

The Rapture and the Tribulation

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Overview

The Scriptures offer clear teaching concerning a number of future events. These include:

1. A seven-year period (the seventieth week of those prophesied by Daniel, Dan. 9:24-27) during which the personal Antichrist appears, asserts his own claims to deity, and oppresses all who would challenge those claims. This period is commonly called “the tribulation period” or “the great tribulation,” but I will argue that this characterization is imprecise.
2. The triumphant return of the Lord Jesus Christ toward the end of #1 to overthrow the Antichrist and establish his own worldwide kingdom.
3. The supernatural gathering of believers to the Lord at a time when he comes from heaven.

Common dispensational theology as preached in many assemblies and Bible churches today holds that #3 occurs before #1, and is associated with a different return of the Lord than #2. Under this view, believers of the church age would not experience the earthly events of #1. For many years I held this view, but after careful study of the Scriptures I have concluded that it is not supported by the biblical evidence. I now believe that the return of our Lord at which he gathers his saints to himself (#3) is the same as #2, and occurs toward the end of Daniel’s seventieth week. A consequence of this view is that believers alive at the time #1 begins will experience many of the events of that period.

These notes seek to explain the biblical issues involved in this shift of persuasion.

- First, I summarize two considerations that weighed most heavily on my mind in making this shift.
- Second, I review the main arguments that have been proposed for the traditional view, and explain why I find them lacking.
- Third, I consider the practical implications of this point of doctrine.

These notes do not seek to be either original or exhaustive. I am indebted to a wide range of writers of many different persuasions. Readers who wish to learn more about positions similar to those to which I have come should consult the writings of George Ladd and Marvin Rosenthal.

What do the Scriptures Teach?

The full answer to this question should be a study of the major eschatological passages in the Bible, in the order in which they were revealed, so that each can be understood in the context of previously given revelation. I have taken this approach in a series of Sunday School lessons (on Daniel) and sermons (on Joel and the NT passages) at WIBC between March, 1993 and April 1995. There is not space or time to reproduce all of this material here. Instead, I will focus on two items that were the most influential in changing my own persuasion on the timing of the rapture with respect to other end-time events. The first is the general NT teaching about the relation between the church and tribulation in general. The second is a passage that, as I read it, explicitly places the Lord’s return and the gathering of his saints *after* the great tribulation.

The Word “Tribulation” in the NT

The use of the term “tribulation” in modern evangelical churches is completely out of synch with its use in the NT. The Greek term is θλιψις (Strong’s number 2347), mostly translated “tribulation,” but also commonly “affliction.” It occurs 45 times in the NT. Three points are worth making about the NT use of the term.

1. In general, it describes abuse directed by unbelievers at believers. Only three references (Rom 2:9; 2 Thes 1:6; Rev 2:22) use the term to describe God’s judgment against unbelievers. Overwhelmingly, it manifests the hatred of the world toward the saints.
2. Just as overwhelmingly, it describes the present experience of the church, not some future expectation. Only six occurrences refer to end-time events (Matt 24:21,29; Mark 13:19,24; Rev 2:22; 7:14). The vast majority of occurrences describe general suffering and persecution suffered by believers during the present time. The end time tribulation is an intensification of the present struggle of evil against God’s people, not a qualitatively new event. The common restriction of “the tribulation period” to Daniel’s seventieth week is thus misleading. The entire present age is “the tribulation period.” In fact, though we sometimes call this age “the church age,” this expression appears nowhere in Scripture. The Biblical term for the age in which we live is “this present evil age” (Gal 1:4, where AV renders αἰων “age” as “world,” reflecting its character as a time in which evil is dominant and believers should expect to suffer.
3. Nowhere is the church promised exemption from “tribulation.” On the contrary, we are told to expect it and be prepared for it:
 - John 16:33 “in the world you shall have tribulation”
 - Acts 14:22 “we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God”
 - Rom 5:3 “we glory in tribulations”
 - Col 1:24, it is the “tribulations” of Christ that we are to fill up in our flesh for the sake of his body
 - 1 Thes 3:3, we are “appointed unto” tribulations

Whatever one may think about the timing of the rapture, the usage of the word “tribulation” in modern evangelical Christendom is clearly inconsistent with “the form of sound words” (2 Tim 1:13) in the New Testament. “Tribulation” is not something from which believers should think they are exempt, but an expected part of their experience in this life (point 3 above) and a source of joy as they experience God’s strength and provision to bear through it (Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 7:4; 8:2; 1 Thes 1:6). The coming “great tribulation” differs from our present trials only in intensity, not in kind. When we consider our Lord’s description of it in the Olivet Discourse, we will see that it is a natural continuation and extension of the tribulations that we experience now.

The Olivet Discourse

Matthew (chapters 24-25), Mark (13), and Luke (21) devote considerable space to an extended lecture that the Lord gave his disciples on the topic of last things, shortly before his passion. Delivered on the Mount of Olives, this discourse is known as “the Olivet Discourse.” It draws together the various threads of OT prophecy concerning end times, and is a major source,

Table 1: Periods Prophesied in the Olivet Discourse

Period #	Mt 24,25:	Mk 13:	Lk 21:	Characterization	Description
1	3-13	3-13	7-19	The Beginning of Sorrows (Mt 24:8)	The NT period, before the fall of Jerusalem (which is the next period). Note close correspondence with the first four seals of Rev 6. Contrary to popular thought, these four seals belong, not to Daniel's seventieth week, but to the present age.
2	(Lacking)		20-24a	The Days of Vengeance (Lk 21:22)	Desolation of Jerusalem under Titus, AD 70. In the discourse, this <i>precedes</i> the time of the Gentiles, and thus is not to be confused with Matt 24:15-28, which <i>follows</i> it.
3	14	(Lacking)	24b	The Times of the Gentiles (Lk21:24)	During this period, Jerusalem is subdued by the Gentiles (Luke) and the gospel goes forth throughout all the world (Matthew).
4	15-28	14-23	(Lacking)	Great Tribulation (Mt 24:21)	Explicitly linked to "the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet" (15, Dan 9:27). This period begins with the entry of the abomination of desolation into the holy place, at the middle of Daniel's seventieth week. Thus "the great tribulation" is only part of that week.
5	29-31	24-27	25-28	Appearing of Son of Man (Mt 24:30)	Cosmic signs, return of Christ in glory, gathering of his saints
	24:32-25:30	28-37	29-36		(Parables about, and exhortations to, watchfulness)
6	25:31-46	(Lacking)		Separation	Final Judgment

under the direction of the Holy Spirit, from which the apostles draw in presenting later revelation.

(Some teachers with strong dispensational tendencies dismiss the first three gospels as more characteristic of the old covenant than of the new, and not directly applicable to the church's doctrine and practice, but Paul at least felt that consenting to "the words of our Lord Jesus Christ" is crucial to sound doctrine (1 Tim 6:3). Personally, the longer I meditate on the Scriptures, the more hazardous it seems to me to dismiss the first three gospels as "old covenant." In particular, I find that the epistles are firmly rooted in records of our Lord's life and teaching as preserved in all four gospels.)

This discourse deserves careful attention from anyone interested in last things. If we study it synoptically, combining the records of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we find a comprehensive calendar extending from the days of our Lord's earthly ministry to his triumphal return and the

final judgment. Of special interest to us, it explicitly describes the temporal relationship between the time of great tribulation, the return of Christ, and a gathering of believers together unto him.

Table 1 outlines the overall calendar and its sources in the different records of the Discourse. The critical observation for harmonizing the three versions is that Period 2 (described in Luke 21:20-24a) precedes the times of the Gentiles and thus cannot be the same as Period 4 (Mt 24:15-18), which follows the Gentile period (though there are strong similarities). Note also the external inclusio between Matt 24:30 and 25:31 (the coming of the Son of Man in glory), showing that the parables are a parenthesis.

Period 4 (the Great Tribulation) is characterized by “tribulation” in the most common NT sense of the word, that is, the persecution of believers by unbelievers. It is the culmination of those sorrows of which Period 1 is the “beginning.” Yet Period 1 comes before the fall of Jerusalem in Period 2. That is, the Great Tribulation is the climax of the opposition to believers in our present age, not something qualitatively different.

John in the Revelation draws heavily from the Olivet Discourse in describing the seal judgments. Most commentators agree that the first four seals directly reflect Period 1, “the beginning of sorrows” (compare Matt 24:4-8). The martyrs in the fifth seal represent those who are slain for the name of Christ in Periods 1, 2, and 4. The coming of Christ with cosmic signs in Matt 24:29-30 (Period 5) is reflected in the sixth seal.

When we appreciate these alignments, we can correct two common misunderstandings.

1. The seals begin before the great tribulation, and in fact before Daniel’s seventieth week, since they extend before the fall of Jerusalem. The church has already participated in the experiences described in the first five seals.
2. The seals extend beyond the end of the great tribulation. The sixth seal corresponds to Period 5, which begins “after the tribulation of those days” (that is, the great tribulation of Period 4). The trumpet and bowl judgments follow the sixth seal and thus are also after the end of the great tribulation (though part of the day of the Lord, which like the great tribulation falls within Daniel’s seventieth week).

The final section of this sermon explicitly brings together three events of vital relevance to our discussion: the tribulation, the return of Christ, and the gathering of his saints to him. Let’s consider Matthew’s version.

29 Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: 30 And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Compare this passage with the central text on the rapture, 1 Thess. 4:16-17.

16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive [and] remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Consider the points of similarity: both passages

- describe the return of Christ
- with “clouds”
- and the gathering of believers
- with angelic support
- and the sound of a trumpet.

These similarities persuade me that Paul has our Lord’s words in mind as he writes. In fact, Paul explicitly claims to be giving this teaching “by the word of the Lord” (4:15), that is, drawing on the earthly teaching of the Lord Jesus. In Paul’s mind, Matt 24:29-31 describes what we call the “rapture.” But Matthew and Mark both explicitly record the Lord’s teaching that these events take place “after the tribulation of those days.” Thus our Lord explicitly teaches that the rapture will come after the great tribulation of the last days. If we are to “consent to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim 6:3), how can we maintain that it should come before?

The traditional dispensational approach to Matt 24:29-31 acknowledges that it describes a gathering of tribulation saints when the Lord Jesus returns to set up his kingdom, but insists that 1 Thes 4 describes a different rapture that is not described in Matt 24. In support of this assumption, it is sometimes urged that the saints in 1 Thes 4 go up to meet the Lord in the air to be with him in heaven during Daniel’s seventieth week, while those in Matt 24 are gathered to him as he comes to earth. Actually, the language Paul chooses in 1 Thes 4 suggests that he has the same picture in mind as Matt 24. His word for “meet” in v.17 is commonly used to describe the actions of a delegation that goes out to meet a visiting dignitary and accompany him into their city. Later in the Olivet Discourse (Matt 25:6), our Lord uses this very word to describe the action of the virgins who go out to meet the bridegroom and accompany him back into the feast. Again, in Acts 28:15, as Paul approaches Rome, Luke chooses the same word to describe how the believers come out of the city to meet Paul at a village along the way and accompany him back to the capital. Thus Paul’s language in 1 Thes 4 does not require or even suggest that the saints meet the Lord to return with him to heaven. To the contrary, it is completely consistent with the view that they rise to form his royal escort as he makes his glorious return to the earth.

What about arguments for a Pretribulation Rapture?

As I read it, Matt. 24:29-31 unambiguously states a chronological relation between the great tribulation and the gathering of believers unto the Lord. There are many other passages that talk separately about that tribulation, or about the gathering of believers, but this passage is the clearest one that brings these themes together. Dispensational tradition insists that many of the other references to a gathering of saints must refer to a different event. Three reasons are usually urged for insisting that believers of the church age must be removed before the future time of trouble: the imminency of our Lord’s return, divine justice, and the distinction between Israel and the church. Let us examine each of these in turn.

Imminency

There are two senses in which the advocates of a pretribulation rapture claim that the Lord’s return is imminent. The weak sense claims that we cannot know the day or the hour when he

might return. The strong sense claims in addition that there are no prophecies that need to be fulfilled before he returns, so that we cannot identify any moment when he *might not* return.

The Strong Sense

If the Lord's return is imminent in the strong sense, the rapture must come before the tribulation. But if our Lord's words in Matt 24:29 refer to the rapture of the church, the tribulation must come first, and until that happens, the rapture is not possible.

Certainly, the rapture was not imminent in the strong sense for the disciples who heard Matt 24:29 from the Master's own lips. It was not imminent for Peter, after he learned (John 21:18) that he must glorify the Lord through martyrdom, nor for Paul, after he learned (Acts 21:11) that he must be bound in Jerusalem, or (Acts 23:11) that he must bear witness in Rome. In the light of such clear counterexamples, we must ask what the biblical evidence is for the strong sense of imminence.

Leading dispensational theologians do not cite any passage that explicitly says, "the Lord's return is the next item on the prophetic calendar." Their argument is rather that the apostles predict the return of Christ and exhort believers to look forward to it. For example, John Walvoord (*The Rapture Question*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, Zondervan, 1979, p. 70-74) cites John 14:3; 1 Cor 1:7; 1 Thes 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-18, Titus 2:13; 1 John 3:1-3. Dwight Pentecost (*Things to Come*, Dunham, 1958, p.203) adds Acts 1:11; 1 Cor 15:51-52; Phil 3:20; Col 3:4; 1 Tim 6:14; Jas 5:8; 2 Pet 3:3-4¹; Rev 3:3. These Scriptures contain precious promises of the Lord's return, and exhort believers to anticipate it and live in expectation that it may appear. These authors argue that if the holy men of God who wrote these passages had understood that the tribulation must come first, they would have been telling Christians to be ready for the tribulation, not to expect the Lord's return.

We should note several things in assessing this argument.

The New Testament writers *do* exhort Christians to expect and be ready for tribulation (John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom 5:3; Col 1:24; 1 Thes 3:3-4). I have already argued that the great tribulation is the climax of the tribulation that believers have frequently suffered at the hands of unbelievers down through the ages, rather than a distinct experience. There is no reason to exclude it from these predictions of tribulation. It is misleading to focus attention on the predictions of the Lord's return and insist that they must describe the next event on the divine calendar, while ignoring many plain predictions that saints must expect tribulation. The Olivet Discourse is the clearest testimony to the fact that the glory of Christ's return for his saints follows the tribulations of this present age, but other texts echo it. For example,

- To the Thessalonians, suffering "persecutions and tribulations," Paul holds up the encouragement that "the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels," at one and the same coming "taking vengeance on them that know not God" and being "glorified in his saints" (2 Thes 1:4-10).
- Rom 8:18 teaches that "the sufferings of this present time" (of which the great tribulation is the culmination) are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us" (in the context, the redemption of our bodies at the Lord's return in 8:23; compare 1 John 3:2; Phil 3:21).

¹ Pentecost references 1 Pet 3:3-4, but this is surely a typographical error for 2 Peter.

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- James 1:12 promises that believers who “endure temptation” will receive “the crown of life” from the Lord, an allusion to his promise to grant thrones to his disciples when he returns (Luke 22:28-30).
- 1 Pet 4:12-13 alerts believers to expect “the fiery trial which is to try you,” rejoicing as they look forward to the subsequent time “when his glory shall be revealed,” a clear allusion to Matt 24:30; 25:31.

It may help to consider a parallel from the Old Testament. God promised the first coming of the Messiah many times, beginning in Gen. 3:15. Most of these promises say nothing about the other events that had to come first, such as the Egyptian captivity, the replacement of Saul by David, the division of the kingdom, the coming of Josiah, the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, the rise of Greece and Rome, etc., etc. These other events were also prophesied in the Old Testament, in their own places, yet no passage explicitly cites all of them in order. For example, Malachi writes (3:1), “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.” Malachi’s readers were to look for the Messiah to come “suddenly,” and they were to delight in that coming. Yet Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy weeks, already given at the time Malachi writes, shows that the Messiah would not come for another four hundred years! This knowledge does not stop Malachi from encouraging God’s people to look forward to the “sudden” appearance of the Messiah. The writers of both OT and NT often focus their attention on the bright star at the end of the road, not on the clouds that lie along the way.

The NT *does* contain explicit prophecies that must be fulfilled before the rapture. Those to Peter and Paul, cited above, are perhaps the clearest example. To readers who recognize the New Testament authority of Matthew 24, it is an explicit denial of strong imminency. 2 Thes 2, a passage often cited with respect to the rapture, is another. In spite of ingenious efforts to find the rapture in the apostasy of 2:3 or the removal of the restrainer in 2:7, any candid reader must admit that these references would never suggest the rapture to someone who was not looking for it. The overall thrust of the passage is that the Thessalonians fear that they are in “the day of Christ” (2:2), also called “the day of the Lord Jesus Christ” and “the day of the Lord.” This period is to be distinguished from the great tribulation. The two flow in opposite directions. The biblical descriptions of the day of the Lord Jesus Christ all concern the pouring out of God’s judgment on sinful men, while the description of the great tribulation in the Olivet Discourse and the first five seals of the Revelation concern the persecution of godly people by unbelievers. Because both involve great human suffering, it can be easy to confuse the two. Traditional pretribulationism, for instance, usually includes the great tribulation in the day of the Lord. The Thessalonians also appear to have made this confusion. Suffering severe tribulation (2 Thes 1:4-6), they worry that perhaps they are in the day of the Lord. Paul assures them that they are not. How does he do so? He tells them to look for the appearance of the Antichrist, taking God’s place in the temple and demanding worship from all (2:3-4). According to Dan. 9:27, this event takes place at the middle of Daniel’s seventieth week. By pretribulation theory, the Thessalonians should be long gone by this time, and this sign would be useless to them. Yet Paul (in conformity with Matt 24:15-22) cites it as the touchstone that will distinguish the great tribulation from all previous tribulations, a touchstone that is in principle accessible to them. According to Paul, the assumption of divine prerogatives by the Antichrist will precede the rapture of the church.

At any point in history since the first century, believers could look forward to the possibility that the Lord might very shortly return. The great tribulation is at most three and one-half years long, extending from the middle of Daniel's seventieth week to the beginning of the day of the Lord sometime in the second half of that week. There has never been a lack of tyrants and dictators in various places, persecuting the church and envying the devotion that she shows to her Lord. From hostile Roman emperors such as Nero or Domitian, and the gothic chieftans who conquered Rome, and the Muslim generals who almost subdued all of Europe, and the imperial papacy faced by the reformers, down to Napoleon, Bismarck, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, "even now are there many antichrists ; whereby we know that it is the last time," 1 John 2:18. Apart from Michael's restraining force in defending Israel (Dan 12:1)², any of these might have set in motion the great tribulation. Paul prophesies that the great antichrist must first come. Once he has appeared, the great tribulation will have begun, a time that God has promised to shorten "for the elect's sake" (Matt 24:22).

The Weak Sense

The notion of imminency is sometimes understood in a weaker sense, claiming simply that we cannot know when Christ *will* appear. The elevation of Antichrist at the middle of Daniel's seventieth week will be obvious to all. Since three and one-half years will remain in that week after he appears, it would seem that believers during that time who know the scriptures would be able to predict the date 42 months later when the Lord will return. Dispensationalists conclude that believers of the church age will be removed before the great tribulation and so not have access to these signs.

This argument is badly embarrassed by the fact that our Lord in the Olivet Discourse itself gives some of the strongest statements in the NT to the effect that his followers cannot know the day of his return and so should be prepared for it at any moment. The parables and exhortations in the parenthetical section between Period 5 (the great tribulation) and Period 6 (the final judgment) all urge believers to watch and be ready, since they cannot know the day or the hour. Read over Matt 24:30-25:32. Just as Matt 24:29-31 is the foundation on which Paul builds 1 Thes 4:16-17, these verses are an important source for Paul's exhortation to believers in 1 Thess 5:1-6 to watch and not be surprised.

How could the time of the rapture be unknown in view of the detailed prophecies that we have been given concerning Daniel's seventieth week? We can date Christ's return from the middle of Daniel's seventieth week only if we assume that the great tribulation extends throughout the second half of that week. In fact, Our Lord promised that the Father would "shorten the days" of tribulation for the sake of the elect, Matt 24:22. He is not shortening the entire seventieth week, whose days have been divinely "determined" (Dan 9:24), just the great tribulation (of believers by unbelievers). The day of the Lord, the pouring out of God's wrath against unbelievers, will begin at that point and continue to the end of the week. Thus believers in the great tribulation will know that their suffering will not last longer than 42 months, but can expect an earlier deliverance at a time not precisely specified.

Thus the imminence of the Lord's return does not mean that the rapture must come before the great tribulation. The strong sense of imminency (that no prophecy remains to be fulfilled before the rapture) is simply contrary to the scriptures. The weak sense cannot force a pretribulation

² This is Rosenthal's analysis of the "restrainer" passage in his book, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, and seems to me the most satisfactory explanation of a text that all agree is far from lucid.

rapture, for the Olivet Discourse shows that in this sense the rapture is imminent even for tribulation saints, who are obviously raptured *after* the great tribulation.

Divine Justice

The argument from divine justice is that since Christ has already borne the wrath of God against believers' sin, it would be unjust for God to require them to endure the great tribulation. 2 Pet 2:4-9 is often cited as an example of how God delivers believers from the judgments he pours out on unbelievers.

Like the weak form of imminence, this argument stumbles on the fact that there are saints on earth during the great tribulation. Their salvation no less than ours is based on the Messiah's role as their substitute and sin-bearer. Yet all agree that they suffer the trials of that terrible time. If the justice of God protects us from tribulation, why does it not protect them as well?

The key is again recognizing that the day of the Lord (the time of God's wrath against unbelievers) is distinct from and subsequent to the great tribulation (the time of satanic persecution against believers). The justice of God guarantees that believers will not, and cannot, experience the day of the Lord. But they will experience the great tribulation, just as they experience its precursors every day somewhere in the world.

Distinction between Israel and the Church

The cornerstone of dispensational theology is the distinction between Israel (the divinely chosen nation descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and the church (the Spirit-baptized body of Christ that came into being on the day of Pentecost). This distinction is extremely important, and critical for the interpretation of the various prophecies in the OT concerning the kingdom of God. If Israel is distinct from the church, then these prophecies about a restoration of David's kingdom centered in Jerusalem must yet be fulfilled. If Israel and the church are one and the same, we must spiritualize the prophecies in a way that can fit the church (for example, by assigning to the church a worldwide political role, or by viewing the promised kingdom simply as the spread of the gospel throughout the earth).

Pretribulationism is the extension of this principle to a logical conclusion. The Great Tribulation is part of Israel's prophetic clock, an element of the last of Daniel's seventy weeks. The church had no part in the first 69 weeks, which terminate with the entry of Christ to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. So (pretribulationists argue) it can have no part in the last week.

The logical consistency of this model is attractive. But theological theories that extrapolate beyond the explicit teaching of the Scriptures, like physical theories that run beyond observed data, are liable to sacrifice accuracy for consistency. The distinction of Israel and the church is hardly an ironclad absolute in the NT. Paul frequently describes the privileged position of Gentile believers by comparing them with Abraham (Rom 4), calling them daughters (e.g., citizens) of Jerusalem (Gal 4:26), and arguably even describing them as "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16). He encourages Gentile believers in Asia Minor to use the Psalms in worship (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16), an exercise that unavoidably forces believers to appropriate to themselves many of Israel's hopes and blessings. If we knew on other grounds that the church would not participate in the great tribulation, we could cite that as another example of the "Israel-church" distinction. But the distinction is not emphasized consistently enough in the NT to justify excluding the church from

the great tribulation. We must be led by the biblical data, not by theory. Three considerations deserve our attention.

1. There is a simple reason that the church was not in the first sixty-nine weeks. It has nothing to do with the theological distinction between Israel and the church, but is much more simple: the church didn't exist yet. This reason does not apply to the last week. The church does exist, and will exist forever. In particular, it will exist somewhere during the great tribulation, and the burden of proof is on those who assert that it cannot experience that tribulation because of its non-Israelite character.
2. Compare the millennium. This period (like the great tribulation and the rest of Daniel's seventieth week) is distinctly Jewish, the fulfillment of OT promises to the nation. Yet no one disagrees that the church will certainly experience it.
3. If the church is excluded from Israel's 70 weeks, then Israel should also be excluded from the church age, the parenthesis between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks. But it is manifestly included. Consider:
 - Dan 9:26, the sacrifice of Messiah, and the fall of Jerusalem, both clearly part of Israel's revelation, are explicitly said to be "after the sixty-two weeks," which conclude the first sixty-nine (cf. v.25). They fall in the gap between the first sixty-nine weeks and the seventieth, outside of Israel's prophetic calendar. The fall of Jerusalem comes after the day of Pentecost and thus by all accounts within the church age.
 - More generally, consider the judgments of Deut 28:15-68. These are clearly judgments on Israel, and v.68 is commonly understood with good historical reason of Titus' conquest of Jerusalem. But this conquest took place in AD 70, again plainly within the church age.
 - Most pretribulationists recognize the return of the Jews to Israel in AD 1947 as part of the divine program for Israel. Again, Israel is found in the church age.

The distinction between Israel and the church is an important one, and to be observed carefully wherever it appears in the Bible. But it cannot be safely invoked to exclude one group from periods dominated by the other. In particular, it is not a reliable basis for keeping the church out of the great tribulation.

What difference does it make?

To some, disputes over the timing of the rapture are mainly academic and irrelevant to practical godliness. There are two reasons to take them more seriously.

Evangelistic Use of the Rapture

It has become common in some circles to hold out escape from the tribulation via the rapture as a "carrot" to persuade people to receive Christ. This offer is completely illegitimate if believers will in fact experience the great tribulation.

This offer also evades the real issue in salvation. The object of salvation is not avoiding pain and inconvenience in this life. In fact, the frequent warnings of persecution in the New Testament remind us that in following Christ we are opening ourselves up for more temporal pain, not less. Following him means taking up the cross, not avoiding it. The point of salvation is

avoiding the wrath of God against our sin. An appreciation of the true biblical teaching concerning the timing of the rapture will help avoid inaccurate presentations of the gospel.

Preparedness by Believers

Our response to persecution and testing is a matter of great consequence. John writes that the martyrdom promised Peter was a means of glorifying God (John 21:19). Paul exhorts Timothy to “be strong” and “endure hardness” like a soldier in battle (2 Tim 2:1,3). The writer to the Hebrews (3:6,14) insists that we are Christ’s only if we persist in our faith unto the end. James pronounces a special blessing on the man who successfully endures trials (1:12). The promises of the risen Lord to the seven churches in the Revelation are focused on those who overcome (2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21), and these are the ones whom God owns as his children (21:7).

The pressures of the world around us every day urge us to deny our Lord. Under Antichrist these pressures will reach their climax. The scriptures warn us of these persecutions, so that we will not be taken by surprise. Paul explains to the Thessalonians that the reason he told them beforehand of coming tribulation is so “that no man should be moved by these afflictions [lit. tribulations]” (1 Thes 3:3,4). Believers who harbor the false hope that the rapture precedes the tribulation will be caught off-guard when great tribulation begins. They will conclude that God lied to them about the rapture and may very well fall away, denying the Lord and bringing dishonor to him. Those who accept the Lord’s explicit teaching that the rapture comes “after the tribulation of those days” will know in that day that God has not forgotten us. The accuracy of his prophecy about the tribulation will encourage us to wait patiently for the promise of his coming. We will be prepared to stand in the strength of God’s Spirit and glorify him in the day of trouble, so that we will not be ashamed before him when he ends that time with his own appearance and pours out his just wrath on those who had troubled us.

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you; but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. 1 Pet 4:12-13.