

Charts: The Tribulation: Chart #9

PREFACE

I don't believe I can improve on the way John F. Walvoord, late and long-time president of Dallas Theological Seminary, prefaces the breaking of the sixth seal.

Walvoord: It would be difficult to paint any scene more moving or more terrible than that described at the opening of the sixth seal. All the elements of a great catastrophic judgment of God are here present, namely, a great earthquake, the sun becoming black, the moon becoming as blood, the stars of heaven falling like ripe figs, the heaven departing as a scroll, and every mountain and island moving. This is an awe-inspiring scene, but what does it mean prophetically?

Indeed, that is what we are about: As a prophecy, what does it mean—and, for our purposes, where are these events to be placed in the timeline of the Eschaton? Let's begin by reading this dramatic and disturbing passage.

Read Revelation 6:12-17.

Although it is true that God is ultimately behind *every* event of the Eschaton, we have here in the breaking of the sixth seal the first instance of God working directly. The results of the first four seals—war, famine, death—and even the martyrdom of the saints in the fifth seal, were largely the results of human agency, springing from the evil heart of man. In the sixth seal, however, we see “divine punishment inflicted upon a blasphemous world” (Walvoord), through what insurance agents here on earth would term “acts of God.”

There are those who reject a literal interpretation of this passage because of its placement—i.e., far too early in the Eschaton for this to take place. But these, too, are often the ones who interpret just about everything in the end times prophecies from an historical perspective (“historicists”).

Then there are a few who take their literalist interpretation to the point of absurdity: if the KJV says “the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places,” then they see a sky literally disappearing and mountains dancing freely across the plains.

I recommend a calm, measured method of interpretation that falls somewhere in-between. We can interpret these catastrophic events described in vv12-17 literally—that is, actual geologic, atmospheric, and celestial events that are unnaturally calamitous—yet keep in mind that the narrator, John, is grasping at terrestrial imagery with which to describe them. Let's first examine the details of the text to understand the events and imagery; then we will determine how and where to *place* them in the Tribulation.

The dramatic occurrences described in this passage are prophesied in a number of other places in Scripture—OT and NT alike. These events were foretold as early as the time of Joel (800s BC), Hosea (c.746 BC), and Isaiah (c.740 BC), as well as by Jesus in the gospel accounts.

v12

I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood;

I recall one fine morning, sitting at my desk in our home in San Diego, when I sensed something approaching in the ground beneath my feet. The sensation became stronger, and stronger, then it rolled past beneath me and continued on until I felt it no more. It was the unmistakable sensation of someone snapping the earth as one snaps a rug, with the concrete slab on which our house was built reduced to little more than chocolate pudding as the waves passed through it. Then it was gone. Most extraordinary to this Midwesterner.

That is *not* the sort of earthquake we are talking about in v12. *This* one will change the order of the landscape. It will be so strong that it will produce even *atmospheric* changes.

Read Jeremiah 4:23-26.

This will be a global temblor far worse than anything previously known to man. Now, let us be clear: The Lord God is capable of doing anything He pleases with the universe He created. There is no limit to not just His power, but His artful imagination. If God so chooses, He can literally switch off the atoms and gases that create the light and heat of our sun, leaving it dark. He also can speak and turn the surface of the moon from gray to the color of blood—He could even turn the surface of the moon *to* blood, if He was of such a mind. But is that what is being described here?

We know even from this last week that when the moon is thrown into eclipse, it takes on an orange or reddish cast. To someone living in the Middle East in the first century, probably the most readily available example of the color red would be blood. And we also know that violent earthquakes can raise a lot of dust into the air, not to mention that volcanic eruptions often accompany earthquakes—or the other way around—which can thoroughly mask out the sun for days.

Sidebar: The typical tents of the Bedouin in the Middle East, and those made by the apostle Paul, were made of black, woven goat hair.

The prophet Joel wrote,

[The LORD says,] “I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth,
Blood, fire and columns of smoke.
The sun will be turned into darkness
And the moon into blood
Before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” (Joel 2:30-31)

v13

and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind.

John’s imagery reminds me of when Linda and I are collecting wild plums. Very often the easiest method is to lay a sheet beneath the bush (as best as one can in the sloping, weed-infested brush) and give a good shake to the branches to send the plums raining down onto the sheet. In this case it is the ripe plums which fall, and the unripe that cling to their stems. Some of the other versions of v13 help us out better than the NASB, as in the NKJV: “as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind.” That is, the apostle refers to figs which form too late in the season to ripen before winter, and thus are shed when spring arrives. (Rev. Robert Tuck, B.A., 1892)

As to the stars of the sky falling to the earth, we can imagine a number of possibilities that might be so described by someone—a non-scientist—in the first century. First, the text does not say that *every* star fell. What do many “non-scientist” people today call a meteor? A “falling star.” If even *one* literal star fell literally to the surface of the earth—that’s all she wrote; end of story; end of everything. There would be no one to “hid[e] themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,” for the mountains—indeed, the earth itself—would no longer exist.

It seems rather obvious that John probably describes a meteor storm, a visually dramatic and potentially lethal cascade of meteors toward earth.

The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

The imagery here is confusing—even contradictory. If one imagines a scroll (such as the one in Chart #9), one could split it apart *or* one could roll it up—one or the other, but not both. The word translated “split apart” in the NASB (in others, “vanished,” “receded,” “departed”) is *apechoristhe*, which means to separate, rend apart, or depart. The KJV seems to track the best: “And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together.” Again, with all this going on—great upheavals on the earth, meteors crashing down—one would expect the stars in the night sky to vanish, that is, to be utterly obscured to human vision. Isaiah puts it this way:

And all the host of heaven will wear away,
And the sky will be rolled up like a scroll;
All their hosts will also wither away
As a leaf withers from the vine,
Or as one withers from the fig tree. (Isaiah 34:4).

With this cataclysmic earthquake occurring, topography is going to be changed. Contrary to the image of mountains dancing across the plain, however, the word translated “moved” or “removed” is *ekinethesan*, from *kineo*, which means to move or shake, as in shaking one’s head. It mean something like “moving about,” which does not necessarily require them to be walking across the countryside. A sensible interpretation is that the mountains and islands are being fiercely shaken, even some mountains reduced to rubble, or islands disappearing beneath the waves. If a mountain is standing still in one spot for thousands of years (in its “place”), and suddenly is shaking and crumbling before one’s eyes, it could reasonably be said that the mountain was “moved out of [its] place.”

Another way to interpret these “moving” mountains is the prophet Zechariah’s description of Christ’s return:

In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south. (Zechariah 14:4)

That description fits well with what happens in places to the earth’s crust, as one side of a fault line slides in one direction and the other side of the fault line in slides the opposite direction, grinding against each other.

v15

Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains;

Perhaps the most repeated element of this cataclysmic prophecy is that this time will be so bad that men will seek refuge in the rocks and caves of the mountains.

Read Isaiah 2:12, 17-21.

Is it not interesting that even as the mountains are quaking and shifting, men of all stations choose *there* to hide. Verse 16 explains why.

v16

and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb..."

Is it too late? One wonders, instead of running to hide—effectively committing suicide—could these people have just repented and accepted Christ Jesus—the Lamb—as Lord and Savior? Is it now too late for that decision? Do they know their time is up and they are out of options? Or are they so terrified by the cataclysmic events that they are reduced to unreasoning, bestial behavior? It is impossible to say; we can only praise God that we, as believers, will not find ourselves in that terrible situation.

Note that they seek refuge from the "presence" or "face" of Father God (*prosopou*), but the "wrath" of the Lamb. We discussed earlier how in a very real sense Father and Son in the Eschaton are almost interchangeable. But, to put it in base human terminology, Christ Jesus is the star of the show. *He* is the one coming in judgment to rule the earth; *He* is the one wielding the "rod of iron." *He* is the one to fear.

v17

"...for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

Now those seeking shelter or quick death reveal that it is the wrath of *both* Father and Son they fear. Their anguished question—"and who is able to stand?"—answers itself: No one. No one by their own merits. No one not already aligned with Jesus the Christ is able to stand.

PLACING vv12-17

Jesus Himself gives us a clue to when these events will take place. [Turn please to Matthew 24](#). Note first how His prophecy ties in so well with our passage in Revelation. Let's begin with v29.

“But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

Now, what Jesus says next tells us when this occurs in the Eschaton.

“And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.”

That is the second coming of Christ immediately at the end of the Tribulation. That passage we read earlier from Zechariah 14 of Christ standing on the Mount of Olives, with the mountain being split and the halves moving in different directions—that, too, is all at His return.

So what are we to make of this narrative being situated beneath the sixth seal, so near the beginning of the Tribulation?

Walvoord: The day of wrath in one sense is the whole period of the great tribulation, when God will deal in direct judgment with the world, climaxing with the return of Christ in power and glory and divine judgment upon all who oppose His coming. E. W. Bullinger describes the first six seals as “a summary of the judgments distributed over the whole book; a brief summary of what will occur in ‘the day of the Lord,’ up to the time of His actual Apocalypse or Unveiling in chapter 19.” In some sense chapter 6 is the outline of the important facts of the period of great tribulation, and the rest of the events of the book of Revelation are comprehended in the seventh seal introduced in chapter 8.

Thus I believe that the events portrayed with the breaking of the sixth seal—Revelation 6:12-17—are a “preview,” as it were, for the apostle John of the final days of the Tribulation just prior to the coming of the Lord. They do not speak at all of events in the early days of the Tribulation, but foreshadow the climactic end of the First Act of the Eschaton, still seven years away.