

CHAPTER 6

THE SEALS, THE TRUMPETS, AND THE PLAGUES

Three visions in Revelation deal with a series of seven occurrences: the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven last plagues. These visions are parallel from the standpoint of covering the same time period. The first six events in each of these series describe things that take place during this Christian dispensation. The seventh takes us into the time of judgment. The difference in the visions is that they each describe different events that affect mankind. The seven seals describe the forces on this earth, which affect the physical lives of men. The seven trumpets describe those forces, which affect the spiritual lives of men while the seven plagues show the consequence of being disobedient to God.

As we study these three visions, it will be helpful to make comparisons. Events which are clear in one series may help explain those which are not so clear in another.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SEALS

Before studying the vision of the seven seals, it is important to have an overall understanding of the entire vision. As Christ opens each of the first four seals, one of the four living creatures introduces the vision. Four horses of different colors are revealed and are ridden by four different riders. The horse is a symbol of war. In order for armies to be strong during this period of history, they had to possess many horses. These horses are symbolic of the different types of wars Christians must fight, and their color determines the type of war being described.

In keeping with the use of the number "4" in Revelation, the events of these four seals are physical events which must take place upon this earth during the entire Christian age. The fifth seal shows that God is aware of the physical persecutions and trials that Christians must suffer. It also shows that if Christians remain faithful through these trials, they will have a home in heaven with God. The sixth seal goes to the end of time. It represents an end to all physical things here on earth and describes the total destruction to take place on that last day.

Chapter 7 answers the question asked in verse 17: "Who shall be able to stand?" It assures us that if we remain faithful, when that last day comes, we will be able to stand. We will not have to hide from God, as sinners are pictured as doing in verse 16. Rev. 7:9 says that the redeemed "stand" before the throne of God.

The seventh seal then goes into the time of judgment. All sinners will have their place in total destruction as symbolized by an earthquake, which would be a great shaking of the people of the earth. Therefore, this vision of the seven seals is a picture of the entire Christian age and judgment.

Many commentators have difficulty with Revelation, for they seek to make it a chronological order of events. They fail to see how the time of judgment could be so early in the book. Because of this, they avoid interpreting anything as meaning the time of judgment until they get into the latter part of chapter 19. The reason we are at the judgment scene so soon in the book is that the vision of the seven seals is complete within itself. It covers the entire Christian dispensation, the end of time, and judgment. The next vision in Revelation, the seven trumpets, will follow this same pattern. The obvious question would be: If we have covered all of time and judgment, why would we have another vision covering the same time period? The answer is this: The subjects being discussed are different. The seals deal with physical matters, and the trumpets deal with spiritual matters. This is an important concept to keep in mind while studying Revelation.

A “SEAL”

The next thing that must be done in order to understand this vision is define a “seal.” In Old Testament times, a seal or signet was used as a symbol of authority. A king would place his seal upon a document to signify its authenticity. Esther 3:12 gives an example of a letter being sealed with a king’s ring to show that it definitely came from the king. Today, we put a signature on a document to indicate the same thing. In some cases, seals or stamps may still be used.

Another purpose of a seal would be to preserve or secure something. We seal jars, packages, and envelopes to secure their contents.

If these meanings of a seal are applied to this book sealed by God, it shows: (1) that God has written and preserved the contents of this book, and (2) it is definitely a message from God. Since the contents of this book are sealed or preserved by God; they cannot be changed by man. Just as a king would place his seal upon a document to make it a law, God has placed his seven divine seals on this book to show that the events contained therein will definitely occur. As Christ opens these seals to reveal the contents of this book, we must realize that the events pictured will absolutely take place. God has sealed them!

God sealed this book with seven seals, showing its divine completeness. In earlier times, multiple seals were used to show the importance of the document. This is a book of great importance. It was written and sealed by the most powerful king of all--- God Almighty.

THE FIRST FOUR SEALS: THE FOUR HORSEMEN

Verse 1. And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.

The Lamb (Christ) opened the first seal, and there was a great noise of thunder, indicating an event of tremendous importance about to be revealed. According to 5:9, Christ had acquired the ability to open these seals because he had given his life to redeem man.

The ASV translates the last phrase as follows:”... and I heard one of the four living saying... , Come.” This statement seems to be directed to those in the vision, not to John. It is as if these living creatures were bidding the actors to come on stage.

Each of the first four seals is introduced by one of the four living creatures. Since the events being described deal with physical events taking place on the earth, we have interpreted the symbolic meaning of the living creatures in 4:6-9 as representing God’s ability to see and know all the physical actions of mankind. (See comments on v. 8.)

Verse 2. And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

As Christ opens the first seal, a white horse appears. The rider is carrying a bow and receives a crown. We are in agreement with those commentators who identify the rider of this horse as Christ. The symbolic white horse is also used in 19:11, and in that passage its rider is definitely identified as Christ. The horse is symbolic of wars and battles which Christians will have to fight on this earth throughout the Christian age. The color white is always used to represent purity or holiness. Therefore, this white horse signifies a righteous war. In 19:19-21, the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies make war with Christ who sits upon the white horse. In 19:14, the army of Christ, Christians, are also pictured as sitting upon white horses and following Christ.

The bow carried by this rider indicates great strength in battle, and the crown he wears represents power and authority.

This white horse is a symbolic description of the battle which Christ and his followers will fight on this earth. It is a war against evil. Mt. 24:14 says, “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.” Christ is fighting this war against evil through his followers as they spread the gospel throughout the entire world. Christ conquers evil every time a person becomes obedient to the gospel. Christians have a powerful weapon to use in this battle as symbolized by the bow. It is the gospel. Rom.

1:16 says the gospel is “the power of God unto salvation.” We also have great authority as represented by the crown. Our authority comes from God through his Word.

Today, Christ sits upon a white horse leading his followers who also sit upon white horses spreading the gospel throughout the world. This is a war that will definitely take place because God has sealed it. The white horse is being ridden throughout the world today.

Verses 3, 4. And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.

As Christ opens the second seal, the second living creature bids the vision to begin as he says, “Come.” The horse in this seal is colored red which symbolizes bloodshed. Joseph’s brothers dipped his coat of many colors in blood to fool their father into thinking he was dead (Gen. 37:31). Since red is the color of blood, it is symbolic of bloodshed or death.

The rider of this red horse has the power to take peace from the earth and cause people to kill one another. We should not identify this rider as any one specific person. He represents any force on this earth that is responsible for wars that cause people to kill each other. Mt. 24:6, 7 says, “And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: ... for nation shall rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom.” Throughout history, men have been at war with one another, and it is no different today. We hear or read of conflicts somewhere in the world almost daily. This is one form of physical persecution through which Christians must remain faithful in order to be acceptable to God. These physical trials will be present as long as the world stands because God has sealed it.

The rider of this horse was given a great sword. This probably reminded the people of John’s time of the great Roman short sword. It was the supreme weapon of that age and was used to inflict terror and slaughterings upon many people. It is symbolic of any weapon that might be used to take peace from the earth.

Verse 5. And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

As the third seal is opened, there appears a black horse. The color black is representative of mourning or death. Therefore, the events described by this seal will bring severe hardships and possibly even death to those affected by it.

This horseman has a pair of balances in his hand. According to verse 6, they are used for weighing food. To weigh food would indicate that it is in short supply. This shows that throughout the Christian age, there will be times of food shortages upon the earth. During these times, food will have to be measured or, as we might put it, rationed. (See Lev. 26:26.)

Verse 6. And I heard a voice In the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.

A measure of wheat or three measures of barley could be bought for a penny, or shilling (ASV). According to William Barclay, this measure was “equivalent to two pints and consistently defined in the ancient world as a man’s ration for a day.” He says the amount of money specified here was the “equivalent of four pence and was a working man’s wage for a day.”² If these figures are correct, this would mean that a man’s complete wages would be needed in order to feed himself. This would most definitely be a poverty situation.

This third seal then represents more physical trials and hardships which people must endure upon this earth. Mt. 24:7 says, “There shall be famines and pestilences, and earthquakes in divers places.” There will always be situations of poverty and famines and people who are in need as long as the world exists. These trials maybe difficult and even cause death, and they will continue as long as the earth stands because God has sealed it.

The voice among the four beasts, which was probably God’s (see 4:6), said that the oil and

wine should not be hurt. It may not be possible to know the exact meaning, but it probably indicates that there will always be riches among the poverty. Oil and wine have always been items of luxury. They are valuable to own and expensive to buy. Mt. 26:6-13 gives the account of the woman who anointed Jesus' head with expensive ointment. The disciples thought the ointment should "have been sold for much, and given to the poor" because it had great value (Mt. 26:9). This seal explains that items of great value and people who are wealthy will always be a part of this world. While some are near starvation, others will be living a life of luxury. This is the situation of the world today, and according to this seal, it always will be. The black horse is being ridden throughout the world today.

Verses 7,8. And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

As the fourth seal is opened, a pale horse appears, and its rider is identified as death. Death would also be the symbolic meaning of the pale color. Hell, or Hades, which is the place of the dead, follows after this horse. The persecutions described by this seal will be so severe as to cause the death of those affected by it.

The rider of this pale horse is given power over the fourth part of the earth to kill by the sword, hunger, death, and beasts of the earth. The proper interpretation of verse 8 lies in understanding the meaning of the fourth part of the earth. A complete examination of the fractions "1/4" and "1/3" is given in the introduction to the series of seven trumpets in 8:6. To understand the meaning of these fractions, it is almost essential that they be studied together so that comparisons can be made. We will give a brief explanation of the "fourth part of the earth" here.

The number "1/4" is used to designate a part of something. This is exactly how it is used in this verse. We know the earth is used to symbolize those people who live upon it because it is people who are killed by the sword, not the actual earth. Therefore, this rider on the pale horse, death, had power over the fourth part of the people of the earth.

The problem many people have in interpreting the "fourth part" is that they make it a literal number instead of figurative. This number is no different from most other numbers in Revelation; it is descriptive. It describes the part of man that the rider of this horse controls. In order to understand this, we must first recognize that man, unlike animals, has two parts to his being. He has a physical body and a spiritual soul. We often use this concept in our prayers as we ask for both physical and spiritual blessings.

As is true throughout Revelation, the number "4" is used to designate the physical things of this world. In order to use the number "4" to designate one of the two parts of man, it would be used as a fraction because a fraction is a part of the whole. Therefore, this fraction "1/4" is used to designate the physical part of any man. It identifies which part of man this rider on the pale horse controls. He controls only the physical life of man. He has the power to take physical life with the sword, or hunger, but he can never destroy man's spiritual life if he remains faithful throughout these physical persecutions. Mt. 10:28 says, "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Therefore, the purpose of this fourth seal is to show that throughout the gospel age, we will be subject to physical persecutions, maybe even to the point of death.

The fraction "1/3" is used extensively in the series of seven trumpets to designate the spiritual part of man.

It is likely that the term "beasts" also has a figurative meaning in this passage. In Dan. 7:17, the term "beast" is used to symbolize worldwide earthly kingdoms. This is the meaning that must be applied to the beast with seven heads and ten horns in chapters 13 and 17. Since that is the meaning of the "beast" in those passages, it probably should be applied here also. The "beast" would then represent those ungodly civil governments of all ages which torture and kill anyone who is disobedient to their laws even though they may conflict with God's laws.

Whether this term refers to persecuting governments or actual wild beasts that have been used

to kill Christians for the pleasure of great audiences, the lesson remains the same. All through the gospel age, Christians will be subjected to many physical persecutions. We must be careful never to deny our faith, even in the face of certain death.

SUMMARY OF THE FIRST FOUR SEALS

From the interpretation of the first four seals, it becomes apparent that they deal with events that take place on this earth all during the Christian dispensation. The first seal represents the actual going out into the world to spread the gospel; thereby waging war against evil. The second represents wars that will be fought between nations. The third describes certain types of physical hardships that will be prevalent throughout the ages, and the fourth describes all types of physical persecutions which people will suffer until Christ comes again. God has said these events must take place. They are sealed.

Not all people are affected by all of these seals. Some may suffer the hardships of famine while others undergo the persecutions of civil governments. Some may even be fortunate enough to live in a time and place where these trials and persecutions are limited. The purpose of this vision is to show that these events must occur all through the Christian age until Christ returns.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LAST THREE SEALS

The first four seals deal with events in which the people of this world affect each other. For example, the first seal teaches that the gospel will be spread throughout the world and those who teach it definitely affect those who hear it. The second seal shows that there will be wars upon this earth until Christ comes again, and they are caused by man himself. The third seal says that some will live lives of luxury at the expense of others who are in poverty, and the fourth seal explains that there will always be those who persecute and oppress others.

The last three seals are somewhat different to this. They describe events that God will set into motion and no man can avoid. The only thing man can do is prepare himself for these great events by being obedient to the gospel. Whether a man is prepared or not will determine how he is affected by these last three seals.

THE FIFTH SEAL: THE CRY OF THE MARTYRS

Verse 9. 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:

The opening of the fifth seal reveals the destiny of Christians who keep their faith through the physical persecutions of this life. The specific group of Christians referred to in verse 9 are those who are slain because they remain faithful to God. They are martyrs. The fourth seal revealed that some men would persecute others even to the point of death, and this seal shows that Christians will prevail even though they may lose their physical lives. We know these "souls" are Christians because they had the Word of God and his testimony, which they refused to surrender.

The souls of these martyrs are found under the altar. According to 8:3, the altar is located "before the throne." This places the souls of these martyrs in the presence of God. This teaches that God knows the persecutions and trials of his people and is always concerned. If we remain faithful, even at the expense of our physical life, we will eventually be able to dwell in the presence of God forever.

We should not view these souls which were slain as any specific group of martyrs. They represent anyone who is required to give his life in service to God.

Verse 10. 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?

The martyrs are asking God to avenge their blood on those who had persecuted them. This

should not be misunderstood to mean that Christians should take vengeance on their persecutors. Lk. 18:7,8 says, “And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily.” Christians should be totally against all forms of sin; yet it is not our responsibility to go out and physically destroy those who sin. Christians, armed with the Word of God, are to fight a spiritual war against sin. Coffman says, “For Christians, upon their own behalf, to engage in acts of vengeance is indeed sinful; but for them to pray for God’s vengeance to fall upon their enemies is right, a proposition that is proved by the verse we are studying.”³

Verse 11. And white robes were given unto every one 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.

According to 19:8, white robes represent the righteousness of saints. White robes were presented to the martyrs, indicating that they had lived righteous lives. This identifies these souls as Christians.

An incorrect interpretation of verse 11 causes many to misunderstand the meaning of the white robes. It is common among those who interpret Revelation to believe that we will be in heaven before we receive these white robes. This one misinterpretation causes several other passages in the book to be misunderstood. We repeat for emphasis’ sake, the white robes are the “righteousness of saints.” When we obey the gospel, we put on the white robes of righteousness. In 3:4, speaking of the saints of Sardis, Jesus said there are a few who “have not defiled their garments.” When they obeyed the gospel, they had put on the “righteousness of saints.” (white robes), and they had kept them undefiled because they continued to be faithful to Christ. The white robes are not literal. They are symbolic of the forgiveness of sin we have through our obedience to the gospel.

White robes were given to these martyrs in this passage to identify them as Christians. When we reach heaven, it may be that we will actually wear white robes, but there is no way to know this for certain. Since we do not even know what form our bodies will take, how can we possibly know what we will wear?

These martyrs were told that they should rest for a little season until other of their brethren should be killed as they were. This “little season” must refer to the entire Christian dispensation because we know that persecutions and even killing of Christians due to their faith has not ceased on this earth and will not cease until Christ returns. We are blessed to live at a time and place where freedom of religion is an accepted practice, but we have no way of knowing what the future holds in regard to this matter.

The lesson of verse 11 is that God will eventually avenge the blood of martyrs, but he will do it when the time is right. God does not keep us from the persecutions of this life, but he will avenge our blood at judgment.

THE SIXTH SEAL: THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE

Verse 12. 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;

The opening of this sixth seal takes us to the end of time. The description given here must represent events as they will occur at Christ’s second coming. They represent the end of all worldly or physical things as we know them. The same type of figurative language is also used in the Old Testament to describe great events of our Lord. (See Joel 2:10,11; Is. 13:5-11.)

Many view these events as literal, and this seems reasonable because 2 Pet. 3:10 says that when the Lord comes again “the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” But, we recognize that Revelation is written in symbolic language, and many of the items described in this sixth seal could also have symbolic meanings. For example, the sun, moon, and stars are those heavenly bodies which give light unto the earth, but when they are used

symbolically, they would represent those forces on this earth which give light, or direction, to the people of the world. Mt. 5:16 says, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works." (Also see Jer. 4:22, 23.) Those who are leaders, whether they are political, religious, educational, or social, could be considered as lights unto the world.

When the sun becomes black and the moon as blood, these lights of the world will cease to shine. When Christ returns, the only power that will exist will be his. All others will cease. Those who are great leaders upon this earth will no longer have any power at all. The light of their great leadership will be darkened.

At this time there will also be a great earthquake. This represents a tremendous shaking of the people of the earth. Heb. 12:28 says that we (Christians) have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken. At the end of time, all physical things of this world will be destroyed, and only the church will be able to stand. This warns us not to put our trust in the powers of this world because when Christ returns, they will all cease. We must put our trust in God, the greatest power of all, and be a part of his kingdom which will never be shaken--- the church.

Verse 13. And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely fig when she is shaken of a mighty wind.

Just as a strong wind will cause figs to fall to the ground before they have ripened, the powers that control the earth will be cast down at Christ's second coming, even though they may be at the height of their powerful reign. No power on earth will be able to stand against the power of God. Even if verse 13 were interpreted literally, the message remains the same, At Christ's second coming, all things of this world will be destroyed.

Verse 14. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

Mountains are used figuratively in the Old Testament to denote powerful enemies of God's people in the form of governmental kingdoms or nations, (See Is. 41:15; Jer. 51:24, 25; Amos 4:1.) "Islands" are sometimes used to figuratively represent leaders among the people. (See Is. 41:1; 59:18.) When we apply these meanings in verse 14, it teaches that all earthly kingdoms and their leaders will fall from power. This once again shows that God is all powerful, and at his coming all powers in force will fall before him. They will be moved out of their places.

Verse 15. 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;

As is common throughout the book, the number "7" is evident in verse 15. There are seven classes of people mentioned here, ranging from the greatest to the least, according to their status upon the earth.

When Christ returns, many people from all walks of life will seek places to hide in order to escape the wrath of God Almighty because they will be unprepared to meet him.

Verse 16. 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:

When Christ returns, anyone who is unprepared to meet him will desire to hide in any way possible. They will beg to be crushed by rocks and mountains in preference to facing the wrath of God. Obviously, they will not have this choice. This description is given in order to show how terrible it will be to face God unprepared.

Verse 17. For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

The "great day of his wrath" must refer to the judgment day. Jude 6 says that the "angels which kept not their first estate" have been "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day." When Christ returns to this earth, the day of judgment will have come. There will be no period of a thousand years between Christ's coming and judgment. It will

take place immediately. For those who are unprepared, it will be a day of fear and destruction unlike any ever before known to man. This sixth seal has included a description of that terror in verses 15 and 16.

The question asked in this verse, “Who shall be able to stand?” is important in understanding, not only the sixth seal, but also all of chapter 7. On the last great day there will be those who will not have to hide their faces and beg for rocks or mountains to fall on them. Those people will be the redeemed. They are the ones who have obeyed the gospel and been faithful through the trials of life. Chapter 7 is a description of those who will be able to stand” at this great day.

The sixth seal is a figurative description of the final destruction of all physical things of this world at Christ’s second coming. For those who are unprepared, it will be a great day of fear, but it will be a great day of victory to those who are “able to stand.”

¹William Barclay, *The Revelation of John, Vol. 2* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 7.

²Ibid.

³James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on Revelation* (Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1979), p. 145.

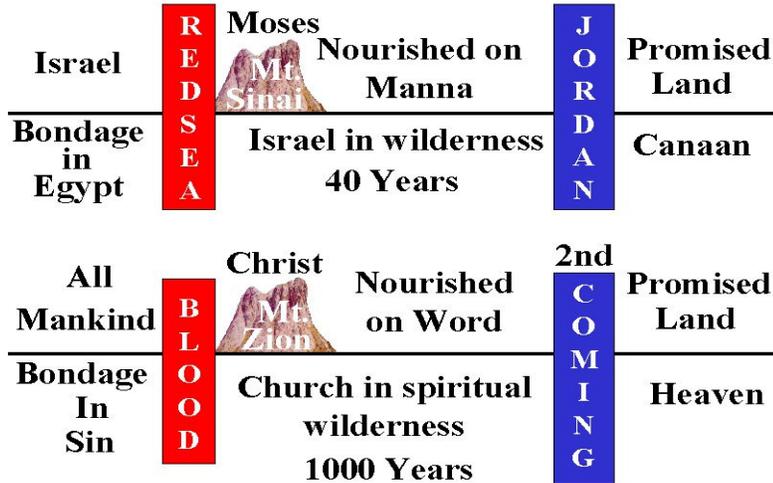
PHYSICAL/SPIRITUAL PARALLELS

CHAPTER 7

In chapter 7, there are two great parallels between physical Israel and spiritual Israel that help in understanding these visions. Below is a concise drawing of these parallels, which were

explained at the beginning of this book. Please review those pages and examine the diagram below. The top of the time line refers to physical Israel of the Old Testament, and the bottom refers to the spiritual parallels of this Christian dispensation.

A Parallel Comparison of Israel and the Church



First, verse 14 deals with a period of time known as the great tribulation. Just as Israel of old was in physical tribulation of slavery during the time of Moses, all those who are living outside the spiritual kingdom of God today are in great spiritual tribulation. They are in the bondage of sin. See Jn. 8:32-34.

Second, the giving of the law of Moses on Mt. Sinai was the great physical parallel to Christ giving his law (gospel) on spiritual Mt. Zion. See Mic. 4:1-7. According to Mic. 4:7, Christ reigns on spiritual Mt. Zion today; therefore, those who stand on Mt. Zion with him are Christians. They are described in Rev. 14 as the 144,000. See the summary at the close of this book for a thorough discussion of this symbolic number. The great truth being pictured in the visions of this chapter is that those who are in the bondage of sin (great tribulation) are coming out of that spiritual tribulation by washing their robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb. They then become a part of the symbolic 144,000 who reign with Christ on Mt. Zion. Verse 9 describes them as a great multitude dressed in white robes who stand before the throne of God. They are Christians.