

TRIBULATION

Many modern teachings about the “end times” assert that the period known in the Bible as “the Tribulation” is a seven-year period, yet in the future, which will be evidenced by the emergence of the antichrist. An objective study of the New Testament shows that this claim lacks biblical support.

We shall see that nowhere does the Bible state that the Tribulation is a seven-year period nor that it is uniquely in the future.

Q. I have always been taught that the Tribulation is a future seven year period which takes place right after the Rapture. The antichrist will arise then, right? But where in the Bible does it say that the Tribulation is seven years long?

A. Not one verse in the entire Bible says the Tribulation is seven years long.

Some point to Daniel 9:24-27 as teaching the seven-year Tribulation, but before you believe that, read the passage for yourself. Do you find a seven-year Tribulation in there anywhere? Unless you come to this passage already believing in the supposed seven-year Tribulation (which is, of course, the point to be proven), you will not easily find it in Daniel.

Until about 150 years ago, no biblical commentator, no theologian, no church in Christendom had ever taught the doctrine of a future seven-year Tribulation. The Tribulation is simply not mentioned in Daniel 9. But if the seven-year Tribulation is not there, then where is it to be found?

One would expect that a doctrine as integral to the church’s understanding of the last days as this one purportedly is would be more

evident in Scripture. Instead, the doctrine of the “seven-year Tribulation” is supposedly found solely in an admittedly complicated and difficult passage in Daniel 9. This passage in Daniel lends itself to a plain interpretation regarding the life and death of Christ, with no need for fanciful extrapolations about the Tribulation.

Moreover, if the future seven year tribulation is to be found in Daniel, an unmentioned 2,000+ year “parenthesis” must be inserted (by the reader) between the 69th and 70th “weeks” of the prophecy, without contextual or hermeneutical warrant. Seventy “weeks” of years are indeed mentioned in Daniel 9, but there is absolutely no hint in the biblical text that would lead one to postulate a more-than-2000-year gap between the 69th and 70th weeks, as the “seven-year Tribulation” theory requires. This treatment of the text is hardly “taking the Bible literally,” as the purveyors of this doctrine pride themselves in claiming to do.

Q. What verse(s) in the Bible teach that the Tribulation is yet in the future?

A. The Bible does not teach that the Tribulation is to be experienced solely in some future time. The writers of the New Testament, living in the last half of the 1st century, did not regard the Tribulation as some far off future event. For them the Tribulation was a daily experience as the Jews, the Romans, and the evil one sought to take their lives and to destroy the infant church.

The New Testament certainly says nothing about the Tribulation being future from the perspective of the reader of the Scriptures, especially not from the point of view of modern readers. In fact, as we shall see, numerous passages assume that the Tribulation is already underway at the time of the writing of the books of the New Testament.

Q. What passages teach that the Tribulation is characterized by the emergence of the antichrist?

A. No passage teaches this specifically. It may surprise you to learn, for example, that the Book of Revelation, which is supposed to be the source of much of the teaching about the Tribulation, never once even mentions the antichrist. The Greek word ἀντίχριστος (antichristos), "antichrist", appears nowhere in the entire book. However, once the concept of the antichrist is rightly understood, it becomes clear that antichrist is present during the Tribulation. The issue is, however, what and when is the biblical Tribulation.

Summary: If one of the key teachings of the Book of Revelation concerns a future seven-year Tribulation led by the antichrist, it is curious indeed that the book of Revelation (1) never mentions the antichrist, (2) never says the length of the Tribulation period is seven years, and (3) never says that the Tribulation is uniquely in the future. The burden of proof is clearly on those who impose these teachings onto the book. It is obvious that such teachings are found in a multitude of books sold in Christian bookstores around the U.S. The question is: Where are they found in the Bible?

Q. If the Tribulation is not a seven-year period in the future led by the antichrist, what is it?

A. The Tribulation is the time of persecution of God's people, ultimately under the direction of the spirit of the antichrist, which takes place in the last days.

Q. So the antichrist is involved in the Tribulation?

A. Yes, if we define the Tribulation rightly. In 1 John (written by the Apostle John, also the author of the Revelation), John writes to believers in the 1st century: "Dear children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen. This is how we know it is the last hour," and "This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son," and "... every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world." (1 John 2:18; 2:22; 4:3).

If John is seeking in these verses to teach his 1st century readers that the antichrist is a specific person who will appear only in some far-off future time, he is certainly doing so in a curiously confusing fashion since his actual words convey precisely the opposite notion, i.e., that in the 1st century many antichrists were already at work in the world, opposing the gospel and the church.

Q. How can John say that in his day it was already "the last hour?" Aren't the last days still in the future?

A. Again, we must examine how the Bible defines its own terms, not just make up our own meanings for biblical words or phrases. According to the Bible, we are now, and have been since the time of the Apostles, in "the last days."

As we have seen above, John said that in the 1st century it was already the "last hour." In Revelation 1:3 he writes that "the time [of the end] is near."



In Revelation 3:10, Jesus warns of “the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world.”

Paul says that his 1st century readers were those “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Corinthians 10:11) and that “the Lord is near” (Philippians 4:5).

The writer to the Hebrews says that “in these last days [God] has spoken to us in His Son...” (Hebrews 1:2), and he wrote to his the 1st century readers, “...now once at the consummation, He has been manifested to put away sin...” (9:26).

James writes, “...the coming of the Lord is at hand...the Judge is standing right at the door” (James 5:8,9).

Peter says that Christ has appeared “in these last times” (1 Peter 1:20) and that “the end of all things is at hand” (1 Peter 4:7). In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter says that Joel’s prophecy concerning the last days was being fulfilled there on that day: “...this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall be in the last days, God says, that I will pour forth my spirit on all mankind...’” (Acts 2:16-17).

Summary: These verses above (and many others) plainly illustrate the fact that the inspired writers of the New Testament recognized the time in which they were living, the 1st century, as already being part of “the last days,” “the end times.”

Q. But isn’t it true that the church is never mentioned in the Book of Revelation from the beginning of chapter 4 until the Great White Throne judgment in chapter 20? Doesn’t this mean that in these “Tribulation chapters” the church has been raptured away and doesn’t go through the Tribulation?

A. Not at all. It is true that the Greek word usually translated “church” (ἐκκλησία, ekklesia) is not used in chapters 4 through 20, but this proves either too much or too little.

On one hand, the word ἐκκλησία (“church”) is not found in Revelation 21 and 22, either. These chapters describe the eternal state of the new heavens and new earth. Most teachers would be reluctant to assert that the church is not in heaven for eternity simply because the Greek word ἐκκλησία is not found in these chapters! This “argument from silence” is very weak.

On the other hand, the church is mentioned repeatedly in chapters 4 through 20, described again and again in the figurative language typical of the Revelation. Symbolic representations of the church, such as the 24 elders, the 144,000, the innumerable multitude, the two witnesses, the woman in the wilderness and her children, and other figurative language describing various aspects of the church are found throughout the Revelation, including the chapters in question.

Q. Where does the N.T. teach that the Tribulation began in the 1st century?

A. In addition to the contexts of the above verses regarding the last days, in Revelation 1:9 John specifically reminds his 1st century readers that he is their “brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.” The word translated “suffering” in the NIV is translated “the tribulation” in most other versions such as the NAS, KJV, NKJV, et al. In Greek the phrase is τὴν θλίψιν (ten thlipsin), which is the New Testament term for “the Tribulation.” John is telling his readers that they should not fear, because even through they are in the Tribulation, they are also in Jesus

In Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus encourages the seven churches of Asia Minor to bear up under circumstances, which are most Tribulation-like.

He tells the church at Smyrna, "I know your tribulation (Θλιψιν)..." (2:9). The churches of Revelation 2 and 3 were enduring evil men and false apostles (Ephesus), persecution by the Jews and imprisonment (Smyrna), dwelling "where Satan's throne is," false teaching, idolatry, and martyrdom (Pergamum), false doctrine, immorality, and idolatry (Thyatira), deadness in the church (Sardis), Jewish persecution (Philadelphia), and spiritual indifference and materialism (Laodicea).

Moreover, the early universal experience of the church in all ages—from the Cross to the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7), the persecution against the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:2), the well-known Roman atrocities against Christians, the martyrdoms of James, Peter, Paul, and the other Apostles, and the present-day persecution of believers throughout the world, resounds with the characteristics claimed for the Tribulation period.

As our Christian brothers and sisters of all ages have been persecuted, imprisoned, and killed for their faith, one wonders what sympathy they might have had for comfortable modern teachers who deny that these martyrs were experiencing the Tribulation. Today's believers who ignore such plain evidence for the reality of the church's experience of the Tribulation throughout its history seem to be saying, "If it hasn't happened to me, it hasn't happened at all."

The world hates us as it hated our Master: "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you...If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also" (John 15:18-20). Jesus' words have been true and apt warnings for every generation of Christians throughout time.

Once one's thinking gets beyond the non-biblical seven-year time limitation, the true duration of the Tribulation of the church is evident. The church

has been experiencing the Tribulation since the time of the Apostles, and it will continue to do so until Jesus Christ returns to conquer His enemies and put them under His feet (Matthew 22:44).

As Jesus tells His disciples in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation (Θλιψιν), but take courage; I have overcome the world."

Q. Isn't there supposed to be an especially difficult time called "the Great Tribulation?"

A. In Matthew 24:21, Jesus tells His disciples, "There will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall." Is there even the slightest hint in the words of Jesus that this great tribulation is to be a seven-year period (or a period of any particular duration) in the distant future? You might rightly think that if the doctrine of the futuristic seven-year Tribulation were so crucial a key to understanding biblical eschatology, Jesus might have mentioned it here. In fact, such a period is presented nowhere in the words of Jesus, nor in the rest of the New Testament (nor the Old, for that matter).

Beginning in Matthew 24:15 and in the parallel passage in Luke 21, Jesus speaks directly to His 1st century followers to warn them about the coming destruction of Jerusalem (which took place some 40 years later, in A.D. 70, under the direction of Titus and his Roman legions). He tells them that when they see the attack forming, they should flee from Jerusalem and Judea and to do so without hesitation: "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand" (Luke 21:20). His followers heeded this warning when they saw the Roman armies surrounding the city in A.D. 70.

The Christians of Jerusalem did escape the slaughter by fleeing to the city of Pella. The unbelievers left behind, however, suffered a horrible fate. The Jewish historian Josephus reported



that over a million Jews were killed in the Roman attack and that during the lengthy siege mothers ate their own children to avoid starvation. Vultures did indeed gather where the corpses were found

(Matthew 24:38). This destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, along with its dead sacrificial system, was the Great Tribulation about which Jesus warned his disciples and their generation.

Conclusion

Despite the widespread popularity in America of the theory of the future seven year Tribulation and the subsequent rise of antichrist, these teachings are simply not found in the Bible.

- 1.** No verse in the Bible says the Tribulation is seven years long.
- 2.** No verse in the Bible says the Tribulation is set in the future. In fact, throughout the New Testament numerous writers and Jesus Himself indicate that even the earliest believers in the first century were already experiencing the Tribulation of the church.
- 3.** The presence and influence of antichrist is not restricted to one satanically empowered man arising in the future. The New Testament is clear that many antichrists had already arisen in the first century. The spirit of antichrist is the spirit of denial of Jesus and the hatred of His church. The workings of antichrist have been evident throughout church history, as attempts to suppress the church have been universal and millions of Christians have been persecuted and martyred because of their faith in Christ.
- 4.** The absence of the word translated "church," (ἐκκλησία, ekklesia), in Revelation 4-20 is irrelevant to the issue of whether the church goes through the Tribulation. Many figurative representations of the church are displayed in those chapters, as should be expected in the most symbolic apocalyptic book in the Bible.
- 5.** The Great Tribulation spoken of by Jesus took place in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. His followers understood His words in that way, and they escaped the terrible siege of Jerusalem, leaving unbelievers to suffer horribly at the hands of the Romans.