

The Great Tribulation (Part 1)

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Readings: Psalm 8, Daniel 9:25-27, Revelation 6 & 8

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Throughout the life of the church there have been those who have wanted desperately to know when Jesus is going to return and the Tribulation events would occur. In 365 AD the French Bishop, Hilary of Poitiers, declared the end of the world would come that year. In 400 AD Martin of Tours announced that the end would arrive soon as the Anti-Christ has already been born. So it has continued almost every decade. Even the great Reformer Martin Luther had a view declaring end would come before 1600 AD. Since then dozens of individuals, religious groups and cults have claimed the same thing with all sorts of justifications and dates. You may have seen the news this week and the claims by a number of Christian groups that the Rapture will occur this coming Saturday as the stars align in a particular manner. It's possible a few political groups may think the same. As was outlined last week, we cannot know this date but we should watch for the season and always be ready. What we can know, is something of the events of Messiah's return and what follows in the immediate period known as the Great Tribulation.

Last week we recognised that the first stage of Jesus' return would be to call His followers to Himself in the air. The sequence of events that must follow has been outlined for us. The Tribulation is a seven-year period that occurs sometime after the Rapture. Speaking to the nation of Israel, this time of distress or "tribulation" is first spoken of in Deuteronomy 4:30, "**When you are in distress (tribulation), and all these things come upon you in the latter days, when you turn to the LORD your God and obey His voice (for the LORD your God is a merciful God), He will not forsake you nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore to them.**" (NKJV Dt 4:30–31). This prophecy outlines a period where much of the Jewish population does not know their Messiah and the events of the Tribulation period will bring a final number of Jewish people to repentance and these will call on Jesus as their Lord and Messiah. We can certainly see, and should be praying for, the large number of Jewish people yet to recognise their Messiah.

The Old Testament book of Daniel records Daniel's visions of future events. These visions have proven to be amazingly historically reliable in terms of some of the big picture events in history: the rise and fall of kingdoms. It is far easier to attribute dates to prophecy after the event, when the prophecy has obviously been fulfilled. For example, Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's vision of a man and a great statue has clearly been fulfilled in the rise and fall of the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Macedonian-Grecian, and Roman empires. Each had symbols, characteristics, sequencing and events that clearly tied each empire inextricably to Daniel's vision.

In Daniel 9 a series of 'weeks' leading to the "End of Days" is outlined. Again, this has been shown to be incredibly accurate. We can briefly summarise this as: seven weeks = 7 x 7 years = 49 years. 62 weeks = 62 x 7 years = 434 years. Together these total = 483 years. From the decree of Cyrus the Persian to the restoration of Jerusalem was 49 years. 434 years later Jesus was executed according to Daniel "for the sins of the people". Following the end of this period of 483 years Daniel prophesied the people of the prince would destroy the city and sanctuary. This happened in 70AD when Jerusalem was sacked and the Temple destroyed. When Jerusalem was overrun the Roman historian Josephus recorded that the amount of blood from the city of Jerusalem, where over a million people were slaughtered, flowed down the hill like a flood. As Daniel observed, from this

period the Anti-Christ begins to rise. “Desolations” in Israel and throughout the world will continue until the end. Desolations we understand as the increasing expression of human nature in rebellion against God. This period is outlined in 2 Timothy 3:1-9, **“But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith; but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs also was.”** (NKJV 2 Timothy 3:1–9)

While some have argued that the Anti-Christ must be a Roman as the Romans Titus and Vespasian were responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem. This however, is not certain, others have argued he must be Macedonian, northern or even American. Since 70AD right up until now, Israel has been the subject of warfare and conflict. What we do know for certain, is that from 70AD onward the End could come at any time. While the timing of the Rapture is debated the start of the Tribulation period is explicit. Daniel 9:27 states: **“Then he** (that is the Anti-Christ) **shall confirm a covenant with many for one week** (that is seven years); **But in the middle of the week** (that is at three and a half years). **He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, even until the consummation, which is determined, is poured out on the desolate.”** (NKJV Daniel 9:27). This makes clear a number of factors.

1. War and conflict will continue to escalate in the world and there will be no peace in Israel until this covenant is seven year signed. Interestingly, Donald Trump is attempting to conclude a peace treaty with Israel right now ... concluding a negotiation that started fifteen years ago. It will be interesting to see how that ends.
2. Either before the peace treaty is signed or somewhere in the first three years the Jerusalem Temple will be rebuilt and the process of sacrifice restarted. Again recent history is fascinating. In 2016 the Temple Institute announced that everything was ready to rebuild the Temple. All of the red cattle herds large enough to begin sacrifice, all the Temple items ready and waiting. The pictures of all the material are available on the Jerusalem Temple Institute website (www.templeinstitute.org). All that is needed is the go-ahead. The Jewish population is becoming increasingly impatient with Arab dictates over the Temple Mount and the recent increase of Jewish control over access reflects this. What is going to happen next?
3. Mid-way through the seven year period, the Anti-Christ will reveal himself clearly and stop the sacrifice at the Temple instead installing himself there as the world ruler.
4. Also during this seven-year period, a number of divine punishments will be poured out on the earth.

Combined, all of these are the beginning of the three and a half year period of the Great Tribulation.

Before we look briefly at the specific tribulations we need to ask: Why? Why does this have to happen? Why doesn't God just come, bringing divine judgement, and sort it all out?

The answer is actually quite simple. God goes out of the way to give us opportunities to repent. This is His very nature, His compassion, His love. In the last days, people will not want to know about the reality of sin and its consequences for the unrepentant before a Holy and Righteous God. We see plenty of this already in the world right now. This is a reality now. When you deny the reality of sin you deny the very reason Jesus had to die. This reality is as harsh as Jesus suffering torture and die horribly on the Cross for you. God wants to make His absolute will in these things as clear as possible to humanity. His Word, by laying out so clearly these final warnings, leaves no one with an excuse if they fail to respond to His love as the future events begin to unfold. Remember, when the Great Tribulation gets going the genuine Christians of today will have already been removed from earth. There will be those who recognise the signs, especially the Rapture, for what they are. These will at last repent and give their lives to the Lord. They will be saved, but not called to Jesus at that time. Instead, they may suffer during the Tribulation and some will die at the hands of the Anti-Christ and his followers – but their salvation will be assured as they remain faithful to the end.

The first three and a half years also see the beginning of God's divine judgements and warnings being poured out on the earth. The Book of Revelation refers to these as the Seal and Trumpet judgements.

In Revelation 5 the apostle John records that in his vision of the *Throne Room of Heaven* he saw God holding a scroll with seven seals. But there was no one found worthy to open the scroll until Jesus arrived on the scene having completed His work on earth, having overcome the Cross, rising, and obviously having completed work on the place His faithful servants will live in eternity (see John 14:1-3). Now is the hour to begin the last phase of human history as we know it – to give the final warnings and to begin divine punishment for sin. No longer the Suffering Servant, Jesus comes as the Conquering King the Jewish populace had always expected ... though this will not be *how* they expected.

There is not time for us to go through the two sets of judgements in detail but let us summarise them this way ... the seven seal judgements begin with the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

1. The first seal sees the release of the Anti-Christ, the *White Horseman*. Coming disguised as an angel of light the Anti-Christ deceives many with a false peace.
2. The second seal sees the release of the *Red Horseman* who will bring a world-wide war, famine, economic instability and serious food shortages.
3. This will be exacerbated by the third *Black Horseman* who brings a serious crisis as world-wide famine strikes the earth. This is a time of great despair and desperation.
4. The fourth *Pale Horseman* sees one quarter of the world destroyed by warfare, famine, pestilence, starvation and wild animals. Not a great time to be around. This fulfils clear prophecies in Joel 2:1-3, Daniel 12:1 and Matt 24:21-22.
5. As if this wasn't bad enough the period is overlapped and followed by the fifth seal: an intense period of persecution and martyrdom of the Post-Rapture believers or saints. These are those who have recognised the season and repented or those who have been born in this period, in Christian homes, are now actively pursued and persecuted.

6. And just in case anyone has not got the message yet the sixth seal is a period of general convulsions in the natural order and a world-wide blackout. There is a great earthquake, far beyond normal as earth's primary fracture lines open up. The sun turns black and the moon red. This suggests significant volcanic activity and clouds of ash as in Joel 2:31. As a result one third of the earth, grass and trees are burned up. Some have wondered if this could be the result of nuclear blast, radiation or fallout? Stars falling may indicate asteroids, meteors or rocks blasted high from volcanic activity. The sky is rolled up in volcanic clouds. Mountains and islands experience earthquakes and related tsumani. Both great and small try to hide but there is nowhere to hide.
7. Then, the seventh seal is opened. This last seal contains, as a subset, the seven trumpets.

Before the trumpets are blown however a number of significant things take place. At the end of the first quarter of this period a governmental system of ten regions sees ten kings from around the world rise to power for an hour before they are cut off by the Anti-Christ who establishes a new religious system to worship himself. God sends 144,000 Jewish martyrs back into the world to be His ambassadors and missionaries to the Jewish people. This mission turns many back to the Lord before it is too late and further reflects the Lord's commitment to His covenantal promises. Also in this first period we have the ministries of the returned Elijah and Moses, two witnesses in Jerusalem. They preach uninterrupted, divinely protected until they are allowed to be struck down and their bodies left to lie in the streets of Jerusalem. But then God resurrects His faithful servants.

As the trumpets in heaven are blown, a second wave of divine punishment strikes the earth. One third of the dry earth is destroyed, one third of the salt water is destroyed, one third of all fresh water is destroyed, one third of the heavens are destroyed, then there is a third blackout accompanied by a first invasion of torment. This is followed by a second wave of torment that results in one third of humanity being destroyed. When the seventh trumpet is sounded we are almost half of the way through the Great Tribulation but significant damage has been done to the earth and many have died horribly.

Clearly, none of this sounds too great. This will not be a pleasant time to be alive. How far does God have to go to get people's attention? What does it take for people to know that God is very serious about what He requires of us? His love and mercy have been poured out and are available to all, but to those who refuse, only judgement beckons. God's holiness, righteousness and justice will not, cannot, allow sin to continue forever. Only when we recognise the enormity of this can we understand why God went to the cost of coming as Jesus among us and going to the Cross so that we would not have to suffer, not only the Tribulation, but the even greater punishment of hell itself. Unlike many, we cannot ignore this part of the Bible because it is critical to make sense of so much else, of why Jesus had to die, and to appreciate how much God loves us all - including the unsaved.

So now we pause here ... next week we will look at the events of the middle and last three and a half years of the Great Tribulation.

Pray for and speak to those who do not yet know Jesus because the time is ever short ...

Amen