

## Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

### Study #11: “Capital Punishment of an Evil Planet” (Revelation 5:1-14)

Do you believe in the death penalty? If you say, “Yes,” you’re in the majority. But according to the Gallup organization, the majority is no longer as large as it once was. The culture has changed and support for the death penalty has now dropped below 61 percent.

So what do you think? Is the death penalty a deterrent to crime as its advocates argue? Or do you think it’s a barbaric practice that ought to be abolished in this modern, civilized age? Several years ago, when Westley Alan Dodd, the child rapist and killer, was about to be hanged in Walla Walla, the *Olympian* said that 1600 churches were protesting the event. In addition, Amnesty International sent out letters to every church in the area asking us to join the protest. So, what’s your opinion? What do you think the pros and cons of capital punishment are?

Of course, as followers of Jesus Christ, the issue isn’t what we think, it’s what does God say? So let’s be sure to ask that question as well? Does God believe in the death penalty, and if so, and what evidence is there that He does? Well, first, we know from the beginning that God has sentenced every human being to death. In Genesis 2:16, He warned Adam and Eve, ““From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.” And so, 1 Corinthians 15:22 says, “In Adam, all die.” In fact, as we learned in our last study, no one except Enoch and Elijah has ever escaped this life without suffering death and all that comes with it.

Furthermore, do you remember this event when God executed an entire generation of fellow men by drowning them because He “saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Since then, He hasn’t done that to us as a group, but He does continue to take the lives of sinners one by one and, since the Flood, He has given the responsibility of protecting innocent life to human government through capital punishment. That’s what His words to Noah mean in Genesis 9:6 where He says, “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God, He made man.” You see, in God’s eyes there’s a difference between innocent blood and the blood of killers and rapists. For example, in the Sixth Commandment which says, “You shall not kill,” the word “kill” should be translated “murder,” because there are situations in which God allows the taking of a human life—police officers in the course of duty protecting innocent life, soldiers fighting for the defense of their country, a father protecting the lives of his family.

Furthermore, what we’re going to see tonight is that God is once again going to take upon Himself the responsibility of punishing this planet, not with water this time, but with fire and a variety of plagues sent out from the throne of heaven. The Bible calls this future period of judgment the Tribulation, a time of suffering “such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will” it again. (Matthew 24:21) To understand what this time of judgment will involve, there are two major facts I want to explain.

#### 1. THE TRIBULATION—ITS TIMING

The Bible uses several terms to describe this period including “the time of Jacob’s

trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7), “the great tribulation” (Matthew 24:21), and “that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10). But the most helpful term for our study is the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel, for in Daniel 9:24, the Angel Gabriel revealed that there would be 70 weeks (or 490 years) of further judgment upon the nation of Israel before their kingdom would finally come to earth.

Daniel 9:24-25 says, “Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place. So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined.” “Week” in this passage refer to a group of seven years. 70 weeks, on the other hand, equals 490 years. However, notice only 69 weeks were to pass until Messiah came and was “cut off” (killed). These first 69 weeks or 483 years of Daniel’s prophecy were fulfilled at Passover in 33 AD when Jesus the Messiah was crucified on a cross. That means one more group of 7 years remains until judgment is completed and the Kingdom finally comes. Consequently, when we say the Tribulation, what we’re actually describing is the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel as seen below.

How do the seal judgments of Revelation 6 relate to these 7 years? The first 6 seals comprise the judgments of the first 3 ½ years, whereas the 7<sup>th</sup> seal contains both the 7 trumpet judgments and the 7 bowl judgments of the last 3 ½ years. Jesus and Daniel testified that this period involves two halves. Daniel 9:27 says the Tribulation begins in a relatively peaceful way when a Roman prince (Antichrist) signs a covenant with Israel. For that reason, Jesus called the first 3 ½ years “the beginning of birth pains.” (Matthew 24:1-7) But at the midpoint of these 7 years, Antichrist will break his covenant and persecute Israel, setting up “the abomination of desolation.” More on this in later studies. That will then usher in the last 3 ½ years which Jesus called “the Great Tribulation.” (Matthew 24:21) For an overview, see the chart below.

## **2. THE TRIBULATION—ITS TERRORS**

First of all, let’s see what the judgment of the first 3 ½ years will involve.

### **A. The First Seal—Antichrist Appears**

Recall with me what the scroll and seals represent. The scroll is the title deed to the earth, which God gave to mankind as an inheritance. But because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, no one has the righteousness to open it. Only Jesus is qualified to do so, and He does it by breaking the seals and bringing judgment on His earthly enemies who have rejected His Lordship and tried to take His place as the earth’s rightful ruler.

That is where verse 1 picks up the action. John says, “Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, “Come!” And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a

crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.”

When people read these verses and see a rider on a white horse with a crown on his head, they assume it's Jesus. But it's not. There are similarities between this and the description of Jesus returning in glory in Revelation 19. But three facts make it clear that it's not Jesus. First, Jesus is not on earth at this point. He is in heaven opening the scroll and its seals. Second, this rider has one crown upon his head, whereas Jesus is wearing many crowns because He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Third, this person goes out to conquer using weapons of war like the bow. But when Jesus returns, He will destroy His enemies and set up His kingdom, not through a process of conquest, but with the sword of His mouth. (Revelation 19:15) That is, simply by speaking the Word of God. Then, you ask, why does this figure look like Jesus? Because he is a counterfeit Christ! Names by which he is known are “the Antichrist,” “the man of sin,” “the Beast,” “the little horn,” and “the son of perdition.”

Arthur Katterjohn of Wheaton College explains: “Some commentators take the word ‘Antichrist’ as one who is the opposite of Christ, and therefore make the mistake of identifying him with the worst tyrants of history—Nero, Hitler, Mussolini. It is true that the prefix ‘anti’ can mean ‘against’ or ‘opposite to,’ but it can also mean ‘instead of.’ Antichrist will be a substitute for Christ, as much like Christ as possible for a tool of Satan. He will talk about justice and love, peace and prosperity. He will be brilliant and eloquent. In short, he will appear as an angel of light, as Satan himself often does, and will be hailed by millions as a superman who will save the world. He will more likely to appear as someone like Albert Schweitzer—who did not believe in the divinity of Jesus or accept the authority of Scripture, yet went out as an angel of light to Africa—than someone like Adolf Hitler, who rose to power in Germany at the same time.”

The first judgment, then, will be the appearance of a wonder-working savior inspired by the devil. During the first half of his reign, he'll be a “Dr. Jekyll” who suddenly turns into a “Mr. Hyde.” Paul gives the reason in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12, “The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore, God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”

Is the world ready for a false savior? The former premier of Belgium expressed Europe's sentiments like this: “The truth is that the method of international committees has failed. What we need is a person, someone of the highest order with great energy. Let him come and let him come quickly. Either a civilian or a military man, no matter what his nationality, who will cut all the red tape, shove all committees out of the way, wake up all the people, and galvanize all governments into action. Let him come quickly. This man we need and for whom we wait will take charge of the defense of the West. Once more I say—it is not too late, but it is high time.”

Nor will it be difficult for him to succeed. When Mussolini was strutting across the Mediterranean world, he was asked to explain his rise to power. He said, “I found Europe full of empty throne rooms, and I simply walked in and took one of them.” The same situation exists today. People all over the world are looking for a great leader in whom they can put their trust. But, because he is not Jesus, they will be quickly and greatly deceived.

## B. The Second Seal—World War Begins

John continues in verse 3, “When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.”

The most striking thing about the second horse is its color. It is “fiery red.” Some think this refers to bloodshed, and it may. But I believe it symbolizes something equally horrifying. For when we look at Revelation 12:3, we find that the same word is used to describe the great “red” dragon that gives the Beast its power. In other words, this very likely refers to the devil’s empowerment of this individual. In fact, it is possible that each of the riders of the four horses is the same person—Antichrist seen in a different facet of his destruction. First, he comes to power offering false promises of peace. But what immediately follows is bloodshed, famine, and finally death. In these verses, he’s given authority to take peace from the earth.

This is something that can happen very quickly. For example, when the Berlin Wall was torn down, the media was so excited by the prospect of world peace they suggested, “Maybe we can relax now and cut back on our defense spending,” which we have done. But the end of the Cold War did not bring lasting peace. It led to the rise of radical Islam, which has made the world more dangerous than ever. And if radical Islam is destroyed, something even deadlier will take its place. 1 Thessalonians 5:3 warns, “When they’re saying, ‘Peace and safety, peace and safety,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them like a thief in the night.” The world will seem to be on the verge of peace, but this man will appear and take all peace from the world.

## C. The Third Seal—Worldwide Famine

The third seal follows in verse 5. John says, “When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!”

A quart of wheat in John’s day was the daily ration of food given to a Roman soldier. And a denarius was the wage for a full day’s work. So what’s the point? It is saying that a person will have to work all day just to earn enough to eat. But you say, “What about the elderly, the ill, and the disabled?” Sorry, there won’t be enough to go around. Social Security will provide no security in that day. If you can’t work a full-time job, you won’t be able to eat.

The pair of scales explains why. Scales are a symbol of food shortages in the Bible. The mention of barley indicates the same thing, for in John’s day, barley was the grain that was fed to livestock. Remember the story of the Prodigal Son. He grew so hungry that he wanted to eat the “slop” he was feeding the pigs. And so it will be when the third seal is broken. The prodigal children of God all over the planet will be so hungry that they will be glad to eat “pig slop.”

Yet the saying is true. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Where do I find that? In the statement, “Do not harm the oil and wine!” Oil and wine were luxury items in John’s day, which means the rich will still be able to afford their treats, while the poor are left to starve.

#### D. The Fourth Seal—Disease and Death

The fourth seal follows in verse 9. “When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” And I looked, and behold, a pale horse!” (This is the Greek word from which we get the ghastly green color of chlorine.) “And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.”

The fourth seal leads to the death of 25% of the earth's population. If that were to happen today, with the population of the world estimated at 7 billion people, it means that nearly 2 billion people would be lost. How will they die? In addition to famine and warfare, two other causes of death are mentioned. One is “pestilence” or disease. Think of the super viruses and bacteria that have weaponized over the last twenty years—Anthrax, Ebola, Ricin, Smallpox, and Typhus to name just a few. What if, when God's grace is removed at the Rapture, all these toxic agents were let loose and mutated beyond the control of science! John is revealing that in addition to these devastating diseases, many new plagues will be released at this time.

The second cause will be “wild beasts.” Perhaps like me you watched the classic horror films produced by Hollywood artists like Steven Spielberg and Alfred Hitchcock, films like “Jaws” and “The Birds.” In that day, however, John says that these far-fetched fantasies will become gruesome reality. One explanation may be the shortage of food. Another explanation is that God will remove the “dread” of man, as described in Genesis 9:2-3. There He promised Noah, “The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered.” But I think something more demonic will be involved. The devil will take away creation's fear of mankind and replace it with a ferocious hatred.

#### E. The Fifth Seal—Martyrs Slain

The fifth seal is described in verse 9. “When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”

Four facts stand out about these martyrs. 1) Their number. In Revelation 7:9, John says, “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.” Who are they? One of the elders explained to John, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation.” This should be an encouragement to us. Sometimes we get the feeling that the growth of the Kingdom depends on us. And while I am committed to the work of worldwide missions, Jesus made it clear that He's the reason for its growth, not us. “I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” 2) Their courage. According to Revelation 20:4, their method of execution will be beheading. Yet rather than intimidating the church, it ignites new growth. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” 3) Their innocence. They are found “under the altar,” the place where the basin was put to catch the blood of the innocent

sacrifices in the Old Testament. 4) Their faith. They call out to God, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Despite their suffering, they keep their eyes on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith.

#### F. The Sixth Seal—Heavens Shaken

John describes the breaking of the sixth seal in verse 12. He says, “When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake.” The word earthquake is *seismos* from which we get our term “seismic activity.” There is no question. The world has witnessed dozens of devastating earthquakes over the past fifty years. The Japanese earthquake of 2011 registered 9.03 on the Richter scale, claimed 15,878 lives, and collapsed 129,288 buildings. The Indonesian earthquake of 2004 was even bigger. It registered 9.2 on the Richter scale and was responsible for over 110,000 deaths. But the most destructive earthquake of all was the Haiti earthquake of 2010 which left 310,000 dead and 1,000,000 people homeless. And yet, despite the scale of these tragedies, they were baby earthquakes compared to this one. John says in verse 14, “every mountain and island was removed from its place.” Not only will Los Angeles slide into the sea as long predicted, but so will hundreds of other cities around the world.

Most of us have experienced earthquakes, but something now happens that defies imagination. Verse 12 continues, “the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up.” We can speculate, but I don’t think anyone can say exactly what this means until it actually takes place. Both Hebrews 10 and Haggai 2 talk about the shaking not only of the earth, but also of the heavens. The frightening thing about this is that the first six seals comprise only the first half of the Tribulation, which Jesus described as the “beginning of birth pains,” meaning the worst is yet to come. For instead of tailing off after each seal is opened, the seal judgments continue throughout the Tribulation period with the trumpet judgments and the bowl judgments added on top of them. No wonder Jesus said that unless the days were cut short, all flesh would perish.

But the most amazing thing is how earth’s unbelievers respond to these judgments. Verse 15 to 17 say that instead of calling on Christ for salvation, “The kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’”

It reminds me of a survey taken among 627 young adults in twelve different vocational schools. They were asked, “What would you do if you had only one day to live?” 20% said they would spend their last hours drinking, taking drugs, and engaging in sexual immorality. Others said they would not wait for death to come, but would end it quickly by taking their own lives. Only one young lady, an 18 year-old Christian, wrote: “I would like to spend my last evening in church alone with my Savior, thanking Him for a full and happy life.” People react very differently to the prospect of death depending on their relationship with Jesus Christ.

What about you? Have you prepared yourself for the capital punishment of this planet? Because it is coming soon and we need to be ready. E. Schuyler English told the following story.

A man who lived on Long Island was able to satisfy a lifelong ambition by purchasing for himself a very fine barometer. But when the instrument arrived at his home, he was disappointed to find the needle stuck pointing to the sector marked "Hurricane." After shaking the barometer vigorously several times, the new owner sat down and wrote a scorching letter to the store from which he bought it. The following morning on the way to his office in New York, he mailed the letter. That evening he then returned to Long Island to find not only his new barometer missing, but his house also. The barometer's needle had been right. There was a hurricane!

So often that's how people react when warned about the Second Coming of Jesus. They think it is just another religious fairytale. In fact, scientists have even come up with a scientific term to explain it away. They call it "uniformitarianism." It's the theory that nothing will happen tomorrow that hasn't happened yesterday or today. In other words, "Since there's never been a worldwide catastrophe in the past, there won't be one in the future either."

Peter warned against this fallacious thinking in 2 Peter 3:3-7. "Knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.' For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly."

That passage came to mind when our family visited the Grand Canyon. Our guide offered his theory as to how it came about. Never did he mention the possibility of a flood. He said it took 6 to 10 million years, but it was the Colorado River that slowly cut its way through that mile of rock. You see, most modern geologists are not Bible-believing Christians. They do not believe there was a worldwide judgment in the past. But we know differently. The Bible says God once acted as the executioner of this planet filled with sinners, and that everything with the breath of life in it died with the exception of Noah and his family. Furthermore, John warns that He will do it again when the time is right. So just as Noah and his family hid in the ark, hide yourself in Jesus, the only Rock that can keep you safe when judgment begins.