Lesson 1

Here Comes the Judge!

1. You are conducting random interviews at a shopping mall, asking the question: “How would you describe God?” Which of the following answers do you think people would most commonly give?
   a) Creator  
   b) Spirit  
   c) Judge  
   d) Savior  
   e) King  
   f) Lord  
   g) Father  
   h) Friend  
   i) Other

2. Of the following adjectives, which description of God is dominant in your mind?
   a) loving  
   b) powerful  
   c) merciful  
   d) forgiving  
   e) vengeful  
   f) sovereign (i.e., in control)  
   g) angry  
   h) compassionate  
   i) all-knowing  
   j) patient  
   k) stern  
   l) distant  
   m) other

3. Now read through the lists above again, this time noting the answers you would expect if you asked churchgoers those questions after a Sunday service. How might their ideas about the nature of God differ from the population in the mall?
4. Why do you think courtroom reality TV shows are perennially popular in our culture? In what ways do they represent a deep human yearning for true accountability and justice?

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**Unfolding the Story**

*(Left Behind, pp. 310–12)*

The first book in the Left Behind series features a small group of people (including a minister) who are trying to discover what will happen now that millions have suddenly disappeared from the earth. The minister, Bruce Barnes, leads the confused bunch in a serious study of the Bible so they can be prepared for what is yet to come. Here’s a scene from one of their first few get-togethers:

“**Let me just briefly outline** the Seven-Sealed Scroll from Revelation five, and then I’ll let you go. On the one hand, I don’t want to give you a spirit of fear, but we all know we’re still here because we neglected salvation before the Rapture. I know we’re grateful for the second chance, but we cannot expect to escape the trials that are coming.”

Bruce explained that the first four seals in the scroll were described as men on four horses: a white horse, a red horse, a black horse, and a pale horse. “The white horseman apparently is the Antichrist, who ushers in one to three months of diplomacy while getting organized and promising peace.

“The red horse signifies war. The Antichrist will be opposed by three rulers from the south, and millions will be killed.”

“In World War III?”

“That’s my assumption.”

“That would mean within the next six months.”

“I’m afraid so. And immediately following that, which will take only three to six
months because of the nuclear weaponry available, the Bible predicts inflation and famine—the black horse. As the rich get richer, the poor starve to death. More millions will die that way.”

“So if we survive the war, we need to stockpile food?”

Bruce nodded. “I would.”

“We should work together.”

“Good idea, because it gets worse. That killer famine could be as short as two or three months before the arrival of the fourth Seal Judgment, the fourth horseman on the pale horse—the symbol of death. Besides the postwar famine, a plague will sweep the entire world. Before the fifth Seal Judgment, a quarter of the world’s population will be dead.”

“What’s the fifth Seal Judgment?”

“Well,” Bruce said, “you’re going to recognize this one because we’ve talked about it before. Remember my telling you about the 144,000 Jewish witnesses who try to evangelize the world for Christ? Many of their converts, perhaps millions, will be martyred by the world leader and the harlot, which is the name for the one world religion that denies Christ.

“The sixth Seal Judgment,” Bruce continued, “is God pouring out his wrath against the killing of his saints. This will come in the form of a worldwide earthquake so devastating that no instrument would be able to measure it. It will be so bad that people will cry out for rocks to fall on them and put them out of their misery.” Several in the room began to weep. “The seventh seal introduces the seven Trumpet Judgments, which will take place in the second quarter of this seven-year period.”

5. According to Bruce (and Revelation 5–6), what events lie just ahead for both the post-Rapture world and their group (which dubs itself the “Tribulation Force”)?
6. Which of the following terms best describe Bruce’s tone: grim, hopeful, or matter-of-fact? Why?

Back to Reality

Most of us face trials and uncertainty—everything from broken-down cars and job layoffs to chronic illnesses and the loss of loved ones. But what would it be like to be left behind at the Rapture, and then to realize that what you thought was odd and farfetched turned out to be true? To know that because the first incredible event has occurred, that the entire world is about to endure a series of devastating judgments unparalleled in human history?

It is hard to imagine being in that situation. Perhaps helping people to visualize and even feel the desperation and despair of such a situation explains one of the strongest attractions for people reading the Left Behind novels.

7. How do you think you might feel if you found yourself left behind? What might you do? Did the novels accurately convey what you would expect to experience?

8. When you read about these horrible events, how, if at all, does it affect your view of God?
9. How do you reconcile God’s divine and righteous judgment with God’s divine love and mercy?

A God of Wrath?

A God of wrath—the words seem contradictory. What does it mean that God, who describes himself as love (1 John 4:8), is also a being filled with wrath? How do we reconcile these ideas? Perhaps the following thoughts will be helpful:

The flip side of God’s righteousness is his wrath against evil. Certain aspects of human character elicit God’s wrath. It is the response of his holiness to all wickedness and rebellion. . . . God cannot tolerate sin because his nature is morally perfect. He cannot ignore or condone such willful rebellion. He wants to remove the sin and restore the sinner, but the sinner must not distort or reject the truth. . . . God shows his anger from heaven against those who persist in sinning.¹

Charles Ryrie reminds us that sometimes two ideas or concepts don’t fit easily together because they operate in sequence: “wrath results when grace is rejected.”²

Understanding the Word

One of the great principles of correct Bible interpretation is to take the whole counsel of God (i.e., the entire Bible) into consideration before coming to any conclusions. In other words, it is possible—if we focus only on one or two passages—to develop an incomplete and inaccurate picture of how things really are. Far too many people do this. They read, for example, a few verses about God’s judgment, and they form a wrong, warped view of the character of God.
Howard Hendricks, the legendary Bible teacher from Dallas Seminary, said the best way to avoid distorting the message of the Bible is to compare Scripture with Scripture: “That offers the greatest safety net, because the greatest interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself. . . . [T]he more you compare Scripture with Scripture, the more the meaning of the Bible becomes apparent. The parts take on meaning in light of the whole.”

Following the advice of Dr. Hendricks, let’s compare the grim revelation of coming wrath and judgment (Revelation 6–18) with this passage from 2 Peter 3:3–15:

First, I want to remind you that in the last days there will be scoffers who will laugh at the truth and do every evil thing they desire. This will be their argument: “Jesus promised to come back, did he? Then where is he? Why, as far back as anyone can remember, everything has remained exactly the same since the world was first created.” They deliberately forget that God made the heavens by the word of his command, and he brought the earth up from the water and surrounded it with water. Then he used the water to destroy the world with a mighty flood. And God has also commanded that the heavens and the earth will be consumed by fire on the day of judgment, when ungodly people will perish.

But you must not forget, dear friends, that a day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn’t really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent. But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and everything in them will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be exposed to judgment.

Since everything around us is going to melt away, what holy, godly lives you should be living! You should look forward to that day and hurry it along—the day when God will set the heavens on fire and the elements will melt away in the flames. But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world where everyone is right with God.

And so, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to live a pure and blameless life. And be at peace with God.

And remember, the Lord is waiting so that people have time to be saved.

10. What do these paragraphs from Scripture tell you about what is to come following the Rapture of the church?
11. What do these paragraphs tell you about the nature of God?

Next, ponder this verse:

*Notice how God is both kind and severe. He is severe to those who disobeyed, but kind to you as you continue to trust in his kindness. But if you stop trusting, you also will be cut off.* (Romans 11:22)

Consider also this Old Testament passage prophesying the coming of Messiah. Note carefully all that is foretold of his ministry:

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God.* (Isaiah 61:1–2 NASB; see also Luke 4:18–19)
13. What do the two passages above add to your understanding of the true nature of God? Are they contradictory, or complementary (showing the various facets of God’s character)?

Finding the Connection

If we fail to remember God’s long-suffering patience; if we forget his countless attempts down through the centuries to woo his rebellious creatures to himself; if all we do is focus on the terrible events of the Tribulation period, we will develop a twisted understanding of God’s heart. With so much violence and death prophesied for the end of the world, many fall into this devilish trap. They wrongly conclude that he is an angry, vindictive deity. Consequently they either avoid him or attack him—calling into question his person and his plans.

The characters in the Left Behind series try to keep God’s love and mercy in view. They are deeply thankful for their salvation, and they make it their aim to tell others the good news of forgiveness in Christ.

14. Christians do not have to worry about God’s wrath. Christ took the severest of punishments upon himself and gave believers his eternal life and favor. With this in mind, how should followers of Jesus be motivated by the truth of the “wrath of God”? What difference does that make in your life?
John 3:36 says:

*And all who believe in God’s Son have eternal life. Those who don’t obey the Son will never experience eternal life, but the wrath of God remains upon them.*

15. How does this verse alter the way you look at your non-Christian neighbors, friends, and/or family members?

“While this period is primarily a time of wrath and judgment, it also features a very strong note of mercy and grace—a note that too often gets overlooked. Sometimes . . . God gets a ‘bad rap’ when people focus exclusively on the judgments and terrors to come. They see the Lord as some kind of angry monster, heaping up catastrophes and pouring them on the heads of defenseless, innocent men and women, like an obnoxious child might pour gasoline down a teeming anthill with one hand while getting ready to drop a lit match with the other.

“But this is all wrong! First, those who suffer the judgments of God in the Tribulation are not ‘innocent men and women.’ . . . [T]he rebels alive at that time will not only reject God and his offer of salvation but will run greedily toward every vile sin known to man, including blasphemy of a kind beyond description. And second, despite their gross sin, God intends that these Tribulation judgments might lead even these wicked sinners to faith in his Son, Jesus Christ!”

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins

Making the Change

*(Tribulation Force, pp. 63–64)*

Tough, terrible times lie ahead for the world. Things will get much, much worse before they ever get better. Forget the chorus of optimistic voices who insist that mankind will somehow
figure out a way to live in peace and harmony. That will not take place until Christ returns in ruling glory. Anyone who asserts otherwise is deluded at best, a false prophet at worst.

Here’s how pastor Bruce Barnes summed up the beginning of that climactic period of divine judgment:

“**WE’VE ALREADY MISSED THE RAPTURE**, and now we live in what will soon become the most perilous period of history. Evangelists used to warn parishioners that they could be struck by a car or die in a fire and thus they should not put off coming to Christ. I’m telling you that should you be struck by a car or caught in a fire, it may be the most merciful way you can die. Be ready this time. Be ready. I will tell you how to get ready.

“My sermon title today is ‘The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,’ and I want to concentrate on the first, the rider of the white horse. If you’ve always thought the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse was a Notre Dame football backfield, God has a lesson for you today. . . .

“During these seven years, God will pour out three consecutive sets of judgments—seven seals in a scroll, which we call the Seal Judgments; seven trumpets; and seven bowls. These judgments, I believe, are handed down for the purposes of shaking us loose from whatever shred of security we might have left. If the Rapture didn’t get your attention, the judgments will. And if the judgments don’t, you’re going to die apart from God. Horrible as these judgments will be, I urge you to see them as final warnings from a loving God who is not willing that any should perish.”

“There will be a great ‘soul harvest’ during the Tribulation. Uncounted millions of men and women and girls and boys will recognize that, although they missed the Rapture and thus will have to endure the terrors of the Tribulation, yet God is still calling them, wooing them to His side. And through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, these individuals will respond in repentance and faith and will choose to forsake their rebellion and instead commit their lives and their futures into the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . And do not forget: Every one of these new believers will have been left behind after the Rapture precisely because he or she had (to that point) rejected God’s offer of salvation. Yet even then, the Lord will not give up on them. Even then, He will use whatever means necessary—fire, blood, earthquakes, plague, war, famine, persecution—to jolt them out of their spiritual slumber and into the waking enjoyment of His glorious light.

“Far from being a stomach-turning display of divine meanness, the Tribulation demonstrates beyond all doubt that our holy God is also a God who loves beyond all human reckoning.”

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins
16. What is the message from the novel for those who still have not opened their hearts and lives to Jesus Christ?

17. How should believers live in light of the certainty of immediacy of these events?

18. Do you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is your Savior? Are you following him as Lord of your life? If you answered no to either question, what are you waiting for? Why the delay?
Becoming a Christian

You are not a Christian because you live in a so-called “Christian nation.” You are not a Christian because you are involved (either superficially or deeply) in a Christian church. You are a Christian when Jesus Christ is in your life—when he is your life. How does this happen? How does Christ come to live in us? Does he sneak in? Barge in? No, he comes when we acknowledge our need for him and open our lives to him. He comes when we trust him to be our Savior.

A Christian understands he can’t DO anything to deserve Christ’s lavish offer of forgiveness and eternal life. On the contrary, she understands that Jesus has already DONE everything necessary to bring rebellious, messed-up people like ourselves into a right relationship with the one true God. Salvation is a gift (Ephesians 2:8–9). This gracious, surprising overture on the part of God is a no-strings-attached offer. We either take it by faith, or we reject it. To say “maybe later, but not right now” is the same as saying “no.”

If you’ve been putting off this most important of all decisions, perhaps you’d like to pray right now along these lines:

Lord Jesus, I need you. I admit that until this moment I have lived for myself and I have ignored you and shut you out of my life. I need you. I need forgiveness and peace. I need the life that only you can give. I believe that you died in my place and paid for my rebellious and foolish acts. I believe that you rose from the dead and stand ready to move into my life. I accept you as my Savior and King and Friend. Thank you for loving me and making me a child of God. Begin to change me now into the person you want me to be.

If you pray that prayer (or one like it) and are sincere, you can be sure that Jesus will forgive you, give you eternal life, and take up residence in your life. This is how we become true children of God.

Pursuing the Truth

Ezekiel 18:31 says:

Put all your rebellion behind you, and get for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O people of Israel?

19. What does this statement from God to his people Israel show you about the heart of God?
20. What aspect of God's character as “Judge” do you still not understand or continue to wrestle with?

“I run into people who are really blown away that I and the other faculty of a theological seminary can't explain everything in the Bible. So I usually provoke their thinking with a question: Does it really bother you that I as a finite person cannot fully understand an infinite Person? Does that really bother you? It would bother me more if I could, because then I wouldn't need God. I'd be as smart as He is.

“Don't get tied up in knots over the problems and unanswerable questions that come up in your study of the Bible. The miracle is that you can understand all the essential things that God wants you to understand for your eternal salvation and for your daily living.”

Howard Hendricks

21. What is the chief lesson you are taking away from this study?
22. List the names of the people in your life with whom you can share what you’ve learned in this lesson. Pray for these folks. Ask God to give you an opportunity to speak with them about spiritual matters.


Lesson in Review . . .

- A terrible time of judgment awaits those living during the Tribulation.
- These judgments reveal the holiness of God and his wrath against the stubborn rejection of his grace.
- These judgments reveal the great patience of God and his fervent desire for sinners to turn to him and find life.
- In light of what is to come, Christians need to warn this generation of the consequences of unbelief and the blessings of trusting in Christ.