

LECTURES ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

By

H. A. Ironside, Litt.D.

*Author of Notes On Jeremiah and Lamentations; Notes On Ezekiel the Prophet;
Lectures On Daniel the Prophet; Notes On the Minor Prophets. etc., etc.*

Copyright © 1919

edited for 3BSB by Baptist Bible Believer in the spirit of the Colportage Ministry of a century
ago

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FIFTH AND SIXTH SEALS

(Lecture 6:9-17)

BEFORE examining what is written concerning the breaking of the fifth and sixth seals, it is necessary to say something as to God's dispensational dealings with His earthly people Israel, and to endeavor to show how the book we are studying links up with the older prophecy of Daniel.

For fifteen hundred years before the Cross, God was dealing in covenant-relationship with this one people which He had chosen to be peculiarly His own, in accordance with His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He separated them to Himself, giving them the land of Canaan as their inheritance, so long as they remained faithful to Him as their unseen King. He gave them His holy law, and declared that if they obeyed His voice they should be the head of all nations and His witnesses to the ends of the earth. On the other hand, He warned them that, if they Were disobedient to Him, if they did not keep His testimonies, if they broke His commandments, if they turned to the false gods of the surrounding nations, He would no longer protect them from their enemies, but would give them up to desolation and scattering, until they judged themselves and turned from their sins, when He would remember His covenant with their fathers, and would restore them to their own land and fulfil all His promises.

They completely broke down under every test; and in accordance with His word ten tribes were carried away by the king of Assyria and a little later the remaining two tribes were deported to Babylon, where they remained in bondage for seventy years. Upon the expiration of this prophetic period they were permitted to return to their own land, that they might be there to welcome their promised Messiah when He should be manifested. Only a remnant of the Jews availed themselves of this privilege, and it was their descendants who were living in Palestine when the Lord Jesus Christ appeared in the fulness of time, only to be rejected by the very nation that had waited for Him so long.

The time of His coming had been very definitely foretold in the book of Daniel. In the ninth chapter we are told that a heavenly messenger brought the word to the prophet that God had appointed seventy weeks to His people and their holy city. These are not to be understood as weeks of days, but sevens of years. The term “**weeks**” might be simply explained as sevens. Seventy times seven years would be 490 years. It is an appointed period in the course of time, and has to do especially with the Jews and Jerusalem.

This period was divided into three parts,- 7 weeks, or 49 years, in which the streets and the wall of the city were to be re-built. Then, 62 weeks, or 434 years, immediately following the completion of this work, unto the appearing and cutting off of Messiah the Prince. Then, one final week, or 7 years, to complete the cycle, at the end of which the King would be reigning in the holy city and all prophecy fulfilled by the establishment of the kingdom so long foretold. The starting-point is clearly defined as, “**The going forth of a commandment to restore and build Jerusalem,**” which is the decree of Artaxerxes as recorded in Nehemiah, chap. 2. During the next 49 years the city was rebuilt. Then 434 years later, our Lord rode into Jerusalem and was acclaimed by the multitudes as King, the Son of David, but a few days later was rejected and crucified. Thus Messiah was cut off and had nothing.

What then of the last week? Has it been fulfilled? It has not. When His Son was cast out, God cast off the nation, and that week will not be fulfilled till a future day, when He takes up Israel again.

The angel-revealer said to Daniel, “**Until the END of the war; desolations are determined.**” This gives the whole history of Palestine for the past 1900 years. It has been a great battleground and a scene of almost unparalleled desolation, because Israel knew not the time of their visitation. Their times are not in progress now. God is doing another work. While the Jews are blinded, in part, and wanderers over the face of the earth, He is gathering out the Church, the body of Christ, a heavenly company, who will reign with Christ when He establishes His kingdom of righteousness upon the earth. The last week, of 7 years, cannot begin to run till the Jews are again in the land, and Jerusalem becomes the Jewish capital, after the church has been caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Of this last week the greater part of the book of the Revelation treats. It is only when this is seen that all becomes plain and the prophecy becomes intelligible.

The church was empowered on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit, sent by Christ glorified, came upon the disciples, though the full truth of this wonderful mystery was not made known until Saul of Tarsus became Paul the apostle. To him, and through him to us, was made known the truth of the present dispensation. The church of Christ is one, though men who take His name and claim to be His followers have become sadly divided and have formed many systems, often embracing saved and unsaved alike. But God’s church consists only of those who are born of the Spirit; and all such are by the same Spirit baptized into “**the body of Christ**” - the church. This special work will cease at the return of the Lord to the air, which is the first stage of His second coming. The second stage will be when He comes to the earth in manifested glory to reign. The 70th, or last week of Daniel, comes in between these two momentous events. The Lord spoke of this period as the “**end of the age**” in Matthew 24, and He divides it into two parts, “**the beginning of sorrows**” and “**the great tribulation.**”

A careful comparison of our Lord's great prophecy with the portion of Revelation which we have before us, will, I believe, make it plain that the first six seals answer to the first half of the week "**the beginning of sorrows**"; while from the opening of the seventh seal we are introduced to the great tribulation itself with all its attendant horrors.

- His warning as to false Christs, implying false hopes of a lasting peace, corresponds to the first seal.
- His declaration that wars and rumors of wars will follow fits perfectly with the second seal.
- In like manner His solemn warnings of famine and pestilence find their counterparts in the third and fourth seals.

The Lord then goes on to foretell a time when His followers shall be ruthlessly slain, and when it will be all one's life is worth to confess His name. This brings us to the breaking of the fifth seal, when John saw under the altar the souls of those who had been beheaded for the word of God and the testimony of the Lord.

"And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto everyone of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled."

Who are these martyred saints, and to what dispensation do they belong?

They cannot belong to the church, for as we have already seen, that is represented by the throned and crowned elders in heaven before the first seal is broken.

But the 11th chapter of the epistle to the Romans makes it clear that after the fulness of the Gentiles has come in, that is, after the present dispensation has come to an end and the church has been removed to heaven, the blindness will pass away from Israel, and they will realize their true condition and their sin in rejecting their Messiah. Then they shall call upon Him for deliverance.

Thus a new company of saints will be formed upon the earth, altogether different from the present heavenly company.

Many of these Jewish believers will be martyred by the Satanic hosts of the last days, and it is these who are seen as having been sacrificed and their souls poured out at the bottom of the altar. They cry for vengeance on their adversaries, for this is fully in keeping with the dispensation of judgment to which they belong; whereas it would be thoroughly contrary to the grace of the present gospel dispensation.

God's people are taught of His Spirit to pray according to the ruling principle of the specific time in which their lot is cast. This accounts for what often disturbs and even shocks sensitive souls - the so-called imprecatory Psalm.

They cannot understand the cries for vengeance that seem so opposed to the grace of God as now made known. And it is no wonder they are troubled and hesitate to take such words upon their lips, for they do not belong to us at all. But they will be exactly suited to the remnant of Israel, suffering for Jehovah's sake, but with no clear knowledge of an accomplished redemption - waiting for their Messiah to appear and overthrow the last great Gentile confederation, which, as we shall see when we come to chapter 13, will be bent upon their absolute extermination.

To these souls under the altar, invoking the judgment of God upon their merciless adversaries, white robes are given, and they are told that they must wait a little season till the time of Jacob's trouble is ended and they are joined by their brethren who are yet to be slain, as the hatred to God and His Christ rises ever higher until the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those that know not God, as we read in II Thessalonians, chap. 1.

The opening of the sixth seal gives a marvellous symbolic picture, of such grave import that I must give it to you in its entirety.

John says,

“And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?”

It should be evident from the balance of the book that we are not to take this as a literal earthquake, though our Lord's words in Matthew 24 show us that there will be such phenomena in divers places, terrific in character as the end draws near. Already, perhaps we have had, in the past two decades, some noteworthy reminders and warnings in the many horrors of this nature that shocked the civilized world, but are apparently so easily forgotten within a very short time. But the earthquake of the sixth seal is of a different character altogether. It cannot be merely literal, as the actual islands, mountains, and seas, together with the cities of the nations are still seen to be in existence long after this vision has had its fulfillment.

It rather sets forth the complete breaking up of society as now constituted, the destruction of the boasted civilization of our present day. Looked at from this standpoint, we have abundant Old Testament Scripture to throw light upon it and to make plain its awful portents.

We shall be helped, too, if we remember that in the very beginning of the book we are told that the Lord sent and **“signified it unto His servant John.”** That is, He made it known by signs or symbols.

If these be kept in mind we shall be preserved from taking literally what God meant us to take symbolically, and so we shall be more likely to get the mind of the Spirit in regard to the future of both Christendom and Judaism, the two spheres with which this book specially deals.

It is therefore not a world-wide, literal earthquake that the sixth seal introduces, but rather the destruction of the present order - political, social, and ecclesiastical - reduced to chaos; the breaking down of all authority, and the breaking up of all established and apparently permanent institutions.

We may see, I believe, a foreshadowing of this in what has so lately taken place in Russia; the overturning of the throne, the blotting out of the Romanoff Dynasty, the wrecking of all industrial and social order, the fearful orgies of fanatical Bolshevism, blood-red anarchy everywhere holding sway, making wild promises of liberty while destroying every safeguard against the unrestrained brutality of beastlike men.

Take as but one horrible instance the attempted abolition of marriage (that which God Himself instituted, at the very beginning of human history, for the sanctity and blessing of His creatures), and the substitution of the degrading custom of forcing all women to be common property, taken by whoever may desire them, and all children born in these abominable conditions to be taken from their parents and reared as children of the State.

Natural affection at once receives its death-blow, and all restraint on man's animal propensities is at an end.

Another event that has shocked the world has been the overturning of Russia's State Church. It is true that it had become unspeakably corrupt, but in their wild desire to destroy it the Soviet Government has declared war on all that bears a religious name, whether human or divine. "No God and no church" is the cry ringing through the unhappy land, and who can foretell what the dreaded future has in store?

Many thought in the past century that they saw the French Revolution portrayed in this sixth seal and it was indeed but an earlier sample of the same conditions we have been considering; so was the break-up of the Roman Empire in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries. But none of these cataclysms, stupendous as they were, fully met the requirements of the prophecy; for the church of the First-born is still here, and the gospel of the grace of God is still being proclaimed to a guilty world. But we have already seen that when the seals are broken the church will be with Christ, waiting for the moment when He will descend to take His world kingdom and establish His authority in righteousness.

But we must now proceed to look at the passage in detail that we may the better grasp its true import.

The sun, we are told, became black as sackcloth of hair. The sun, the source of light and life for this planet, speaks of supreme authority, and is the well-known type of the Lord Himself. **"Unto you that fear my Name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings."** Such is Malachi's declaration concerning the coming of Christ the second time.

At present Christendom, at least nominally, owns His lordship. We even date our letters Anno Domini. We speak of Him as our Lord, and profess to receive our governments from His hand. But soon He will be entirely rejected and His word utterly despised. Thus will the sun be blotted out from the heavens, and God will seem to have been dethroned.

Naturally enough this will mean the complete destruction of all derived authority, so we next read, **“the moon became as blood.”** The moon gets all its light from the sun, just as **“the powers that be are ordained of God,”** and are appointed by Him for man’s blessing. But all government being thrown down, the lurid glare of anarchy will take its place, for a time at least.

The stars falling from heaven indicate, I take it, the downfall and apostasy of great religious leaders, the bright lights in the ecclesiastical heavens.

In Daniel, those who turn many to righteousness shine as the stars. In the first part of our book the stars are said to be the messengers of the churches. So it would seem clear that we are to understand the symbol in the same sense here.

After the true church has been caught up to meet the Lord in the air, there will be a vast host of unconverted ecclesiastics left behind; thousands of church dignitaries, both Protestant and Romanist, who, though looked upon as guides in things spiritual, shall be manifested as utterly bereft of divine life - professional clergymen who, despite their pretensions and exalted calling, are simply natural men intruding into spiritual thing, like the Philistines of old who dwelt in the land of Canaan and gave their name Palestine, to the whole thing as though it longed of right to them, while all the time they were unwarranted intruders of Egyptian descent.

These are the stars who will be hurled from their places of power and eminence in that awful day of the wrath of the Lamb, and who, apostatizing from the last vestiges of Christianity, will soon become leaders in the worship of Antichrist.

Thus the heavens, the ecclesiastical powers of every description, will depart as a scroll when it is rolled up. The whole fabric of Christendom will be wound up as something obsolete and out of date.

Recently, leaders of religious thought, as they are called, have been questioning the finality of the Christian religion, and declaring that out of the chaotic conditions brought about by the war shall arise a new religious conception altogether, superseding that of “the Nazarene” and resulting in the worship of humanity - a new conception of God as immanent in all men and only to be found within the heart of man. That such teachers are correct as to their expectation there can be no doubt, and for this Christian Science, so-called, the New Thought, the New Theology, Theosophy, and kindred cults (all founded on the same basic philosophy), are preparing the world. But as long as the Holy Spirit is here on earth, dwelling in the church of God, the full development of this mystery of iniquity is checked; but as soon as He goes up with the church, the whole profession that is left will be destroyed, and out of its ruins will arise the final Satanic masterpiece of the last days.

The destruction of all organized religion will but intensify the frightful conditions of that dreadful time, however. Men drunk with their sham liberty, and rejoicing in the triumph of a blatant God-defying demagoguery, will for a brief period turn this earth into a great mad-house. The vile orgies of those days will be indescribable, until there shall dawn upon multitudes the realization that the Lamb of God whom they had rejected and whose gentle rule they had spurned has in some way visited their sins upon their own heads.

Then we have depicted what someone has called “the greatest prayer meeting of all history,” when “**the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the chief captains, the mighty men, the bond and the free**” shall hide themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains, crying out in their sore distress for the mountains and the rocks to cover them and hide them from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, “**for,**” they will cry as with one voice, “**the great day of His wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?**”

Yet we read of no repentance, no true turning back to God or trusting His Christ - just an awful realization that it is the rejected Lamb with whom they have to do, and whose wrath they would fain escape. They are like those of whom Jeremiah prophesied who will cry in that day of the fierce anger of the Lord, “**The harvest is passed, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.**”

Notice the solemnity of the expression, “**The wrath of the Lamb.**”

We are not accustomed to couple the thought of wrath, or indignation, with the Lamb, which has ever been the accepted symbol of gentleness. But there is a terrible truth involved in it nevertheless.

For if the grace of the Lamb of God be rejected, His indignation and wrath must be faced. It cannot be otherwise. It is part of eternal righteousness so to do. God Himself will not, and in accordance with the holiness of His nature cannot, have it otherwise; as we read elsewhere, “**He cannot deny Himself.**”

“Hear the just law, the judgment of the skies:
He that hates truth must be the dupe of lies:
And he who will be cheated to the last,
Delusions strong as hell must bind him fast.”
- Cowper.

For such there can be nothing in reserve but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries; and this of a much sorer character than that which befell those who despised Moses’ law, for they now defy God revealed in grace, who has come out to man in the person O f His Son. For such there must be “**the wrath of the Lamb.**”

“Grace like this despised, brings judgment
Measured by the wrath He bore.”

But the wrath of God is even a deeper and more intense form of judgment, which will be poured out upon the earth from the “**seven bowls (or vials) of the wrath of God,**” and under which the Christ-rejecter must abide for eternity, for it is written, “**He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.**”

Note the hopelessness of the condition here depicted. Abiding wrath precludes any thought of either annihilation or restoration, and tells us that the results of refusing the matchless grace of God are eternal; for that which “**abides**” is unending.

But I must bring this address to a close, and as I do so I would again remind you that this sixth seal brings us to the end of the first part of that last unfulfilled week of the ninth chapter of Daniel.

It divides into two parts, and the Lord Himself defines the first part as “**the beginning of sorrows,**” while He designates the last part as “**the great tribulation.**” This is introduced for us in the book of Revelation by the breaking of the seventh seal, and that will come before us after the great parenthesis of the seventh chapter.

The wrath of the Lamb is visited upon the nations in the beginning of sorrows; the wrath of God will be their portion in the great tribulation.

May He grant, in His mercy, that none who hear these words may enter into either the one or the other. Grace is still reigning through righteousness, and a just God waits in loving kindness to be the justifier of everyone that believeth in Jesus.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
