

Truth for Today

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Will the Church Go Through the Great Tribulation?

Just think of it! The man who two thousand years ago was rejected as the King of the Jews will be the only Person worthy to open up the book of judgement that will be poured out upon this world (see Revelation 5). As it is written in Acts 17:31, "[God] hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead."

In this talk, we will consider:

- what is meant by the Great Tribulation?
- the meaning of the term "church";
- some considerations relating to the likelihood of the church passing through this Tribulation period.

What is meant by the Great Tribulation?

The Great Tribulation is a period of judgements under the hand of God that is unique in human history. It is pinpointed by Daniel as a "time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation" (Daniel 12:1). The Lord Jesus Christ declared it to be "Great Tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matthew 24:21). Also, Revelation 7:14 refers to it as "great tribulation" or, literally, "Tribulation, the great one" using the definite article. Furthermore, Revelation 3:10 describes this tribulation as the "hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world". This may be paraphrased as "the time of trial that shall come upon the inhabited world". It shows the scope of the judgements.

The book of Revelation makes detailed reference to it over many chapters. It includes the time when the wrath of God and the wrath of the Lamb (the Lord Jesus) is poured out upon the earth. In Revelation 6:16-17 we read of people saying 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?" Again, in Revelation 15:1 we find, "And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvellous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God." Then we hear an order rapped out in Revelation 16:1, "And I heard a great voice out of the temple saying to the seven angels, Go your ways, and pour out the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth."

The word "wrath" means "anger". The righteous anger of the Lord Jesus was seen when He drove out the profiteers from the temple at Jerusalem during His life on earth. In the day to come, it will be expressed with immense power from heaven against sinful folk.

Daniel chapter 9 predicts, not only the time that Jesus was to be crucified, but also the length of time for God's dealings with Israel in judgement. In verses 21-27, we discover that the angel Gabriel speaks to Daniel confirming that seventy weeks had been allotted to the children of Israel until the coming of the kingdom of God under the Messiah. These seventy weeks are literally seventy sevens and point to seventy periods of seven years. The angel then splits the seventy into seven weeks and sixty-two weeks. The seven weeks were to account for the re-building of Jerusalem and the further sixty-two weeks to the Messiah. We know that these are weeks of prophetic years (360 days) because of the time it took to restore Jerusalem from the starting date given in Nehemiah 2:1. That year was 444 BC. So there were, in total, 69 sevens to Christ. This amounts in prophetic (or Jewish) years to 173,880 days and brings us to AD 33 on the Gregorian calendar. It was at this point that Christ was crucified (that is, cut off) and had nothing. The Jewish people of the day had rejected their King.

Since that point, the prophetic clock has stopped for Israel. Yet there is one week - seven years left before the kingdom of God is set up on earth. During this week, Israel will pass through what Jeremiah calls "Jacob's Trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7).

At the start of that period a leader of a revived Roman Empire (probably formed by a combination of some European and some North African countries) will emerge. He will be empowered by Satan. He will make a covenant with Israel for the seven years. After three-and-a-half years, he will break that covenant embracing idolatry. In fact, an image of

this leader will be erected in the holy place of the temple by the Antichrist (the Jews' leader of the time). All will be commanded to worship it or be executed (Revelation 13:15). This is the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel and the Lord Jesus (Daniel 12:11 and Matthew 24:15). It is the sign for the commencement of Jacob's Trouble or the Great Tribulation because those in Judaea are told to flee to the relative safety of the mountains or be taken for judgement.

About the same time, the Antichrist demands that people receive the mark of this leader in their right hands or foreheads in order that they could trade. This Roman Empire will be a closed shop as far as commerce is concerned. The last three-and-a-half years are the time when God's judgements (represented by trumpets and vials) are poured out on the earth. These devastating judgements may be read in Revelation chapters 8-14. So great are the calamities that the Lord Jesus Christ said, "And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened" (Matthew 24:21-22). The 'elect' in this passage being those chosen of God and faithful during this hour of trial.

During the first three-and-a-half years, we see, from the book of Revelation, the seal judgements of God coming upon the earth. These are the "Beginning of Sorrows" spoken of by our Lord in Matthew 24:4-8. He warned His disciples in this way, "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows."

These first sorrows parallel the "Horses of the Apocalypse" of Revelation 6 - starting with the victorious rider of the white horse whose bow speaks of his conquests over a distance by relatively peaceful means. However, this is followed by war with great bloodshed represented by the great sword given to the rider of the red horse. The rider of the black horse holds balances or scales representing the famine that follows where the necessities of the poor are only available at great cost, but the luxuries of the rich are untouched. The pale horse is ridden by Death and Hades. Death is the condition of the body without the soul and Hades speaks of the condition of the soul without the body. They claim many people. This leads on to other devastation resulting in men, from kings to servants, seeking refuge in mountainous areas thinking that the wrath of the Lamb had already come.

The Lord will still have a testimony on earth during this time. The Gospel of the Kingdom is preached. This is the Gospel that Jesus preached while here on earth anticipating the setting up of the literal Kingdom of God in this world (Matthew 4:23). It introduced Israel to their King - the Messiah. They rejected Him. "We will not have this man to reign over us!" they declared.

In His teaching, the Lord Jesus instructed His disciples as to the end times, "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14).

Another gospel called the 'Everlasting Gospel' is also preached just prior to the appearing of Christ as King of kings. Its character is found in Revelation 14:6-7, "And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgement is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters." It calls upon men to fear and worship the God of Creation. Those who respond positively to these Gospels have become known as 'tribulation saints'.

There will be a false church during this time. It will be made up of people of religions that say they worship one god. It will be the final outcome of what we call today the ecumenical movement. In Revelation 17:5 this pretence for a church is presented as a woman riding a beast and bears a name on her forehead, namely, "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth." The same chapter identifies the centre of this diabolical religion as Rome itself. The name Babylon expresses its idolatrous character. Chapter 17 also describes it as a persecutor or murderer of true believers (verse 6). Some of these are described in Revelation chapters 7 and 20.

Furthermore, God also seals those who are faithful to Him during this period. In Revelation 7, He seals 144,000 of the children of Israel. This 144,000 is found in chapter 14. These were the godly remnant of Israel redeemed from among men and are pictured with the Lamb (Christ) on Mount Zion. Also in Revelation 7:9-17 a great multitude of believing Gentiles are found. They have come out of the Great Tribulation.

Amidst all the sorrows of the tribulation period, men will have one occasion where they rejoice and even send presents to one another. It is when two powerful prophets whom God uses as His special witnesses are finally overcome. Their bodies are left on the streets of Jerusalem and the people who had been tormented by their testimony rejoice. It is short-lived. A few days later, God brings them back to life and, in awe, their persecutors watch them ascend to heaven.

Summarising the last week of Daniel's prophecy, we see that there is a period of seven prophetic years. The leader of the empire formed by Europe and parts of Northern Africa will make a covenant with the leader of Israel who is none other than Antichrist. The covenant is broken after three-and-a-half years. The Antichrist raises up an idol of the Roman leader in the temple that must be built by the Jews during the first half of the seven years. The offerings and sacrifices that recommenced with the building of the Jewish temple are stopped. Then the Great Tribulation begins and lasts for the last three-and-a-half of Daniel's predicted seven years. It includes the wrath of God and the Lamb being poured out on the earth. During that time, the Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached, as will the Everlasting Gospel. Those who believe during that time, Jews and Gentiles, will be called saints, but suffer intense persecution by the false church. The latter may profess one God, but is not marked by real faith. Its origin is Satanic. Further persecution of Jewish believers in particular is enforced by the Antichrist who has those who will not worship the image of the leader of the Roman Empire executed.

What is the Church?

Our second consideration is what is meant by 'the church'? The word 'church' means 'an assembly of called out ones'. It is therefore formed by those who have been called by God. The foundation of the church is the statement of Peter referring to Christ, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." It is upon this rock that Christ is building His church. If you do not believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah who is indeed the Son of the living God, then you cannot be rightly termed a Christian and you are not part of the church. All true Christians form the church. This is a New Testament truth. Those who believed in God in the Old Testament were saved by their faith, but do not form any part of the church. People like John the Baptist are described as 'friends of the Bridegroom' (Christ); but the church is described as 'the bride of Christ'.

The church was formed at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). On that day, followers of Christ were baptised into one body by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). They were no longer separate believers, but formed the Body of Christ and were joined to Christ and to one another. That which united them was the indwelling Spirit of God. All Christians, whether living or asleep in Jesus, make up the church.

Will the Church Go Through the Great Tribulation?

This leads us into a consideration of whether or not the church will go through the Great Tribulation. As most of the details concerning that period are found in the Book of Revelation, we will look at this first of all. It is well worth remembering that the book is full of metaphors that may only be rightly interpreted by the immediate context or by their use in other scriptures.

In 1:19, we read the instructions of the glorified Christ to John, "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter..." We immediately see that the book is broadly chronological recording things past, then present and, finally, future. Most of chapter 1 is a description of what John saw, that is, the Son of Man (Christ) as a judge. Chapters 2 and 3 give a description of the responsible churches (or assemblies) of that time, yet spanning across to the present age. The last four of these churches have references to the coming of the Lord. The rest of the book deals with future events including the Great Tribulation period during which there is no reference to the church. It is only after that period when we see the church again as the holy city, the New Jerusalem that comes down from heaven.

The divisions themselves show that the coming of the Lord for the church will take place before the future events including the Great tribulation. The coming of the Lord for His church (and Old Testament believers) is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

1 Corinthians 15:51-52 confirm this, "Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed." The same chapter describes the glorified bodies of believers as incorruptible, glorious, powerful, immortal, heavenly and spiritual.

So this lends a special significance to the apostle John being told to view the future events from heaven as stated in Revelation 4:1, "After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter." The invitation to John to come up to heaven suggests that Christians will not be on earth when the horror of Daniel's seven years begins.

A further indication of this is found in Christ's message to the church at Philadelphia in Revelation 3:10, "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." The 'hour of temptation' is another term for the seven years of Daniel. The force of the phrase 'keep thee from' is 'keep out of'. As the judgements of the time are world-wide, then the only way this church could be kept out of this period of tribulation is by being taken out of this world. This does not only apply to the faithful Philadelphian church, but to the whole body of Christ for we shall all be changed.

Paul's teaching relating to the coming of the Lord shows us that it could happen at any time. He uses it as a lever for us to be faithful in serving the Lord here. At the same time, John instructs us to purify ourselves in the light of His appearing. The coming of the Lord refers to the coming already mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4 while the appearing of the Christ refers to His coming as King of kings and Lord of lords to set up His kingdom. In the former, the Lord comes into the air - the domain of Satan. What assurance this gives us as believers. We will be protected by the Son Himself. In the latter, His feet touch the Mount of Olives. They are two distinct events. The first occurs before the judgements of the Tribulation and the second follows the judgements. Both are put together in Titus 2:13, "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ..."

That the coming and the appearing of Christ are distinct events is shown by the Lord Jesus being called the morning star and the Sun of righteousness. In Revelation 22:16 Jesus says, "I, Jesus, have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star." While in Malachi 4:2, we read, "But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings..." In the Middle East, the morning star rises before the dawn of sunlight, so the coming of Christ for the church takes place before He appears as the ruler of this world.

Today, the Gospel of the Grace of God is preached (Acts 20:24). This is also described as the Gospel of God (Romans 15:16) and the Gospel of Christ (Romans 15:29). It is also described as the glorious Gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4). A different Gospel is preached during the tribulation period. There is a return to preaching the Kingdom of God because that literal kingdom will follow the seven years. As it involves the Old Testament Law of God, we see this as a Jewish hope in particular - although Gentiles come to share in it. However, there is also a final appeal to all men in the Everlasting Gospel to fear the God of creation just before the true King returns. The question posed by the Lord Jesus Christ found in Luke 18:8 fills us with dread concerning the response to the last Gospel preached: "...When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" Despite the devastation heaped upon this world by the hand of God, people in general will not repent and believe. Instead, they curse and blaspheme God.

Today, the church is an habitation of God by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22). It is the house of God (1 Timothy 3:15). During the early period of those years of trial, worship is found in a temple and the offerings and sacrifices of the Old Testament are recommenced. This shows a direct change of the manner of worship. This suggests that the church has been removed because Christians are privileged to worship the Father in spirit and truth by the power of the Spirit of God. They need no artefacts to help them. They need no holy place or city in which to do so (see John 4 and Philippians 3:3). All they need is a sincere heart and the guidance of God's Word.

This also shows that there is a return to the Law of the Old Testament that Jewish Christians of Paul's time were told not to practise because they were under the grace of God. "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Galatians 2:16).

It also follows that when the church leaves this world, then the Spirit that indwells it will also leave. He that descended at Pentecost will ascend with the church at the rapture i.e. the coming of Christ. This is indicated by the revealing of the Wicked One, the Man of Sin described in 2 Thessalonians 2. Verse 7 contains the words, "...He that letteth will let until he be taken out of the way." The meaning of the word "let" in this context means to "hinder" or "restrain". So this is speaking of the restraining power of the Spirit on earth being removed and wickedness having its sway beginning with the unveiling of the Man of Sin (Antichrist). The people who remain on earth will be deceived concerning the disappearance of so many of their fellow men. How? God sends them a strong delusion that they should believe a lie because they are marked by unrighteousness and will not believe the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10-11).

Linked with the departure of the Spirit and the revealing of the Wicked One is the fact that there is the falling away from the Christian faith. The authority of the Bible will be denied in a way previously unheard of and people will adopt a form of godliness without the power of it. Seeds of this are seen already in our own nation today.

Another argument to examine is the fact that the wrath of God and the Lamb is poured out during these terrifying years. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 Paul reminds the Christians of how they turned from idols to serve the living and true God. He then stated, "And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered (or, better, delivers) us from the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Christians are preserved from the wrath that God will use against sin during that period.

The character of the heavenly companies which have come out of the Great Tribulation period is different to that of Christians. In Revelation 6:9-10, we find them asking for vengeance upon their enemies. This shows that they are there on Old Testament ground because the Christian does not cry for vengeance. Remember the prayer of Stephen as he died under the stones of persecution: "Lay not this sin to their charge." The cry for vengeance is not in keeping with the Gospel of the Grace of God.

Finally, when God has dealt with the earth, the church as the bride of Christ, the wife of the Lamb, descends from heaven. She has been there while these events have occurred on earth. The service of individual Christians for the Lord would have been assessed at the Judgement Seat of Christ. They will have received appropriate rewards for their faithfulness. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb in heaven will have also taken place. Only then will the Bride descend from heaven in all her glory as the New Jerusalem.

Time forbids us to look other avenues of truth that relate to the subject, but from the scriptures we have considered must conclude that the church will not pass through the Great Tribulation. This means that the coming of the Lord for His own is the next great prophetic event! Is your Christian life in accord with this? Let us finish by reading the words of the Lord to righteous Lot who had been warned of the judgement about to fall on the cities of the plain: "Haste thee, escape thither; for I cannot do anything till thou be come thither" (Genesis 19:22).

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