

Chapter Six

The Great Tribulation

The word “tribulation” is a transliteration of the Latin “tribulum.” It’s a picture word, so to speak, that connotes images of a person beating a rug to remove the dust, or beating wheat with a rod to separate the wheat from the chaff. The Greek word translated “tribulation” is “*thlipsis*” (θλίψις). “*Thlipsis*” is derived from the word “*thlibo*”-- meaning to crush, press, compress or squeeze. Thus, “*thlipsis*” indicates grievous affliction or distress.

Christ said that this squeezing, as well as this removing of dust and chaff through chastening, is part of the Christian journey, and we should not expect our lives to always be smooth:

“These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation (*thlipsis*), but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

However, this common trouble is not to be confused with “*thlipsis megas*” -- “tribulation the great”.

“For then there will be a great tribulation (*megas thlipsis*), such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.” (Matt. 24:21)

That is a time of trouble unlike any other time and any other trouble. It is the period of Daniel’s 70th week, expanded and described in the book of Revelation. It is, specifically, the last 3½ years of this present age before Jesus returns to set up His kingdom that shall never be destroyed.

When Daniel received his angelic vision of the “70 weeks,” he had been reading from the book of Jeremiah and came to realize that Israel’s 70 years of desolation were about to come to a conclusion. Jeremiah had prophesied a specific time that would run its course, very literally, in the life of the Jewish nation. And, certainly enough, at the end of the desolation the children of Israel, by the decree of Cyrus and later by Artaxerxes, returned to rebuild the temple, and eventually Jerusalem.

Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept

sabbath until seventy years were complete. Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia — in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah — the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying, “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!’” (2Chron. 36:20-23)

The prophecies of Jeremiah were both accurate and literal; the details and the exact numbers played-out in sequence. Importantly, the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah was specifically to the tribes of Israel and Judah. It is in that framework we find the following prophecy:

The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, ”Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Write all the words which I have spoken to you in a book. For behold, days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel and Judah.’ The LORD says, ‘I will also bring them back to the land that I gave to their forefathers and they shall possess it.’” (Jer. 30: 1-3)

Terrific! The dispersed members of Judah and Israel will one day return to the land they have always held as a gift promised to Abraham, Isaac and their descendants. But, then the prophecy takes a dark turn:

Now these are the words which the LORD spoke concerning Israel and concerning Judah: “For thus says the LORD, ‘I have heard a sound of terror, of dread, and there is no peace. ‘Ask now, and see if a male can give birth. Why do I see every man *with* his hands on his loins, as a woman in childbirth? And *why* have all faces turned pale?’” (Jer.30:4-6)

What an odd question. Do men have birth pains and double over, clutching their stomachs? No. Then why does God see every man with his hands on his loins in misery? God foretells a time, concurrent with Israel reregaining possession of their land, when all their faces are ashen with pain and grief and there is no peace, only trembling and fear. Why?

“Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it; And it is the time of Jacob’s distress, but he will be saved from it.” (v.7)

Jeremiah foresaw a day so terrible that it can truly be said that no other time is like it. The word translated “day” is the Hebrew “*yom*” and it points to a specific moment or event in the plan of time. It is not limited to a single 24-hour day.

Notice that the day of trouble is called “Jacob’s trouble” or “Jacob’s distress.” Jacob was the original name of the progenitor of the Jewish nations, whose name was later changed, by an angel of the Lord, to Israel - “prince who has power with God” (Gen. 32:28). Still, despite this warning of horror, the word from God also includes the promise that Jacob will be saved from it!

Daniel also foresaw this same day and provides a further clue to its time frame. In the last chapter of his book, after he has listed the horrors that the “little horn” will undertake, detailing the battles and attacks against Jerusalem, Daniel says:

“Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands *guard* over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace *and* everlasting contempt . . . But as for you, Daniel, conceal these words and seal up the book until the end of time.” (Dan. 12:1-2,4a)

If the language here sounds familiar, it hearkens back to the first chapter of this book - The Resurrection. Daniel connects this time of tremendous trouble with the resurrection of the dead. But, even as trouble sweeps over the earth, Michael the archangel, the one who protects Israel and who helped conquer the “kings of Persia,” stands up to protect and defend Daniel’s people. And, once again, the events are to be sealed up until “the end of time.” That ought to be sufficient to convince us that this time of trouble has yet to occur.

But, wait! There’s more!

In Matthew 24, the disciples of Jesus asked Him what would be the signs of the end of the age and of His coming. He answered by saying that they were to take heed that they not be deceived by the false Christs who would appear and deceive many. They would hear of wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms, famines, pestilence and earthquakes in various places. But, these are just the “beginning of birth pains” (Matt. 24:8). These birth pains -- the Greek “odin” (ὄδιν) -- that Christ included in His description of the signs of His return are a direct parallel to Jeremiah’s description of these selfsame days.

Christ went on to say that many would be afflicted, killed, and hated for their testimony of the name of Christ. Men will betray each other, false prophets will arise, iniquity will abound and the love of many will wax cold. But, some will endure to the end and be saved. And, the gospel of the kingdom will be preached to the entire world for a witness to all the nations and then the end shall come. It is in that context, as Christ was answering these questions, that we discover the verse we referenced earlier:

“Therefore when you see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.” (Mat.24:15-20)

The references to Daniel’s prophecy, Judea and the Sabbath make this an undeniably Jewish/Israelite instruction. And, where are they to flee? Just “to the mountains”? No, Christ already gave his audience their clue -- Daniel’s “abomination of desolation”:

“He will also enter the Beautiful Land, and many *countries* will fall; but these will be rescued out of his hand: Edom, Moab and the foremost of the sons of Ammon.” (Dan.11:41)

The final word ruler will invade Jerusalem to set up his image in the temple and “displaying himself as being God” (2Thes. 2:4). But, his armies will providentially miss the ancient territories of Edom, Moab and Ammon. They were on the eastern shore of the Dead, or Salt, Sea, ensconced in a mountain range. Ammon is to the northeast of the sea, Moab is due east, and Edom is southeast. This is the area that God has set aside for the purpose of protecting His chosen people from the onslaught of the armies of the “little horn.”

But, why the rush? What’s the big hurry that would preclude even returning to the house to grab a coat? Why should nursing women be concerned? And, why worry about the weather?

“For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.” (Mat.24:21-22)

Jesus predicted the same event foretold by Jeremiah and Daniel, using the same language. It was future to Jesus and it remains future to us. Either that or we must uncover some event that occurred between Jesus’ ministry and today that adequately fulfills this prophecy.

Identifying the Elect

This would be a suitable place to add a necessary definition. During His ministry, Jesus made several references to “the elect.” Not only did He say that the days of trouble would be shortened for the elect’s sake, He equally prophesied that the

miraculous signs and wonders to be performed by “false Christs and false prophets” would be so effective that they would even deceive the elect, if such a thing were possible (Matt. 24:24). When the “sign of the Son of Man” appears in the heavens, as the tribes of the earth are mourning, Jesus will send His angels with the sound of a great trumpet to gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other (Matt. 24:31). These same statements appear in Mark’s gospel. And Luke records Jesus’ parable of the unjust judge, including the summary statement, “Now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?” (Luke 18:7)

Jesus spoke openly and frequently of “the elect.” Unfortunately, the failure to understand Jesus’ words in their proper context has led to several errant eschatological schemes. For instance, those folk who contend that the Church (redeemed believers from every kindred, tribe, tongue and nation) will be present on Earth during the time of Jacob’s trouble point to Jesus’ statement that its duration will be shortened for the elect’s sake. They assume -- wrongly -- that Jesus was referring to the Church when He mentioned the “elect.”

But what would Christ’s original listening audience have understood Him to be saying? The closer we can get to their mindset, the closer we will get to His meaning. Remember that Jesus was walking and teaching among the Jews, primarily. He was perfectly clear in declaring, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matt. 15:24) Although Gentiles sought and occasionally conversed with Him, His target audience was Israel. So, how would they have understood His several references to “the elect?” They would have understood Him to be speaking of them! After all, in their Scripture they were identified exactly that way:

O seed of Israel His servant, sons of Jacob, His chosen ones! (1Chron. 16:13)

O seed of Abraham, His servant, O sons of Jacob, His chosen ones! (Psa. 105:6)

For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His own possession. (Psa. 135:4)

“But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham My friend ...” (Isa. 41:8)

“But now listen, O Jacob, My servant; And Israel, whom I have chosen: Thus says the LORD who made you and formed you from the womb, who will help you, Do not fear, O Jacob My servant; And you Jeshurun whom I have chosen.” (Isa. 44:1-2)

“For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen (*KJV: Mine elect*), I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor, though you have not known Me.” (Isa. 45:4)

“And I will bring forth offspring from Jacob, and an heir of My mountains from Judah; Even My chosen ones shall inherit it, and My servants shall dwell there.” (Isa. 65:9)

Israel’s Scripture (what we call the Old Testament) was the only frame-of-reference available to Jesus’ target audience. And those Scripture are unflinchingly clear in identifying Israel as God’s chosen, elect people. Therefore, the only Biblically consistent understanding of His use of the phraseology “the elect” is that He was referring to the very people to whom He was speaking -- to Israel. And that brings His words in league with everything we’ve already discovered concerning the time of Jacob’s trouble.

Titus

Some writers and commentators -- particularly those who promote the theory that every prophecy of the Bible has already been fulfilled and that the future holds nothing but Christ’s eventual return -- point to the destruction of Jerusalem and the tearing down of the temple in 70 AD as the particular cataclysmic event that Jesus was describing in Matthew 24. They find in Titus, the Roman general (and later emperor) who led the invasion and destruction, the person they define as the “little horn”, thus wrapping up the loose ends and neatly pushing all prophecy into the past.

It’s a tempting conclusion inasmuch as Jesus was inarguably referring to those events early in His discourse:

And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.” (Matt. 24:1-2)

It was truly a horrific event as the walls were razed to the ground and the temple was set ablaze. Josephus claims that 1,100,000 people were killed during the siege, of which a majority were Jewish, and that 97,000 were captured and enslaved.

"The slaughter within was even more dreadful than the spectacle from without. Men and women, old and young, insurgents and priests, those who fought and those who entreated mercy, were hewn down in indiscriminate carnage. The number of the slain exceeded that of the

slayers. The legionaries had to clamber over heaps of dead to carry on the work of extermination." ¹

Nevertheless, despite the horror and inarguable prophetic fulfillment involved in that event, it is an enormous stretch of even the most fervent imagination to conclude that the destruction of Jerusalem was indeed the "great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall." Certainly after the Dark Ages, the Inquisition, the Crusades, two World Wars, and the Holocaust (which reportedly took the lives of 3,000,000 Jews), it's hard to imagine that none of those events was on par with Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Nor is Titus the embodiment of the "little horn." Neither "this age" came to its conclusion, nor did Christ return in visible clouds of glory when Jerusalem fell. Titus was undoubtedly a tool in the hand of a sovereign God to accomplish Christ's word concerning the temple. But, then he was removed from the stage of history and Biblical prophecy.

The 29th verse of Matthew 24 ought to be sufficient to convince us of that fact:

"But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory." (Matt. 24:29-30)

Unless these particular events – the sun and moon darkened, stars falling from heaven, all the tribes of the earth mourning as they witness the sign of Christ as He comes in the clouds of Heaven with power and glory - can be historically located and connected with Titus, he is not the man of whom Daniel and Jesus spoke. And the Great Tribulation has yet to occur.

Sure, sure ... some commentators have attempted to allegorize the events described in Matthew 24:29-30 in order to argue that they did indeed occur in 70 AD. But, inasmuch as the first portion of Jesus' prophecy concerning the stones of the temple being cast down came true in a very literal, physical fashion, we have no reason -- nor any exegetical imperative -- to conclude that the whole of the prophecy is not equally literal.

The Day of the Lord

This period of trouble is made doubly worse by the fact that not only the "little horn" inflicts persecution on Israel and the surrounding kingdoms, but as he lifts himself up to the position of deity God intervenes and begins pouring out His fury, His wrath on the inhabitants of the earth for their rejection of His Son and

their proclivity for sin. That period when God begins the work of punishing sin is called "The Day of the Lord." It is a time truly unlike any time that has gone before:

Moreover, the word of the LORD came to me saying, "And you, son of man, thus says the Lord GOD to the land of Israel, 'An end! The end is coming on the four corners of the land. Now the end is upon you, and I will send My anger against you; I will judge you according to your ways and bring all your abominations upon you. For My eye will have no pity on you, nor will I spare *you*, but I will bring your ways upon you, and your abominations will be among you; then you will know that I am the LORD!" Thus says the Lord GOD, "A disaster, unique disaster, behold it is coming! An end is coming; the end has come! It has awakened against you; behold, it has come! Your doom has come to you, O inhabitant of the land. The time has come, the day is near--tumult rather than joyful shouting on the mountains. Now I will shortly pour out My wrath on you and spend My anger against you; judge you according to your ways and bring on you all your abominations. My eye will show no pity nor will I spare. I will repay you according to your ways, while your abominations are in your midst; then you will know that I, the LORD, do the smiting. Behold, the day! Behold, it is coming! *Your* doom has gone forth; the rod has budded, arrogance has blossomed. Violence has grown into a rod of wickedness. None of them *shall remain*, none of their people, none of their wealth, nor anything eminent among them. The time has come, the day has arrived. Let not the buyer rejoice nor the seller mourn; for wrath is against all their multitude. Indeed, the seller will not regain what he sold as long as they *both* live; for the vision regarding all their multitude will not be averted, nor will any of them maintain his life by his iniquity. They have blown the trumpet and made everything ready, but no one is going to the battle, for My wrath is against all their multitude. The sword is outside and the plague and the famine are within. He who is in the field will die by the sword; famine and the plague will also consume those in the city. Even when their survivors escape, they will be on the mountains like doves of the valleys, all of them mourning, each over his own iniquity. All hands will hang limp and all knees will become *like* water. They will gird themselves with sackcloth and shuddering will overwhelm them; and shame *will be* on all faces and baldness on all their heads. They will fling their silver into the streets and their gold will become an abhorrent thing; their silver and their gold will not be able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the LORD. They cannot satisfy their appetite nor can they fill their stomachs, for their iniquity has become an occasion of stumbling." (Ezek. 7:1-19)

That terrifying description of God's anger and unrestrained punishment is just the beginning. Descriptions of righteous, Heavenly judgment, complete destruction

and earthly lamenting run throughout scripture. And they are most always connected to The Day of the Lord.

Gird yourselves *with sackcloth* and lament, O priests; Wail, O ministers of the altar! Come, spend the night in sackcloth O ministers of my God, For the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly; Gather the elders *and* all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, And cry out to the LORD. Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and it will come as destruction from the Almighty. (Joel 1:13-15)

Blow a trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm on My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; Surely it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness. As the dawn is spread over the mountains, *so* there is a great and mighty people; There has never been *anything* like it, Nor will there be again after it to the years of many generations. (Joel2:1-2)

They run like mighty men, they climb the wall like soldiers; And they each march in line, nor do they deviate from their paths. They do not crowd each other, they march everyone in his path; When they burst through the defenses, they do not break ranks. They rush on the city, they run on the wall; they climb into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief. Before them the earth quakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and the moon grow dark and the stars lose their brightness. The LORD utters His voice before His army; Surely His camp is very great, for strong is he who carries out His word. The day of the LORD is indeed great and very awesome, and who can endure it? (Joel 2:7-11)

Therefore thus says the LORD God of hosts, the Lord, "There is wailing in all the plazas, And in all the streets they say, 'Alas! Alas!' They also call the farmer to mourning and professional mourners to lamentation. And in all the vineyards *there is* wailing, because I will pass through the midst of you," says the LORD. Alas, you who are longing for the day of the LORD, for what purpose *will* the day of the LORD *be* to you? It *will be* darkness and not light; As when a man flees from a lion And a bear meets him, Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall And a snake bites him. *Will* not the day of the LORD *be* darkness instead of light, even gloom with no brightness in it?" (Amos 5:16-20)

Near is the great day of the LORD, near and coming very quickly; Listen, the day of the LORD! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. A day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and the high corner

towers. I will bring distress on men so that they will walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD; And their blood will be poured out like dust and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of the LORD'S wrath; And all the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy, for He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one, of all the inhabitants of the earth. (Zeph.1:14-18)

Are you getting a feel for this? There are also references to that day in Zechariah and Malachi. They convey a similar message. The Day of the Lord is the day when God unleashes His anger and His wrath on the sinful people of this planet. He starts with Israel for their hard-hearted refusal to follow Him, but His punishment finally encompasses all the inhabitants of this world for their mistreatment of His chosen and their unending perniciousness. It is a time of darkness, distress, fear and anguish. It is a time of torment at the hand of God. It is a time of judgment and punishment.

The New Testament echoes and continues this theme:

“AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BELOW, BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE. THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD, BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME. (Acts2:19-20, quoting Joel2:30)

John also saw this specific moment in his vision, but he added one critical element to the mix. John not only saw the men of earth running to hide from the wrath of God, but:

I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth *made* of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (Rev.6:12-17)

Jesus, the Lamb, takes part in this vengeful wrath. Take note of how complete the list of terrorized people is: kings, great men, commanders, rich men, strong men, every servant, every free man. That's a very extensive list and it's most certainly John's intention to make sure that no one is left out. Absolutely

everyone living on earth at this juncture in time falls under the wrath not only of God, but also of Christ Himself. As Christ warned:

"Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21:34-36)

Here, again we are faced with this vital piece of information. The day of the Lord descends on every inhabitant of the earth - the whole earth. There is no church hiding somewhere, or no "Christian Nation" which escapes these horrific events. There are no individuals with solar-paneled homes, private gardens, their own milk cows and water wells who will "ride out" this period of unrestrained terror. The only people who are safe during this wrath are the people who no longer populate the earth.

A Thief in the Night

You would think that with all this warning, given all the signs Jesus catalogued, and the several appearances of this theme in Scripture, men and women would see this horrible time coming and avoid it at all costs.

But, not so... "The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches" (Mark 4:19) are tough taskmasters. And, virtually no one sees it approaching. As Jesus described it:

"For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be." (Mat. 24:37-39)

"It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed." (Luke 17:28-30)

Life goes on. People continue doing what they've always done, ignoring God's word and every witness that would warn them. Noah was 120 years in building the ark in the middle of a desert. His neighbors and all the people who heard of this tremendous oddity were without excuse when the rain began to fall. For 120 years they had Noah's evidence and witness of the judgment to come. Nevertheless, as they ate and drank, took wives and husbands, and carried on

with “life as usual”, the first raindrops appeared. As God safely closed Noah into the ark, the judgment of God fell on everyone else.

Likewise, Lot, a nephew of Abraham, was the only just man in Sodom. As Lot and his little family were being escorted from the city by an angel, the residents were eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building - looking toward the future. But, the flaming hail destroyed them all. Christ said that His return would have the same element of surprise to those who had not received the witness and the warning. And, He likened that element of surprise to a thief coming in the night.

"Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think *He will*.“ (Mat. 24:42-44)

There is a warning in that passage. Just as a home owner, if he knew a robber was coming and knew what time he would arrive, would wait up to thwart the robbery, so Christ warns men to watch and be ready, because while they are busy “getting on with their lives” He will suddenly appear in power and in judgment.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. (2Pet. 3:10)

The conclusion of this time of horror sees the skies and heavens disintegrating and the elements that make up the physical earth as we know it burning and melting in the final cataclysm. But, the inception of these events appears as if out of nowhere. In His warning to the church at Sardis, Christ admonished:

“So remember what you have received and heard; and keep *it*, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.” (Rev. 3:3)

And later:

"Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame." (Rev.16:15)

This warning comes on the heels of Christ’s description of the in-gathering to the final conflict. He advised watching the events leading up to this point and that the recipients of this warning – the remnant - keep their garments with them at all

times, since they will be fleeing with haste to the mountains and are not to go back to get anything. Again, it's either "watch" and be ready to flee to the wilderness or be destroyed.

"On that day, the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house must not go down to take them out; and likewise the one who is in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot's wife." (Luke 17:31-32)

Lot's wife was running from Sodom and she paused, turned and looked back at the city as the judgment began to fall. She was instantly turned to "a pillar of salt" (Gen. 19:25). When the wrath of God begins and the forewarned begin to flee, it's an all or nothing at all proposition. Run away and trust God for absolutely everything, or hesitate and fall under the judgment.

A quick point of clarification: I've frequently heard preachers attach the phrase "like a thief in the night" to the "rapture." However, as you will clearly notice, there is no such connection in Scripture. The rapture is not the event that appears "like a thief in the night." That phrase is only employed when the Bible's authors are describing the cataclysmic judgment. And, as the next chapter will clarify, the "thief in the night" concept never applies to the Church.

Armageddon

The sixth *angel* poured out his bowl on the great river, the Euphrates; and its water was dried up, so that the way would be prepared for the kings from the east. And I saw *coming* out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs; for they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty. ("Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame.") And they gathered them together to the place which in Hebrew is called Har-Magedon. (Rev. 16:12-16)

The Day of the Lord, the time of the Great Tribulation, comes to its culmination as the unholy trio sends out demonic messengers to gather the armies of the earth to do battle against God and His Christ. They have always rebelled against Him. They will not bow in submission to His Lordship and they reject the notion that this Jesus will rule over them. But, this is the time appointed and the Great God will avenge Himself.

Why are the nations in an uproar
And the peoples devising a vain thing?
The kings of the earth take their stand
And the rulers take counsel together
against the LORD and against His Anointed,
saying, "Let us tear their fetters apart
And cast away their cords from us!"
He who sits in the

heavens laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then He will speak to them in His anger and terrify them in His fury, saying, "But as for Me, I have installed My King Upon Zion, My holy mountain. I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, And the *very* ends of the earth as Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shall shatter them like earthenware.'" Now therefore, O kings, show discernment; Take warning, O judges of the earth. Worship the LORD with reverence and rejoice with trembling. Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish *in* the way, For His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him! (Psalm 2)

This psalm is frequently attached to Christ's passion and crucifixion, but it is much more obviously an end-time prophecy. It spells out the same events we have been studying. The "kings of the earth" are gathered to do battle with God and his Son. But, God is not at all concerned with their pitiful attempts at throwing off his dominion.

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And *among* the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, "What have You done?" (Dan. 4:35)

In fact, He laughs at them. He declares that His Son will have the everlasting authority, which He will establish by breaking them "with a rod of iron" and dashing them to pieces.

The Cosmic Battle

This is not simply a human battle for fleshly gain. The spiritual battle for dominion began before the first man was created. Satan sought the preeminence in Heaven and thought to overthrow God. But, that prideful act was the beginning of his destruction.

"How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, you who have weakened the nations! But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly In the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit." (Isa.14:12-15)

"You were in Eden, the garden of God; Every precious stone was your covering: The ruby, the topaz and the diamond; The beryl, the onyx and the jasper; The lapis lazuli, the turquoise and the emerald; And the gold,

the workmanship of your settings and sockets, was in you. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were the anointed cherub who covers, and I placed you *there*. You were on the holy mountain of God; you walked in the midst of the stones of fire. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created until unrighteousness was found in you. By the abundance of your trade you were internally filled with violence, and you sinned; Therefore I have cast you as profane from the mountain of God. And I have destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I put you before kings, that they may see you. By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries. Therefore I have brought fire from the midst of you; It has consumed you, and I have turned you to ashes on the earth In the eyes of all who see you. All who know you among the peoples Are appalled at you; You have become terrified And you will cease to be forever." (Ezek.28:13-19)

This rebellion against the God of Heaven will culminate at the battle of Armageddon when Satan sends out the demons to gather the mighty armies of the earth to do battle against the Lamb:

"Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women *will be* grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming." (Mat. 24:40-42)

Interpreters who are too anxious to make Jesus comment on the rapture also sometimes confuse that verse. However, Matthew 24:40-42 is not a rapture passage. The church was not even in existence when Christ was responding to His disciples' question. His audience at the moment was Jewish. The parallel passage in Luke gives us greater insight into Christ's true intention:

"I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other will be left. There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken and the other will be left. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other will be left." And answering they said to Him, "Where, Lord?" And He said to them, "Where the body *is*, there also the vultures will be gathered." (Luke 17:34-37)

What bodies? What vultures? Where are they gathering? The answer is in the book of Revelation:

And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in midheaven, "Come, assemble for the great supper of God; in order that you may eat the flesh of kings and the

flesh of commanders and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them and the flesh of all men, both free men and slaves, and small and great.” And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies, assembled to make war against Him who sat upon the horse [Christ], and against His army. And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone. (Rev.19:17-20)

The demonic messengers like frogs will gather together the rebels of Earth to one final confrontation. But, what they intend as the destruction of God's authority, God intends as a feast for the fowls of the air. Kings, captains, mighty men, horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, free and bond, small and great are listed in this destruction.

And the angel swung his sickle to the earth, and gathered *the clusters from* the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood came out from the wine press, up to the horses' bridles, for a distance of two hundred miles. (Rev.14:19-20)

And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it *is* called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. And His eyes *are* a flame of fire, and upon His head *are* many diadems; and He has a name written *upon Him* which no one knows except Himself. And *He is* clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white *and* clean, were following Him on white horses. And from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may smite the nations; and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, “KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.” (Rev. 19:11-16)

And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone. And the rest were killed with the sword which came from the mouth of Him who sat upon the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh. (Rev. 19:20-21)

When the armies of Earth, marshaled by the Little Horn and the False Prophet, gather to do battle against God and His Christ, they are vanquished and the

bodies are fed to the carrion birds. That's what Jesus was describing in Matthew 24.

Notice the vastness of destruction. No enemy can stand against the wrath of the Lamb and His army. They come riding on white horses behind Him, wearing "fine linen, white and clean." And who are they? They are more than just His army -- they are His bride!

And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright *and* clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are true words of God." And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said to me, "Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus; worship God. For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." (Rev. 19:6-10)

Now, the observant student will notice that these events exactly precede the events we referenced above (Rev. 19:11 and following). The "Marriage Supper of the Lamb" in which He takes His bride to Himself and clothes her in fine, white linen occurs before Jesus comes back to unleash His wrath and pour out His judgment. The newly adorned saints accompany Him as He returns for that task!

Who are they? They are the church!

For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you *as* a pure virgin. (2Cor. 11:2)

Wow! But, that would mean that sometime before the end of the Great Tribulation, the "catching away" of the believers has to happen! And, before the final Day of the Lord, when judgment and wrath fall, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb occurs, otherwise the army will not be dressed in the clean, white linen they receive at the Supper!

The Biblical chronology is consistent and exacting.

What We Know So Far

- A time of trouble is coming to this Earth; trouble such as never was or ever will be again.

- This time is called “the Great Tribulation” and is also known as the time of “Jacob’s trouble.”
- But Jacob/Israel will be delivered and protected through it.
- This time of trouble culminates in the “Day of the Lord,” when God pours out punishment and wrath on the inhabitants of the Earth.
- Prior to the return of Christ, He will gather His elect saints to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.
- When Christ returns in vengeance, the saints will accompany Him.

¹ Milman, The History of the Jews, book 16.