

THE CHURCH AND THE TRIBULATION
Matthew 24:15-24

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The disciples asked our Lord the question, “What shall be the sign of the end of the age” (24:3). The Lord seeks to answer this question in 24:15 and says the specific sign of the end of the age is the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet. Last week we concluded that the abomination of desolation is a yet future world dictator who will rise to such power that men will actually worship him as God. This will be the deification of a man and he will set himself up in the temple in Jerusalem as one to be worshipped.
- B. In 24:16-24, our Lord is describing some events that will occur at the end of the age. The end of the age will not be a single climatic event but a chain of events or a complex of events that will be culminated at the second advent of Christ. Christ says that this end of the age is the Great Tribulation which seems to be the last 3½ years of the Tribulation period (24:21, 22). This period will begin with the sign of the abomination of desolation and all the events of 24:16-24 occur within this period.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE TRIBULATION PERIOD

- A. Introduction: For those who read their Bible with understanding they know that the Bible predicts a yet future time called the Tribulation consisting of 7 years. It is divided into two 3½ year periods. It is a time of unprecedented trouble. The scriptures present the Tribulation as a time of darkness, judgment, pain, suffering, woe, warfare, bloodshed and death. The whole idea of a Tribulation period should send chills up and down our spines.
- B. Old Testament: Sometimes this period, especially the last 3½ years is called “the indignation” (Isa. 26:20), “a time of trouble” (Dan. 12:1) and “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jer. 30:7). The Old Testament presents this period as a time of suffering and misery in which the wrath of God is poured out on this earth.
- C. The Revelation: The Apostle John in the Book of Revelation describes the Tribulation as a time of wrath (6:17). Words such as darkness, judgment, pain, suffering, woe, warfare, bloodshed, wrath and death are used by the Apostle John to describe this period.
 - 1. Rev. 6:12-17: Men will suffer so much during this period that many will be begging for death.

2. Rev. 9:20, 21: Great judgments will sweep the earth but most people will not repent. Fear will not drive men to repentance but to more defiance of God.
 3. Rev. 11:7-10: Men will be hardened to righteousness and there will be blatant, worldwide delight in evil.
- D. The Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 24:21, 22): In light of these other scriptures, our Lord's teaching on the Great Tribulation makes sense. This Tribulation is yet future and there is nothing in history to compare with it. So terrible is the suffering that God has to shorten the years or all mankind will be destroyed, and the elect of God spared.
- E. Conclusion: The Tribulation will be the triumph of evil for a season. All bonds will be broken, restraints will be cast aside, and lawlessness will fill the earth. Men will take no delight in good but will be rejoicing in the triumph of evil. **NOTE**: It is quite obvious that we live in different days than those of the yet future Tribulation period. There is still a restraining of sin in the present age which we live. Evil is all about us but good still triumphs at times. Despite widespread injustice and terrible violence and crime, the scales have not yet been tipped in favor of the wrong. Evil is rapidly gaining a foothold and the philosophy of the end of the age is becoming more obvious but evil is still restrained.

III. THE CHURCH AND THE TRIBULATION:

- A. The Restraining of Evil: What is it that is holding back sin in this present age? The answer is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is in every Christian. Our Lord told Christians in the Sermon on the Mount that they were the light and salt of the world because they were "born again" by the Spirit and had a personal relationship with Christ. Light dispels darkness and pushes back evil. Salt is a preservative and arrests corruption. It stops spoiling; it keeps the meat from rotting. It is Christians indwelt by the Spirit of Christ who are preserving society from going completely corrupt. Christians are a restraining, controlling, limiting, binding force on the malignancy of sin that is slowly corrupting the world. **NOTE**: Because Christians are a restraining force, they must not isolate themselves from society. Christians are intended to permeate every level of life, for their presence is a restraining force to society.
- B. The Removal Of The Restrainer (II Thess. 2:1-8): These Christians at Thessalonica were undergoing great persecution and they wondered whether this was the Tribulation period that Paul had instructed them about. The "Day of Christ" is the time Christ will come for His Church and that day cannot come until there is a "falling away" (apostasy). There will be a great apostasy from the true Christian Faith towards the end time. The Man of Sin or the future world dictator cannot arrive on the scene until there is great apostasy in the outward, external Christian Church. Paul goes on to say that the spirit of the lawlessness of

the Man of Sin is already working in human society. But the Wicked One will not show up until the one “who now letteth (restrains) . . . Shall be taken out of the way.” Some have taken this to refer to human government but government is not usually referred to in terms of a pronoun “he”. It is much better to see this as the Holy Spirit who is the restrainer of sin. He is presently holding back or restraining lawlessness. The Holy Spirit is also permanently indwelling the Church. When the Spirit is removed so shall the Church be removed. The Holy Spirit is restraining sin through the presence of the true Church in the world. **NOTE:** All restraints must be removed before evil and lawlessness can triumph for a season. The salt must be taken out of society to allow the rottenness to manifest itself.

- C. When Will The Church Be Taken Out? When will the salt or the Christian Church be removed? It is not as easy as some think to pin down the time, for there are no specific signs to tell us when it will happen. We know from II Thess. 2 that it will occur before Anti-Christ is revealed. We know also that this removal must occur somewhere between the event recorded in Matt. 24:14 and 24:15. It will be sometime before the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel stands in the holy place. **NOTE:** Does the removal of the Church occur in the middle of the Tribulation or at the beginning of the Tribulation? I personally feel that it will occur at the beginning of the Tribulation which allows time for the corruption of society, which has been held in restraint by the presence of Christians. **NOTE:** Good scholars disagree on the time of the departure of the Church.
- D. How Will The Church Be Taken Out? The Church will be suddenly taken out of the world. This is not the organized, insituational church, but the true Church, consisting of Christians of all denominations (and in no denomination) who possess, through the new birth, the indwelling life of Jesus Christ. The Church is told to be continually looking for the return of Christ (Titus 2:13). The return of Christ must be imminent without any signs whatsoever. Perhaps this is even implied right here in the Olivet Discourse. Our Lord does not mention it at the time it occurs chronologically but it is implied (24:36-42) Christians are to be continually watching for the return of Christ. While the disciples probably did not understand it all, the Lord implies that there are two aspects or phases of the parousia (coming and presence) of Christ. One is sudden, unexpected, and dateless. All we know is that it will occur sometime before the Antichrist enters the temple and the close of the age begins. It is imminent and no signs are needed to bring the first phase of Christ’s coming. However, in 24:29, 30, our Lord mentions a later phase of Christ’s presence which will occur as the final event in the close of the age and will be preceded by all kinds of signs. **NOTE:** Christ is talking about one return that covers a period of time; one return but two phases. It will begin with a secret arrival, when he will come like a thief in the night. He will snatch away the Church but His presence shall continue in one sense throughout the whole Tribulation. His presence with the Church shall be behind the scenes, as it were, invisible to the world. Then, “after the tribulation of those days,” he will manifest his presence visibly, appearing in power and great glory.

NOTE: The first phase of Christ's coming is more clearly revealed to the Apostle Paul (I Thess. 4:15-18). This event is sometimes called the "departure" or "rapture" of the Church. Christians who are alive at the Rapture of the Church will not physically die, but will pass directly into a glorified state. Every Christian who is alive when Christ returns will be changed in a moment (I Cor. 15:51, 52). **NOTE:** The Rapture of the Church will not be visible to the world. There will be just a strange disappearance of thousands, and this event will be explained away by the world. Furthermore there probably will not be enough true Christians left to make any impact on the world.

ILLUSTRATION: Dr. Criswell of First Baptist Church in Dallas, TX recently made this observation. In 1776 approximately 25% of the world were evangelical Christians. In 1968 approximately 8%; in 1980 it will be 4%; in 1990, 2% and in 2000, well??? Who is going to miss such a small percentage of the world's population if a Pre-tribulation rapture does occur!

IV. **CONCLUSION**

- A. A close friend of mine wrote these words in his Bible and any books he gave away, "If you day I should just disappear and no one knows what happened to me, do not be alarmed. I have been Raptured and taken into the presence of Christ forever. But you who read be concerned, for unless you change your mind about Christ, receive Him as your Savior and decide to walk with Him, you must face the horrible judgments of the Tribulation period and even worse, you must face the excruciating soul pain of one who is doomed to eternal punishment."
- B. But there is a way of escape and that is through Christ alone. God promises the Christian escape from all wrath whether in Tribulation or Hell:

"God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ." I Thess. 5:9

"And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus Christ, which delivered us from the wrath to come." I Thess. 1:10