

What And When Is The "Great Tribulation"?

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Introduction

A description of the doctrine known as the "tribulation" by those who believe and teach it would sound like this. "The Tribulation is a terrifying period of 7 years in which God pours out His wrath on a rebellious and unbelieving mankind." (LaHaye & Jenkins, 155)

According to Harold Wilmington,

There is coming a calamity unlike any which this weary world has ever seen. And although this future period will be relatively short, it will nevertheless destroy more of this earth's population than all previous disasters combined. The estimated toll of human life lost ranges from 3/4 to 1 billion. Another 340 million will be seriously injured and 1/3 of those (will be) incapacitated because of radiation, chemical or biological warfare. (Walvoord 50)

The tribulation is supposed to occur immediately after the "rapture of the church" and last for seven years, at which time the Lord's "second coming" will follow.

A number of things are supposed to take place during the tribulation period. These include the following. The "antichrist" will arise as the deceiver and soon leader of the world. He will unite the world in one government, one economy and one religion. The temple in Jerusalem is also supposed to be rebuilt in the first 3 1/2 years of this time. Also the entire system of Judaism will be restored including the resumption of the offering of animal sacrifices according to the law of Moses. The "antichrist" will give to all of his followers the "mark of the beast" according to the book of Revelation 13:16 - 18. Then the judgments spoken of in the book of Revelation called the "seven seals" and the "seven trumpets" and the "seven vials" found in chapters 6 through 16 will be poured out on the earth by God.

The tribulation is supposed to come to an end when Christ returns with His saints from the heavenly rapture. He will lead a His army against the armies of the "antichrist" in the so-called "Battle of Armageddon." Christ will be victorious and will set up His millennial kingdom.

Where in the Bible do they find ideas like these? There are many passages which they use in support of their theories but they are misinterpreted. We will look at three of the main passages which are cited in support of their doctrines.

Daniel 9:24 - 27

In Daniel chapter 9, verse 20 - 27, the angel Gabriel is bringing to the prophet Daniel the answer of God to the prophet's prayer. The answer is in the form of a prophecy. It reads:

Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate.

Their interpretation of this passage includes the belief that not all of the six items listed in verse 24 have yet been fulfilled, only the first 3 or 4 of them have been fulfilled. They also believe that the "prince" mentioned in verse 26 is the "antichrist." They see a "gap" between the 69th and the 70th week of the fulfillment of this prophecy, a gap, they say which we are currently living in called the "church age." They believe that the rest of the items mentioned in verse 24 will be fulfilled when Christ comes back to the earth and set up an earthly kingdom.

There are many things wrong with their interpretations. All six of the items mentioned in verse 24 were fulfilled during Christ's first visit to this earth, 2000 years ago.

1. "To finish the transgression," I believe is a reference to the completion of wickedness accomplished by the Jewish people, a situation which Jesus recognized and declared the punishment for in Matthew 23:32 - 35.
2. "To make an end of sins" was done by Christ when He died for the world's sins; Hebrews 9:26.
3. "To make reconciliation for iniquity" is mentioned by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:19 as having been done by Christ as also,
4. "To bring in everlasting righteousness in 2 Corinthians 5:21.
5. "To seal up the vision and prophecy" Christ speaks of prophecy having been accomplished in His life and death in Luke 24:27, 44.
6. "To anoint the most Holy" is a reference to the anointing of Christ Himself at His baptism, Matthew 3:16.

The "prince" of verse 26 is not any "antichrist" but is a reference to the Roman general, Titus, who led the Roman armies to destroy Jerusalem in A. D. 70. Comparing Matthew 24:15 to Luke 21:20 will

show that Jesus said the "abomination of desolation" spoken of by Daniel is the surrounding of Jerusalem by armies. He therefore told Christians to flee the city.

And there is no gap between the prophetic 69th and 70th weeks. Gabriel said, "after the 62 (+ 7) weeks, "Messiah will be cut off." Logically, after the 69th week comes the 70th week. So the Messiah was cut off during the 70th week. So there can be no gap currently existing before the 70th week. These are just some of the reasons why this prophecy has already been fulfilled in its entirety.

Matthew 24

The 24th chapter of Matthew has often been misunderstood and said to give "signs" that foretell the end of the world or the second coming of Christ. Many Premillennialists believe that this chapter can be divided and interpreted as follows. Verses 4 - 14 are said to give us signs of the approaching rapture. Verses 15 - 22 are said to describe the early and middle time of the tribulation. Verses 23 - 44 are said to describe the latter days of the tribulation.

There are a number of things what stand out as being unacceptable in their interpretation. The so-called "signs" of verses 4 - 14 are really not signs at all. Jesus repeatedly indicated that fact by such statements as: "Take heed that no man deceive you" (4); "See that ye be not troubled" (6); "All these things must come to pass" (6); "The end is not yet" (6). Jesus was telling His Apostles that they should not let any thing like these, cause them to think that anything special was about to happen. But in verse 15 He gave them the sign. He said, "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place...then...flee into the mountains." Here is the sign on which they were to take action. When this verse is compared with its parallel verse in Luke 21:20 we learn that the abomination of which Jesus spoke was the surrounding of Jerusalem by the armies of Rome. We know that this is that abomination because it is followed by the same command: "flee to the mountains." This is a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20) and not to any future time of tribulation which any "antichrist" will bring persecution on the earth.

We also learn that this part of the 24th chapter of Matthew refers to Jerusalem's destruction because of verse 34. There, Jesus said, "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled." Jesus meant that His own generation would witness the fulfillment of all that He had said about Jerusalem's destruction.

It is interesting to remember that Jesus did give a sign concerning the coming destruction of Jerusalem (24:15) but He gave no sign and said there would be no way for any man to know the time of His second coming. Verse 36 says, "But of that day and hour knoweth no man."

Revelation 6 - 16

Next, those who teach this premillennial doctrine see in chapters 6 through 16 of the book of Revelation a literal description of the tribulation period. They believe that the judgments of the seven seals and that of the seven trumpets and also that of the seven vials all refer to punishments wherein God will bring great tribulation upon the inhabitants of the earth for their disobedience to His will.

Their view cannot be accepted for several reasons. The book of Revelation itself tells us that it is a book of "signs." That is, it contains many "signs" contained in figurative visions which John was shown and told to write. The very first verse of the book says, "And he (Jesus) sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John." To "signify" is to make known by the use of signs. Thus the book is here said to use figurative language in the giving of its message. We must keep this thought in mind as we interpret the book. The premillennialists always try to interpret passages of the Bible as if they were written in literal language. This has led them into so much misunderstanding of the message of the Bible.

Also in that first verse of Revelation is found the statement, "To shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass." This must mean that the events contained in this book are just about to be fulfilled. How can one properly understand the Revelation, if he only sees its fulfillment as being 2000 years after its having been written?

When one interprets the book of Revelation as applying to the Christians of that time in which it was written, it will make perfect sense. I believe that the book gives in prophetic, figurative language, God's answer to the request of the martyrs mentioned in chapter 6:10. They were asking God for vengeance, God said it would come in its time. According to history, Rome fell in A. D. 476.

Conclusion

If one is to properly understand the Bible on any subject, one must be careful to observe proper rules of interpretation. If you do not, there is no end to the fanciful theories you might come to believe. The premillennialists make many mistakes in their attempts to understand God's Word.

- They fail to realize that much of the Bible is written in figurative language.
- They fail to realize that the church and the kingdom are one and the same.
- They fail to realize that Jesus' kingdom is "not of this world."
- They fail to realize that physical Israel is no longer the people of God.
- They fail to consider the context in which many of their favorite verses lie.
- They fail to realize that if Jesus were to return to this earth, He could no longer be our High Priest for He is not of the tribe of Levi. This would cause Him not to be the Savior anymore.
- They fail to rightly divide God's Word, especially in considering that the order of Bible books are not in chronological order.
- They fail to realize that their theories complicate the plain and simple teachings of the Bible. They often admit that there is much disagreement even among them concerning the meaning of these and other passages.
- They fail to realize that much prophecy in the Bible is conditional.
- And they fail to realize that God has only given mankind one chance to secure his salvation. The time for doing that is now.

Works Cited

LaHaye, Tim & Jerry Jenkins (1999). *Are We Living In The End Times?*, Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

Walvoord, John, et. al. (1999). *The Road To Armageddon*, Nashville, TN: Word Publishers.