

The Tribulation**1 Thessalonians 1:6—10**

It is important to understand how the idea of a Tribulation is formulated. If it is a biblical concept then why do the majority of Christians reject it? People's interpretation of Scripture is usually based on their core beliefs. Too often a person's core religious beliefs skew clear biblical teaching. Those who adhere to Covenantism (basically reformed theology) reject any notion of a rapture and subsequent Tribulation. Those who are Dispensationally interpret Scripture to include a Rapture and Tribulation. Although it is impossible to completely put aside doctrinal biases when interpreting Scripture, I hope to show from Scripture that there will indeed be a literal Tribulation.

Covenant Theology

Before looking into the Tribulation I think it's helpful to see how others, those who take an opposing view to ours, approach Bible interpretation. Covenant theologians, and those who follow Reformed Theology, have their roots with some of the early church fathers beginning 200 years or so after Christ was on earth. They were attempting to deal with the "problem" of Christ not coming back when they thought He should. In the 1500s the theological covenants (in contrast to biblical covenants such as the Abrahamic Covenant) of works (between God and Adam), grace (between God and the elect) and redemption (between the persons of the Godhead) were formulated to explain how God dealt with mankind throughout the ages while eliminating the "problem" of Christ not returning.

Their basic theology rejects the notion of Dispensations, that of God dealing with mankind in different ways throughout the ages. They will sometimes scoff at the idea of a dispensation, but their own theology also shows God dealing with mankind in different ways at different times as shown by their own distinction between the covenants of works (before the fall) and grace (after the fall). They have dispensations but are unwilling to use that term.

By believing God deals the same way with all men after the fall of Adam they need to reject that God deals with Israel any different than the Church, the Body of Christ. They see one people of God throughout history so that what was given to Israel is just as relevant to us today in the Church. However, there are problems in directly transferring all the blessings and curses given to Israel (such as the promise of land in the Middle East) so they have taken to allegorizing literal promises with spiritual replacements (making their Promised Land our Heaven, etc).

Since there is only one people of God and God deals with this people consistently throughout history, there is no room for distinctions between Israel and today's Church. This is why they teach the Rapture is the Second Coming (God coming for His people will happen only once), there is only one judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ after His Second Coming (there will be no separate Judgment Seat of Christ for believers) and the Millennial Kingdom (as promised for Israel) is the final eternal state in the new heavens and earth.

To summarize, Covenant Theologians (in general) believe God has the same program for all generations and thus reject the idea that He will once again deal with Israel as a nation (preferring to use the term "people of God" for all generations), and often interpret prophetic passages non-literally since a literal interpretation would go against their theology.

Dispensational Theology

Although most see seven distinct dispensations beginning with the creation of Adam, we will only deal with the two that come up most frequently, the Dispensation of Law and the Dispensation of Grace. In general, Dispensationalists see a distinction between God's dealings with Israel and His dealings with the Body of Christ. They also tend to interpret the Bible literally instead of allegorically.

Part of the problem and weakness with Dispensational teaching is that it is not consistently taught and applied. If Pastors and teachers would build a wall between Israel's program and the Church, the Body of Christ, then many difficulties would disappear and Covenant theologians would not be supplied ammunition by weak Dispensationalists. This includes men such as John McArthur who continually dip theological truths for today's church out of the well of Israel's doctrine. This tainting of Pauline doctrine has done much harm to the teaching of Dispensationalism.

The Tribulation

I believe the clearest indication that the Tribulation is literal comes from Daniel's prophetic timeline. Here Daniel lays out Israel's future (from his vantage point) for 490 years. Covenant theologians often view Daniel as allegorical (as they do Revelation). They understand it as an encouragement to remain faithful. If taken literally, Daniel 9:24—27 lays the foundation of Israel's prophetic program. By building on this foundation with passages such as Daniel 11 and the book of Revelation it's possible to put together a fairly detailed account of what will happen to Israel in the future. The important thing to understand is that out of Daniel's 490 years only 483 years have been completed. That leaves the final seven years to finish out Israel's prophetic program.

According to Daniel 9:27 the antichrist will make a seven-year covenant and at the mid-point (3-1/2 years) that covenant will be broken marked by the Abomination of Desolation—the desecration of the temple. Matthew 24 adds additional information. Verse 15 picks up with the Abomination of Desolation warning Israel to flee to the mountains (also see Revelation 13:5—6). This last part of the Tribulation is called the Great Tribulation because it will be a cataclysmic like no other time on the history of the earth (verse 21). The Tribulation will be followed by cosmic signs (verse 29) ending with the Second Coming (verse 30). These events are so specific and detailed that it's difficult to see how they could be interpreted as allegorical.

As mentioned above, the event known as the Abomination of Desolation will happen at the midpoint of the Tribulation. Revelation 11:2 gives the length of the last part of the Tribulation as forty two months (see Luke 21:20). Revelation 12:6 says Israel will be nourished by God for 1,260 days after she flees Jerusalem while verse 14 reiterates the details stating Israel will be in the wilderness for a time (one year), times (two years) and half a time (see Daniel 7:25; 12:7). All these numbers are consistent in setting the time of the last part of the Tribulation at three and a half years. That makes the full Tribulation seven years, which conforms to Daniel's prophecy of a "week" of years. Again, these very specific details collaborated by multiple passages of Scripture speak to the literalness of these prophetic events.

The Tribulation is God's wrath

To expand on last week's lesson a bit, I want to point out additional verses that show the Tribulation is a demonstration of God's wrath. Since most of the book of Revelation is about the Tribulation, that would be a good place to start. 6:16—17 says that God is demonstrating His wrath to the point that men desire death. 11:18 speaks of God's wrath being poured out before the Second Coming (verse 15) and the judgment of the dead. 14:10, 19 compares God's wrath to a winepress while the seals, bowls and trumpets are all pictures of God pouring out his wrath on the world (15:1, 7; 16:1, 19). Clearly the Tribulation is God's wrath. Notice that Ezekiel 20:33—34 says that God will gather Israel in His wrath for judgment. This will be done before the middle of the Tribulation and thus indicating that the entire Tribulation period is God's wrath.

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