Spirits?" You're in the land of symbols here, and the numbers also are symbolic. The number seven means the fullness of the Holy Spirit as he does his work throughout the whole world.

Revelation pictures a red dragon with horns and a lot of nastiness. Satan is not the color red. He's not a dragon either. But he's nasty. The picture of a red dragon is a symbol, but it's a symbol that points to the real Satan, just as the Lamb is a symbol but points to the real Jesus.

That's how you deal with symbols—or rather, that's how symbols deal with you, because that's really what's going on in the book of Revelation. When God gives us the pictures and the symbols, he's arousing in us a sense of the realities that those symbols point to. And so we need to realize the value of having these impressions and these pictures that God sends, that then convey to us a deeper, more powerful sense of the realities that it's talking about.

Revelation is one kind of book. There are other books of the Bible that are not highly symbolic, that are not a bunch of pictures pointing to something else. They are simply describing what happened. There are some who say, "Jesus Christ himself and his death and resurrection are kind of an archetype that appears in a lot of different myths." No! Jesus was a real man who died on a real cross, who rose from the dead in a real body that could be touched, a body that could eat after the resurrection. The Bible is very specific and clear about that.

So just because Revelation is highly symbolic and portions of some other Bible books are symbolic does not mean the whole Bible is just a symbol, a bunch of myths that you can make into whatever you want. There are different kinds of writing in the Bible. There's the straightforward and the more literal, and there's the symbolic. We need to hear both of them as what they really are.

### ***First coming launched last days***

Another key for understanding the book of Revelation is that Jesus' first coming launched the last days. We are in the last days. When you read the Bible, you hear things like, "This is now the last hour" (1 John 2:18). You need to realize that you're living in the last days.

It's a mistake to take the whole book of Revelation and say, "It's about the last days, and therefore it's about the last few years of earth's history before Christ comes again." In the New Testament, "the last days" refers to the entire period between Jesus' first coming and his second coming. Now there may be a few years at the very end that you could say are the "last last days," or however you want to phrase it, but when the New Testament speaks of "the last hour," "the last times," or "the last days," it's talking about the whole period between Jesus' first and second coming.

### ***Visions overlap, same story***

When we read the book of Revelation, we need to understand that the visions are not simply portraying events in chronological order. It's a mistake to think, "This vision is about one period of time. The vision that comes after it must be about a later period of time. And the next vision after that must be about a still later time." Don't read Revelation as though it's telling you things one after another in chronological order. The order of Revelation is the order in which John saw the visions, not necessarily the order in which things happen.

The end of the world is already described in our reading from Revelation 6. There's a lot of chapters to go yet, and the end of the world will be portrayed again and again in later chapters. It's the same basic ending but from different camera angles. Revelation gives you the vision from one angle, then it gives you a little different angle, and oftentimes it goes back again and goes through the same events from a somewhat different angle. And so as you read Revelation, you'll find that the meaning of the visions overlaps, that oftentimes it's speaking of the same set of events in several different ways. It's often telling almost the same story but with a different accent, or a different angle or perspective on things.

### ***Partial fulfillments, then final***

A final thing that I want to say about interpreting Revelation is that there are often multiple fulfillments of these visions. When something happens, you might wonder, "Was that the fulfillment or not?" Often it's not so clear-cut as that.

I mentioned before the sentence from 1 John, "You've heard that the antichrist is coming into the world. I tell you, many antichrists have already come" (1 John 2:18). When you come upon a very powerful and influential false teacher who denies that Jesus is the Christ, he doesn't have to be the final false prophet to be a false prophet. When you come up against an anti-Christian dictator who is killing Christians, he doesn't have to be the final man of sin to be the beast. False prophets and anti-Christian dictators are partial fulfillments of the final false prophet and antichrist dictator.

Now I do believe that at the end of history there will be a final and worst tribulation, a final and worst political ruler and oppressor, a final and worst power of religious deception, a final and worst Babylon civilization which will suck people in and dominate them, with bodies and souls for sale, as Revelation puts it. But there are multiple fulfillments along the way. God did not give this book of Revelation to satisfy our curiosity about the last few years of world history. He originally gave it to help some struggling churches at the time it was written, and he gave it to the church ever since to help us during times of tribulation.

Rather than say, "Hmm, I wonder if we're living close to the time of tribulation yet," you need to realize that you're in the last days. You're living between the first and second comings, and these forces are at work in our world now.

Those are some of the principles that I follow when reading the book of Revelation and thinking about what it means. Now when it comes to the visions we just read from Revelation 6, you might say, "All this talk about interpretation is bad and boring. We had this exciting, vivid chapter full of pictures, and then we got a lecture from a theology professor." Fair enough. There is a great difference between the power of the visions of Revelation and our attempts to think things through. But having said all that, it is so very important that we do listen to these visions and take them to heart without plunging into whacked out ideas.

### **Seven seals**

1. White horse

2. Red horse
3. Black horse
4. Pale horse
5. Souls calling
6. World's end
7. Silence

As I said before, there's overlap among the various visions. Revelation 6 is a chapter about tribulation, but later in the book there are similar visions about tribulation. In this vision of the seven seals, the first four seals involve the white horse of conquest, the red horse of war, the black horse of shortages and famine, and the pale horse of death.

Do we have to wait for the very, very end of the world to think that those horses have been set loose? Those horses are often at work. As Jesus said in a less figurative passage, "You're going to hear of wars and rumors of wars. There are going to be famines and earthquakes. The end is not yet" (Matthew 24:6-7). Jesus says those things are going to happen in these last days between his first and second comings, but it doesn't mean you're at the very end.

I want you to notice the importance of the fifth seal. The souls of those who are under the altar are crying out, "How long, O Lord, until you avenge our blood?" In the earlier vision of heaven in chapter 5, John says that the four living creatures and the 24 elders are holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints (Revelation 5:8). Now, in chapter 6, from below the altar you have the cries and prayers of the saints again. When you move forward, you find that when we get into the seven trumpets, there's an angel who has the golden censer with incense, which are the prayers of the saints (Revelation 8:3-4). John says again and again and again that the incense of his visions is the prayer of the saints. Do you realize what this means? Tribulation is coming in large part in response to the saints' prayers that God avenge their blood.

Some people think we shouldn't pray some Old Testament prayers in the Psalms that say things like, "God, would you please take out my enemies? Just strike them down." We may think we've grown beyond that, but there are souls in heaven right now praying, "God, take out those enemies and strike them down. How long is it going to be until you avenge our blood?" When we think we've progressed beyond prayers in the Bible, it's not always a great improvement.

The sixth seal is the end of the world. As I said before, if the visions of Revelation were depicting events in chronological sequence, you'd already be at the end of the world by the end of chapter 6, because you have all the powers of the earth calling on the mountains and rocks to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of God and of the Lamb (Revelation 6:15-17).

After the sixth seal, Revelation 7 offers an interlude. Then, at the very beginning of chapter eight the seventh seal is opened, and there is silence in heaven for about half an hour, just silence. After God devastating judgment on the earth, there is silence. "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (Habakkuk 2:20). That used to be a call to worship in some churches, and it's an appropriate call to worship today. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10) is spoken in the midst of a psalm about the desolations God brings on the earth. Silence.



We need to be silent before the great and magnificent power and justice and vengeance of God the Judge.

### **Seven trumpets**

1. Hail, fire, blood kill 1/3 of plants
2. Fiery mountain kills 1/3 in sea
3. Wormwood poisons 1/3 of rivers
4. 1/3 of sun, moon, stars go dark
5. Demons torment unbelievers
6. 200 million attackers
7. Christ judges and reigns

After visions of the seven seals come visions involving seven trumpets. Some of the events and plagues in the seven trumpets are a little different from the seven seals, but I would contend that they're really telling us about some of the same realities unfolding during history.

At the end of history, in the seven trumpets, there's hail and fire, and it turns things to blood and kills a third of the plants.

Then the second trumpet is sounded by an angel, and there's a fiery mountain that kills one-third of everything in the sea.

With the third trumpet, a fiery star called Wormwood comes in and poisons a third of the rivers and the springs.

With the fourth trumpet, one-third of the sun, one-third of the moon, and one-third of the stars go dark.

When the fifth trumpet sounds, some terrible beings are going out and causing torment so that people want to die but they don't dare to die, because they're afraid something worse may be waiting for them beyond death. These are demons that have gone out to torment unbelievers.

With the sixth trumpet, great rivers are dried up, and 200 million troops attack in a terrible war.

With the sounding of the seventh trumpet, Jesus judges and reigns. "The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.' And the 24 elders, who were seated on their thrones before the throne, fell down and worshiped, saying, 'We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth'" (Revelation 11:15-18).

That's the seventh trumpet: destroying those who destroy the earth. "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ." So you see that the seven trumpets end up pretty much where the seven seals did, with judgment, with silence, and with the reign of Christ over all things.

### **Seven bowls**

1. Sores on beast worshipers
2. Blood and death to the sea
3. Rivers & springs become blood
4. Sun scorches; people curse God
5. Beast's realm dark; more cursing
6. Kings & demons gather forces
7. Quake, hail, collapse; curse God

Then in later chapters there is the dragon and the beast and the false prophet and the prostitute Babylon. They are judged as seven bowls of God's wrath are poured out. Remember the bowls of incense representing the prayers of the saints? The bowls of God's judgment are in response to prayers of the saints.

The first bowl results in sores on those who worship the beast. The second bowl bring blood and death to the sea, and the third causes the rivers and springs to become blood. This sounds a lot like the plagues on Egypt. It also sounds like some of the earlier trumpet judgments that we've heard. The fourth bowl causes the sun to scorch people. You want to talk about climate change? The sun scorches the inhabitants of the earth, and they curse God but won't repent.

In the fifth bowl, the beast's realm goes dark. One of the plagues on Egypt in Exodus was darkness. What's so terrible about darkness? For the Egyptians, the sun stopped shining and everything went dark. Likewise, the beast's realm goes dark. There's more cursing of God and no repenting.

Then with the sixth bowl, the kings and the demons all gather their forces to make war on the Lamb. With the seventh bowl there is again a great earthquake. The hail comes down. The earthly creation collapses. And even then, what do people do? They curse God.

Probably the most terrible verses you can read in the book of Revelation are in chapter 16: "They cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him... Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done" (Revelation 16:9-11).

No matter how terrible it gets, they won't repent or change. They won't face the simple question, "How's that working out for you?" We sometimes experience tribulation on an individual level. We are going to do things our way. We know God has different notions about how we ought to proceed, but we're going to go our way. And this disaster hits us, and that devastating thing happens, but still we think we are right. We're not changing course. We refuse to pay attention. Events—even catastrophe—can hardly get our attention and humble us before God.

At any rate, that's what happens in the tribulation: there are some who harden themselves just like Pharaoh did in the Old Testament. They harden themselves so much against God, and God hardens them, that they refuse to repent.

## **Tribulation**

- Lamb on throne unfolds God's plan
- Heaven summons hellish powers
- Reflects Old Testament plagues
- Drives rebels to rage, fear, perish
- Makes faithful Christians strong, pure, ready
- Intensifies until creation collapses
- Heaven worships and rejoices

Let's summarize and highlight some of the most important things that are taught in Revelation's visions about tribulation.

### ***Lamb on throne unfolds God's plan***

After looking at some details about tribulation, let's go back and ask again: Who is in charge? Somebody has been opening those seals. The Lamb on the throne is the one who opened the first, the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh seal. Some would like to doubt the sovereignty of God over painful things, terrifying things, and say, "God has nothing to do with that." Revelation doesn't make any apologies. It just says the Lamb opens the seals. Jesus is the one in charge of all these matters.

### ***Heaven summons hellish powers***

Not only does the Lamb open each of the seals, but it is a heavenly being, a "living creature," a cherub, who summons each of the four horsemen. Our imaginations are gripped by the white horse and its rider, and the flaming red horse, and the black horse, and the pale horse of death. But don't forget that in the vision it's the first living creature, one of the cherubim around God's throne, who says to the first horseman, "Come!" And the second horseman can only go out when the second cherub says, "Come!" And then the third, and then the fourth. The four horsemen may be hellish powers, but they are summoned and governed by the supreme powers of God, working through his throne attendants, the living creatures, the cherubim.

I know that people have various ways of understanding how the sovereignty of God relates to wickedness and catastrophe, and I don't claim to have all the answers to that. But I would say, take very seriously this vision. It is the Lamb who opens the seals. It is the mighty angelic heavenly beings around God's throne who summon the horsemen, those forces of judgment.

### ***Reflects Old Testament plagues***

The various forms of tribulation in Revelation reflect Old Testament plagues. Almost everything that's described here in Revelation is elsewhere described in the Old Testament, whether plagues

that were sent on the Egyptians when they were holding Israel as slaves or in other portions of the Old Testament.

### ***Drives rebels to rage, fear, perish***

What does tribulation do? It drives rebels to rage. It terrifies them and fills them with fear. It causes them to perish. They don't repent. What a horrifying reality—that the worse life gets, the more hardened they get against God.

There's a verse in Proverbs which says, "A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the Lord" (Proverbs 19:3). Isn't that true? I've heard people say, "How could God do this to me?" And very often it is catastrophic consequences of their own actions. The question is, "God, how could you?" Never was a question asked when things were sailing smoothly: "Why is God blessing me and sending all these good things my way?" That's God's job. But when God allows the world to be what it is, and its wreckage to become a wreck, then we say, "God, why?"

Tribulation brings out where we are in relationship to God. It won't make us into followers of Jesus Christ. The gospel and the Holy Spirit must do that, because having the temperature turned up on punishment just makes people angrier, and they become more resistant.

When God sends judgment and tribulation, it often drives rebels to rage, fear, and perish. That's a warning to response while it's the day of grace. While God is being kind and gentle in your circumstances and in your situation, that's the time to repent. "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). Don't wait till the day when you can't bear to look at the returning Lord and you want the rocks to fall on you and hide you from the face of God and of the Lamb (Revelation 6:16). We need to repent before it's too late.

It's possible for it to be too late even before death comes. The heart can become so hardened against God that our day of opportunity has passed even before we die. I don't say this to discourage anyone but to urge you to yield to Jesus now. If you long for salvation but wonder, "Has my day of opportunity passed?" don't despair. The fact that you're asking the question means that your heart is not yet hardened beyond hope. Turn to Jesus now. He never turns away anyone who comes to him and calls on him for salvation.

### ***Makes faithful Christians strong, pure, ready***

Although tribulation drives rebels to rage, fear, and perish, it has a very different effect on those who love the Lamb. They triumph by dying. They triumph by bearing up under persecutions. They triumph amid tribulations. They may die at the hands of their oppressors. They may not seem to flourish in this life. But they're getting stronger. They're becoming more pure. They're becoming ready for that day when the Lamb comes.

When he comes, two different things will happen. When he comes, those who long for him will rise in the air to meet him, because they are drawn to that beautiful face that they have loved even before seeing it. And the others, when they see that terrible face that they've never loved,

are repelled by it and are forever fleeing toward outer darkness, because they prefer outer darkness to the light of the world. The light of the world is unbearable. The light of the world is unbearable to those who prefer the darkness (John 3:19-20).

### ***Intensifies until creation collapses***

Tribulation intensifies until finally creation can't bear it anymore. The earth is shaken, things collapse, and the old world is brought to its end so that a new one can rise out of the ashes and take its place. Remember that God's plan includes all this. None of these things that happen apart from God's arrangement. When tribulation happens in our world, when we get a pandemic that affects us, that kills some of us—we don't say, "Wow, nothing like that has ever happened before." It has happened before. And you don't go into a total panic if you know who's in charge. If you don't know who's in charge, then panic away!

We need to know that he's got the whole world in his hands, and that until he decides it's time for it to be over, it won't be over. In the meantime, we learn from tribulation. We seek God's help in becoming stronger, purer, more ready to meet him.

Earlier I encouraged you to interpret Scripture with Scripture. All the things Revelation says about tribulation can be distilled in one statement of Jesus: "In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Jesus doesn't say you might have tribulation; he says you will. It's certain. "But take heart. I have overcome the world."

### ***Heaven worships and rejoices***

How does this particular vision end up? It doesn't actually end with everybody calling on the mountains to fall on them. There's still that one more seal with silence. But even before that seal is opened, John has a vision of a great host in heaven.

First he has a vision of Israel: 144,000 people, 12,000 from each of the tribes. Again, Revelation is symbolic, and it's very likely that it's a picture of God's Israel, and not just of Jewish Israel—although it includes Jewish people. Numbers are symbolic. Twelve is the number of completeness. Twelve times twelve times a thousand: the completeness of God's people.

When John sees a vision, often another one comes right on its heels that further explains the previous vision: "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 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.' 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. 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" (Revelation 7:9-17).

That's the final word on tribulation for those who belong to Jesus Christ. They have come out of the great tribulation. They are in heaven. They worship and rejoice in the Lord. They stand in his presence forever.

### **Prayer**

Father, help us not only with minds but also with heart and soul and imagination to sense more and more of the reality of your great reign, of your purposes in tribulation, of your victory over all the powers of evil and your control of those powers even before you destroy them. Give us trust in you, in your might. Give us confidence in our risen Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And help us, Father, to be among those who stand unashamed in your presence, in your radiance—not fleeing from your light but basking in it and rejoicing in you forever. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**Revelation: Tribulation**  
**By David Feddes**  
**Slide Contents**

**Interpreting**

- Scripture interprets Scripture
- Different forms, same truths
- Pictures symbolize realities
- First coming launched last days
- Visions overlap, same story
- Partial fulfillments, then final

**Seven seals**

1. White horse
2. Red horse
3. Black horse
4. Pale horse
5. Souls calling
6. World's end
7. Silence

**Seven trumpets**

1. Hail, fire, blood kill 1/3 of plants
2. Fiery mountain kills 1/3 in sea
3. Wormwood poisons 1/3 of rivers
4. 1/3 of sun, moon, stars go dark
5. Demons torment unbelievers
6. 200 million attackers
7. Christ judges and reigns

**Seven bowls**

1. Sores on beast worshipers
2. Blood and death to the sea
3. Rivers & springs become blood
4. Sun scorches; people curse God
5. Beast's realm dark; more cursing
6. Kings & demons gather forces
7. Quake, hail, collapse; curse God

## **Repent or curse?**

They cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him... Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done. (16:9-11)

## **Tribulation**

- Lamb on throne unfolds God's plan
- Heaven summons hellish powers
- Reflects Old Testament plagues
- Drives rebels to rage, fear, perish
- Makes faithful strong, pure, ready
- Intensifies until creation collapses
- Heaven worships and rejoices