

“The Great Tribulation”

November 19, 2023

Matthew 24:15-28

I. Introduction

Before we continue our study of Jesus’ teaching concerning the end times, I need to make a disclaimer. If you are looking for an in-depth study of the Tribulation with dates and times, countries and perhaps even people named, I’m afraid that you will be disappointed. There are hundreds of books, some with multiple volumes, which do just that—the trouble is that many come up with conflicting ideas. In a morning worship service, we don’t have the time to jump multiple times from one Biblical reference to another or from one author to another as we build a timeline for the last 7 years of the world before the return of the Lord—what many call Daniel’s 70th week. This is something to be done in a Bible study or Sunday school class where there is more time and there can be some give & take conversations.

In the musical “*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*” when Joseph is tossed into prison by Potiphar, there is a song that says, “*Don’t be afraid, we’ve read the Book and you come out on top.*” The purpose of Biblical prophesy isn’t that we can diagram the future day by day and hour by hour, but that we can have peace and security about the future. We aren’t told all these things so that we will be obsessed with dates, events, and speculations about the minute details of the end times. We are given enough information to encourage us to grow in spite of what is going on around us. It should also encourage us to go and tell others about the love of Jesus and of the coming judgment of all creation. We don’t need to wonder if God is in control or why various things are happening or what’s going to happen next—Jesus and His prophets have already warned us. ***We don’t need to be afraid we’ve read the Book and we come out on top!***

Last week in the first 14 verses of this chapter, Jesus told His disciples, and those who would later read His teachings, about some of the conditions on the earth that would act as indicators of His imminent return. Since they would intensify just before His coming, He called them “**birth pains.**” But beginning with **verse 15**, there is a shift from general information to more explicit happenings. To begin, Jesus introduced “**the abomination that causes desolation.**”

II. The abomination that causes desolation.

The prophet Daniel referred to the “**abomination of desolation**” in 3 different places—[Daniel 9:27](#); [11:31](#); [12:11](#). Turn to one of them, [turn to Daniel 9:25-27](#). Around 170 BC, the Greek King Antiochus Epiphanes captured Jerusalem. He tried his best to eradicate the Jewish race as he slaughtered thousands of Jewish men and sold their wives and children into slavery. He set up an idol of Zeus in the Temple, sacrificed ceremonially unclean animals, including pigs, on the altar and forced the priests to eat the flesh. Finally, in an attempt to do away with Judaism altogether, he abolished the Jewish religious holidays and practices. This defilement by Antiochus was just a preview of the even greater “**abomination that causes desolation**” that will be committed by the Antichrist in the end time that is called the Great Tribulation.

Antiochus and several other captors of Israel, including Rome, were mere precursors of this abomination, Jesus said that the real action was yet to come in the future. Paul wrote about this Antichrist who is yet to come. [Turn to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4](#). In [Revelation 13:11-18](#) we are told that a living idol of the Antichrist will be set up in the temple by the false prophet—the 2nd beast of Revelation. Although Antiochus set up an idol in the Temple to be worshipped by the Jews, it was a one of his gods—Zeus. The Antichrist will set up an idol of himself as God and demand worship from all mankind. He will end all sacrifice in the Temple and commit the outrage or abomination that makes the holy place desecrated and desolate.

When Jesus said, “**Let the reader understand**,” He wasn’t giving the warnings in the Olivet discourse just to the disciples themselves or to their generation but, also, to believers in the end time. They will read these truths and others in Scripture and then be able to understand the trials they are enduring. They will know what to do—how to react to “**the abomination that causes desolation**.”

III. Reaction to the abomination

From Daniel and other prophets, it seems that the first three and a half years will be a time of relative peace and quiet. But in the middle of this 70th week of Daniel, this ruler, the Antichrist, will have a living statue of himself erected in the Temple and his associate—the false prophet of [Revelation 20:10](#)—will

demand the whole earth worship it. Satan has always wanted the world's worship, and in the middle of the Tribulation he will begin to receive it.

The last half of the Great Tribulation will be a terrible time. Jesus gave 4 statement or warnings regarding this time. First, He said that great danger will accompany the arrival of the abomination and for that reason those in Jerusalem should flee the city to be safe—to be safe, flee!

A. To be safe, flee! Jesus gave 5 conditions about this flight. **First, flee to the mountains.** Jesus said, **“Let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”** When the abomination occurs, those who have understood the prophecies of Jesus and His prophets will know that immediate and utter destruction is coming on Jerusalem, and many will die. In fact, **Zechariah 13:8-9** says that 2/3's of the people will die. Knowing this, those who are observant should flee with great haste to the mountains for refuge. This may be the refuge that John pictured in **Revelation 12:14-17**.

2. Next, Jesus said, “Don't waste time getting stuff from inside the house.” This is what Jesus meant when He said, **“Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house.”** The flat rooftops on many homes in Israel were a place to find a cool breeze in the evening and were considered part of the living quarters. If they were there when they saw the abomination, they must not waste any time. The impending destruction will be so imminent that there will be no time to gather provisions from inside the home, they must flee NOW! **“Don't waste time getting stuff from inside the house.”**

3. Not only are they to flee without any provisions, but they are also to **Flee with just the shirt on your back.** Jesus said, **“Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak.”** The outer coat was important for a traveler. As well as protection from the elements, it served as a sleeping blanket when sleeping outdoors. But there wasn't time to go home to get it, now was the time to flee.

4. Verse 19 adds, **“How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!”** Jesus was saying, **“Pray that you aren't pregnant or nursing.”** Even today travel for pregnant women or those with small children is challenging. But on that day, things will be much more difficult. Those who are more vulnerable and rely on the help of others will suffer the most.

5. Finally, **“Pray that there will be no obstacles to your flight.”** Although Palestinian winters are mild compared to those here in Wisconsin, even slightly inclement weather could be a hindrance to escape. Those seeking to escape should also pray that they will not have to flee on the Sabbath when legalistic Jews who are not fleeing might try to stop those whom they believe are profaning the Sabbath. Jesus’ point was that no possession would be worth the risk of retrieving it and no hindrance could be considered too small. Because of the imminent unmatched terror, single-minded, undeterred flight must be of utmost importance.

B. There will be great distress. As well as telling people to flee, Jesus warned that **there will be great distress**. The appearance of the **“abomination that causes desolation”** will herald the time of **“great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again.”** Although the history of Israel and the Jewish people has seen many horrifying events, including things like Hitler’s Holocaust and the fighting going on today, nothing will equal what will happen at that time. In **Revelation chapters 6 - 16** John recorded in much more detail the escalating intensity of God’s wrath upon sinful, rebellious mankind. God’s message for Israel and those that read His Word is that things are going to get infinitely worse before they get better. The nation and its people will suffer treachery, desecration of the rebuilt Temple, and indescribable persecution and brutal slaughter that will be unequal to anything that has ever happened in history.

C. Third, the days will be cut short. If the wickedness of humanity and the wrath of God were allowed to run unchecked, there would be no end to the terror; Jesus said, **“No one would survive.”** During this time of the Great Tribulation, when the Antichrist and his followers rise up against God and His people, God will pour out His wrath on them. For just an example of what will happen **turn to Revelation 16:1-21**. This will be a terrible time to be alive. But Jesus promised that the time of tribulation will not last indefinitely. Because God is in charge, the days will be cut short.

The people of Israel are often referred to as God’s chosen or the elect. But when Jesus talked about the elect in **Matthew 24:22**, it could also be a reference to those who become Christians during the Tribulation. In **Revelation 7** God will choose 144,000 Israelites to evangelize the world and to bring in

believers from all nations to worship God and the Lamb. I suspect that both are part of the elect—a remnant of the nation of Israel as well as any redeemed Gentiles.

D. There will be false messiahs. As He had done earlier, Jesus once again warned that there will be false messiahs. But during this terrible time, things will change. As we read earlier in [Revelation 16:14](#) and in [2 Thessalonians 2:9](#), during this time of great distress, the false messiahs and false prophets will have the ability to perform “all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders.” These signs and wonders will be so awesome and convincing that Jesus said in [verse 24](#) that they would almost be able “to deceive even the elect.”

Jesus warned those who are going through this time not to be fooled by those who say they are the messiah. The Messiah will not come secretly, hiding out in a desert or in a secret room. Jesus said that the Son of Man will come in a spectacular manner: “As lightning that is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” His coming will not be stretched over a long period of time but will be sudden, visible to everyone, and totally amazing! For those who belong to Him, Christ’s coming will be a marvelous deliverance, but for those who have resisted and opposed Him it will be the ultimate day of tragedy. [Turn to Revelation 6:15-17.](#)

Jesus closed His warnings about the false messiahs and His triumphal return with a proverb: “Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.” There are several interpretations of this proverb—all which seem to have some truth to them. Perhaps Jesus is saying that His coming will be as obvious as the gathering of vultures around a carcass.

V. Conclusion

In the Bible there are some nonnegotiable items—the Bible is emphatic about them. Things like: God created the heavens and the earth; Jesus was both man and God; Jesus was born of a virgin; Jesus died on a cross and 3 days later rose from the dead; Jesus is in heaven interceding for us; there is only one way to be saved from an eternity in hell—believing on the Lord Jesus Christ; there will be an end to time.

There are some things that don't seem to be quite so cut and dried—even after searching the Scriptures there are still some questions about them. None of these questions and answers affects a person's salvation. One such question is *“When exactly will the Messiah, i.e., Jesus, come back to the earth and establish His kingdom?”* Many people have come up with dates and even times, but they have all been proven wrong. There is another similar question: In [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#) Paul wrote that Jesus is coming in the clouds to take His children, Christians, back to heaven to be with Him. (This is called the Rapture.) The Bible doesn't say exactly when that will happen either, but the majority of Christian scholars feel that the Rapture will happen either just before the Tribulation starts or halfway through it.

This leaves us another question: “If they are right (and, for what it's worth, I feel they are), why does Jesus go into so much detail concerning these last days and especially concerning the last 3½ years after Christians have been taken out of the world?” Some we've seen before:

1. We can have confidence that things aren't just randomly happening, but that God is in charge.
2. We know that as we get closer to the time of Tribulation, things will become more difficult.
3. We can be encouraged to live Godly lives as we see God's hand at work.
4. If we believe what Jesus said, we should be eager—even anxious—to tell others of God's love and mercy so that they will not have to suffer in the Tribulation and in God's wrath that will follow.
5. Finally, for those who become saved during the Tribulation, they will be assured that God does care for them and that there is an end to the persecution and death all around them. Like us, they can be forewarned and therefore forearmed concerning the false messiahs and prophets.

In [John 9:4](#) Jesus said, *“As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work.”* No one knows when the Tribulation will start, for that matter, no one knows when they will die and leave this earth. For those of us who know the way of salvation, it is supremely important that we tell others that Jesus saves by what we say and by what we do before it is too late—before night comes. We don't need to be afraid; we've read the Book and we come out on top BUT WE NEED TO TELL OTHERS!