

The Great Tribulation -- When and How Long?¹

I am often asked whether or not the “tribulation” is a seven year period which immediately precedes the second coming of Jesus Christ, or is it the entire period of time between Christ’s first and second advent, the so-called “great tribulation?”

This is an important question for several reasons. First, when most people think of the “tribulation,” they are thinking of the popular dispensational notion that at (or about) the time of the Rapture, the world enters a seven-year period— “the tribulation”—in which the Antichrist comes to power after the unexpected and instantaneous removal of all believers. The Antichrist then makes a seven-year peace treaty with Israel, only to turn upon the nation after three and a half years, plunging the entire world into the final geopolitical crisis which ends with the battle of Armageddon. Dispensationalists believe the seven year tribulation is a time of horrific cruelty and persecution for those who are “left behind,” and that the only way to be saved during this period is to refuse to take the mark of the beast, and not worship the beast or his image, which will likely result in martyrdom. The critical flaw with the dispensational doctrine of a future seven-year tribulation is that it is nowhere found in Scripture—although dispensationalists make appeal to Daniel 9:24-27 (more on this below).

A second reason why this question is important has to do with the rise of various forms of preterism. Full preterism is properly considered a heresy. But so-called “partial” preterism is not. Preterists (I am speaking here of the orthodox, “partial” variety) contend that Jesus Christ returned in the clouds in A.D. 70 to execute judgment upon apostate Israel, the city of Jerusalem, and the Jewish temple, and its sacrificial system. Those who hold to the various orthodox forms of preterism believe that the great tribulation spoken of by Jesus in Matthew 24:21, has come and gone with the events associated with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans. All that remains is the Lord’s return.

In light of the tendency to relegate a time of "great" tribulation to the distant past or the immediate future, it is important to briefly survey the biblical teaching on this topic. When we do so, it becomes clear that the time of “great tribulation” cannot be tied exclusively to the events of A.D. 70, nor to the seven years immediately before our Lord’s return. The Bible does not speak of tribulation in this manner, and as we know, many of God’s people have already faced periods of horrific tribulation following the days of Christ’s redemptive tribulation on the cross, and that such tribulation for the people of God will continue until Jesus returns at the end of the age to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new.

Virtually all scholars agree that the basis for the three references in the New Testament to a “great tribulation” (Matthew 24:21; Revelation 2:22; 7:14) is Daniel 12:1, which reads: “At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.”

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In Daniel's prophecy, this period of suffering is tied to the time of the end (i.e., the mention of the general resurrection in vv.2-3), but the basis for the tribulation God's people will face is their covenant loyalty to God in the face of external persecution (by the state) and false teaching (from within) which brings about the apostasy of many within the covenant community (cf. Daniel 11:30-39; 44; 12:10).

The same idea is found in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. Three of the churches mentioned by John (Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea) were suffering greatly, and two other churches were thoroughly compromised in their witness to Jesus Christ (Pergamum and Thyatira). In light of the struggles these churches are experiencing, in Revelation 2:22, we read "behold, I will throw her [the woman Jezebel] onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works." According to Jesus's letter to the church of Thyatira, "great tribulation" is to be meted out upon those in the church of Thyatira who delight in this woman's false teaching. This, the text explains, is a time of "great tribulation" for unbelievers (i.e., apostates).

In Revelation 7:14, one of the elders tells John that "these [whom John sees] are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." This refers to the faithful remnant in Thyatira, but also to those across time who endured the persecution of the world and who have been put to death because they refuse to renounce their allegiance to Jesus Christ. Having been given white robes, every tear is wiped from their eyes as they serve in the heavenly temple. They hunger and thirst no more!

In both passages in Revelation then, the idea of a "great tribulation" refers to events occurring at various points between Christ's own tribulation on the cross and the end of the age. As G. K. Beale puts it, "the great tribulation has begun with Jesus' own sufferings and shed blood, and all who follow him must likewise suffer through it." Beale goes on to say this is the point of passages such as Revelation 1:9 (where John states he is already a participant in tribulation because he follows Christ), as well as Colossians 1:24; and 1 Peter 4:1-7, 12-13 (cf. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 433-435).

While Jesus speaks of "great tribulation" in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple--the events of A.D 70 (Matthew 24:21)--in Revelation, John speaks of such periods of "great tribulation" as re-occurring throughout the course of this age, perhaps even intensifying at the time of the end.

So, with that in mind, we are now in a position to answer the initial question above.

1). "Where does the tribulation fit into the course of history?"

We may face tribulation at any point throughout the course of the interadvental age. In the providence of God, we may even face a time of "great tribulation."

2). "Are we living in it now?"

Yes and no. While we live in an age where unbelievers and government authorities will attempt to persecute us or deceive us, it is surely not proper for me (in answering this question) to compare my current situation (indeed, my life-long situation), with a Christian who lives in a Muslim nation under Jihadist control (or any other oppressive nation for that matter) where martyrdom is a constant threat. Some of God's people will face unspeakable rage and hatred throughout this period. This is the tribulation of which John speaks in Revelation 7:14. Some will be martyred, and many will live in material deprivation. But others will be spared from such tribulation and will be free to live their lives and even prosper greatly. The reason as to why one suffers and another does not, is not to be found in the guilt of the suffering Christian, but in the mysterious providence of God.

3). "Will it be a distinct time of tribulation before the return of Christ?"

Not in the sense taught by dispensationalists, who believe in a seven year tribulation which is improperly tied to the fulfillment of the so-called "seventieth week" of Daniel 9:24-27. I believe this to be a messianic prophecy already fulfilled in Christ and address the matter in some detail here (The Seventy Weeks of Daniel). But will there be increasing tribulation (both in intensity and frequency) before the time of the end? Yes, I think that is a real possibility (indeed likely), and that Scripture warns us that we may be called to suffer during a time of "great tribulation" (and apostasy), while at the same time encouraging us with God's promise of all-sufficient grace under the most difficult of circumstances.