

The Tribulation

It is commonly heard in modern eschatological teachings 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.

Questions and Answers

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? 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 this, but unless one comes to this passage already believing in the supposed seven-year Tribulation (which is, of course, the point to be proven), he will not find it there. Until about 150 years ago, no biblical commentator, no theologian, no church in Christendom had ever taught such a doctrine. The Tribulation is simply not mentioned in Daniel 9. But if the seven-year Tribulation is not here, where is it?

One would expect that a doctrine as supposedly 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 mentioned in Daniel 9, but there is absolutely no hint in the biblical text which would lead one to postulate a 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 doing.

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

A. The New Testament does not teach that the Tribulation is yet in the future. The writers of the New Testament, in the last half of the first 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 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, numerous passages assume that the Tribulation is already underway at the time of the writing of the books of the New Testament (see below).

Q. What passage teaches that the Tribulation is characterized by the emergence of the antichrist?

- A. No passage teaches this specifically. It may surprise some, for example, that the Book of Revelation, which is the supposed source of much of the teaching about the Tribulation, never once even mentions the antichrist. The Greek word **ἀντίχριστος**, “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 the supposed 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 future from the perspective of the reader. The burden of proof is clearly on the one who imposes 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 antichrist is involved in the Tribulation?

- A. Yes, if the Tribulation is rightly understood. In 1 John (written by the Apostle John, also the author of 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 come**. 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).

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 let the Bible define its own terms. 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 wrote in the 1st century, “...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 (and many others) plainly illustrate the fact that the writers of the New Testament defined the age in which they were living, the 1st century, as already being part of “the last days, ...the end times.”*

Q. 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 the church is “raptured” away and doesn’t go through the Tribulation?

A. Not at all. It is true that the Greek word usually translated “church” is not used in chapters 4 through 20, but this proves neither too much or too little.

On one hand, the word is not used 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 22, describe in the figurative language typical of the Revelation. The 24 elders, the 144,000, the innumerable multitude, the two witnesses, the woman in the wilderness and her children, and other symbolic representations of various aspects of the church are made throughout the book.

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 on the last days, in Revelation 1:9, John specifically says to his 1st century readers that he was their “brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.” The word translated “suffering” in the NIV (translated “the tribulation” in the NAS, KJV, NKJV, et al.) is the Greek phrase τήν θλιψιν, which is the New Testament term for “the Tribulation.” John is telling his readers that they should not fear even though they were in the Tribulation, because they were 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). As these Christians were being persecuted, imprisoned, and killed for their faith, one wonders what sympathy they might have had for comfortable modern teachers who deny that these 1st century brothers were experiencing the Tribulation.

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.

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 beneath 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 a special 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 of any particular duration) in the distant future? Sober readers might 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 mentioned 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 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 to 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). This warning was heeded by His followers 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 historian Josephus reported that over a million Jews were killed in the 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 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 **ἐκκλησία** 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.