

STUDY EIGHTEEN – THE TRIBULATION PERIOD!

INTRODUCTION

In First Thessalonians 1:10, Paul wrote of our deliverance from the wrath that is to come. He wrote that we are waiting *"...for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come."*

The word "wrath" is an interpretation of the Greek word that depicts divine tribulation against the ungodly. The "wrath to come" speaks of a future time when divine indignation will come upon the guilty. God has been patient with the ungodly and with a world gone astray, and He is presently holding back judgment—but the Greek word translated as "wrath," tells us that a specific moment is coming when God will no longer hold it back. God has patiently held it back, but when it comes, it will appear as though the wrath and vengeance of God has erupted fiercely, suddenly, and violently on the world scene. That specific moment will occur when the Rapture of the Church has occurred, and authentic believers have been taken out of the way and "delivered" from the pouring out of wrath that will subsequently take place.

If you read the book of Revelation (which is not the focus of this study), you can easily come to the realization that when God's wrath begins to be released as a fierce eruption during the seven-year period called the Tribulation, it will be unlike anything humankind has ever experienced. And this wrath will be initiated by God Himself and will not be directed at His people. Rather, it will be His holy and righteous judgment directed against unrepentant ungodliness and evil.

In fact, in Matthew 24:21, Jesus referred to the severity of that wrath when He said, *"For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be."*

The use of these words "great tribulation" warns that those who are living on the earth during the seven-year period called the Tribulation will experience something so intense that no one in human history has ever experienced. Remember, Jesus said it would be *"...great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be"* (Matthew 24:21). Jesus makes it clear that no one on earth at that time will be able to escape the intensity of this time period. Indeed, no one at any time in past history has ever experienced the bowls of wrath that will be poured upon the ungodly after the Church is vacated. And this dreadful event will begin the moment the Church is raptured and taken out of the way.

As a phrase, Matthew 24:21 could be interpreted, *"That time [referring to the Great Tribulation] will be of a sort that stands uniquely in a category by itself. For such a time has emphatically not ever occurred from the very beginning of the world, until this present moment, and neither will it ever happen again. No, not ever, before or again, will such a time ever occur."*

PAST AND MODERN CATAclySMIC EVENTS

There have been many cataclysmic events and times in human history, so let's consider a few of them. The following is not intended to be an exhaustive world history lesson, but it's a reminder of just a few events that most biblically minded people will recall as events that were cataclysmic in nature.

- The Flood at the time of Noah was an event so cataclysmic that Peter wrote, *"And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly"* (2 Peter 2:5).

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Because God "spared not" the old world, this word emphatically means that just as God was not lenient and did not ultimately overlook the wretched moral condition of the world that existed at the time of the Great Flood, He also will not overlook or be lenient with the moral condition of our world today.

The Greek depicts an ancient civilization that no longer exists due to the Great Deluge at the time of Noah that engulfed the ancient world, completely tore it to pieces, and destroyed it. By using this word, Peter clearly stated that an entire civilization previously existed and was utterly wiped out by a cataclysmic flood. God's justice is so steadfast that when the world of Noah's day persisted in their egregious sinful behaviour and refused to repent, God eventually judged that entire ancient civilization. In fact, He judged it so steadfastly and deliberately that He wiped it out—leaving only a handful of Noah's family as survivors.

- The Tower of Babel signified a moment that is also unique in human history. Genesis 11 tells of this potentially shattering event that occurred when the whole of mankind, led by Nimrod, had set their hearts against God to do evil things in His sight.

Genesis 11:6-9 says, *"And the LORD said, 'Indeed the people are one, and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So, the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore, its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth."*

When Nimrod's empire was destroyed at the Tower of Babel, and the human race was divided by language and then scattered across the face of the earth, it was an event that would be difficult to overstate in terms of impact and enormity. It became a world-changing event in human history as Nimrod's stronghold of evil was dismantled by this act of God's wisdom and power.

- The Ten Plagues of Egypt were among the most cataclysmic events in human history, and that occurred when God delivered Israel from Egypt and showed Himself to be the God above all gods.

When one travels the Nile River in Egypt today, it is possible to see many of the sites and structures that Moses and the children of Israel saw in their day. These include the legendary Sphinx of Giza, the ancient pyramids, the temple cities of Karnak and Luxor, the Valley of the Kings, and a unique temple at Kom Ombo, dedicated to Sobek, the crocodile god. This was a majestic and powerful empire at one time, considered in its heyday to be the greatest empire of the ancient age.

But this powerful empire was oppressive toward the people of God, and when the cries of the Hebrew nation reached His ears, God raised up Moses to deliver His people from the Egyptian taskmasters and the tyrannical rule of Pharaoh. God's weapons of mass destruction were manifested in the form of ten powerful plagues—each one uniquely designed to humiliate the so-called gods of Egypt and utterly destroy the land's famed riches and resources of which they were so proud.

By the time the tenth plague ended with the death of Pharaoh's firstborn, in the midst of great despair, the wicked ruler of Egypt called for Moses. The Bible says Pharaoh *"...called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, 'Rise, go out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel. And go, serve the LORD as you have said.'" (Exodus 12:31).* In effect, Pharaoh cried, "Get up and get out—you and your whole clan!"

Eventually Pharaoh hardened his heart, changed his mind, and pursued the children of Israel with his army. But God opened the Red Sea and exposed a road in it that the children of Israel walked upon to the other side (see Exodus 14:21-22; Psalm 66:6). When Pharaoh's army tried to take the same road

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through the Red Sea, God caused a wind to blow, and the raging walls of the Red Sea that were held back for the children of Israel collapsed upon Pharaoh's army and they were destroyed.

- The Destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD was a decisive event of the first Jewish-Roman War (66-74 AD).

In that horrific and painful event in which Emperor Vespasian sent the Roman army to besiege the city of Jerusalem, as part of the siege led by the future emperor Titus, Roman troops destroyed the city and set fire to the Temple, completely destroying it. The historian Josephus wrote that more than 1,000,000 people in Jerusalem were killed during the siege. He further stated that another 97,000 were enslaved. The destruction of Jerusalem was so devastating that when the siege ended, only 40,000 people had survived the rampage, and of that number, more than 10,000 Jewish men were sent to Rome to serve as slaves.

The Second Temple in Jerusalem was so magnificent that before the Roman emperor Titus laid siege to Jerusalem in 70 AD and destroyed it, he first entered it to plunder its treasures and carry them back to Rome. Today at the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum (Forum Romanum), there is a carved relief on the interior of the arch that pictures the golden Menorah from the Temple being carried into Rome in a triumphal procession, along with other treasures taken from the Temple in Jerusalem.

Most people do not realize the incalculable value of what Titus plundered from the Temple. It is so immense that once it was converted into cash, the sales of the Temple treasures were eventually sufficient to use as capital for the construction of Rome's enormous Colosseum. And the workforce that constructed the Colosseum was the group of 10,000 Jewish men who were sent to Rome as slaves.

FURTHER NOTES ON THE GREAT TRIBULATION

It is Christ Himself who used the phrase Great Tribulation with reference to the last half of the tribulation period. In Matthew 24:21, Jesus says, *"For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be"* (ESV). In this verse Jesus is referring to the event of Matthew 24:15, which describes the revealing of the abomination of desolation, the man also known as the Antichrist. Also, Jesus in Matthew 24:29–30 states, *"Immediately after the tribulation of those days . . . will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory"* (ESV). In this passage, Jesus defines the Great Tribulation (verse 21) as beginning with the revealing of the abomination of desolation (verse 15) and ending with Christ's second coming (verse 30).

Other passages that refer to the Great Tribulation are Daniel 12:1b, which says, *"And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time"* (ESV). It seems that Jesus was quoting this verse when He spoke the words recorded in Matthew 24:21. Also referring to the Great Tribulation is Jeremiah 30:7, *"Alas! That day is so great there is none like it; it is a time of distress for Jacob; yet he shall be saved out of it"* (ESV). The "distress for Jacob" refers to Israel's experience of persecution and natural disasters such as have never before been seen.

Considering the information Christ gave us in Matthew 24:15–30, it is easy to conclude that the beginning of the Great Tribulation has much to do with the abomination of desolation, an action of the Antichrist. In Daniel 9:26–27, we find that this man will make a "covenant" (a peace pact) with the world for seven years. Halfway through the seven-year period, this man will break the covenant he made, stopping sacrifice and grain offering, which specifically refers to his actions in the rebuilt temple of the future. Revelation 13:1–10 gives even more detail concerning the beast's actions, and just as important, it also verifies the length of time he will be in power.

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Revelation offers us the most information about the Great Tribulation. From Revelation 13 when the beast is revealed until Christ returns in Revelation 19, we are given a picture of God's wrath on the earth because of unbelief and rebellion (Revelation 16—18). It is also a picture of how God disciplines and at the same time protects His people Israel (Revelation 14:1–5) until He keeps His promise to Israel by establishing an earthly kingdom (Revelation 20:4–6).