

## Coming Soon When All Hell's Break Loose

When's the last time that you had a really bad day? What's the worst experience you've ever had? What's the sickest you've ever been? Have you ever been so sick that you thought you'd die; then got scared you wouldn't?

What do you think is the most tragic event in history? The Holocaust? Rwanda? The Black Plague? The Haitian earthquake? Then, what's the most tragic scene of pain and suffering that you've ever seen in a movie?

Got it? Got it all in your mind's eye? All of those combined aren't even a hangnail compared to the horror, pain and devastation awaiting this world in the coming Tribulation. Hiroshima and Nagasaki are mere microcosms of the horror that awaits our world. Please turn to Amos 5:18-20 (p. 768).

Talk about a bad day. Amos runs out of devastating metaphors to describe how terrible it's going to be. Here's a man who runs into a lion, a terribly dangerous situation. He escapes that only to confront an even more dangerous enemy, a bear. Again he escapes, this time to the safety of his own home. Finally, thinking that he's safe, he relaxes and leans up against the wall, only to be fatally bitten by a poisonous snake. Talk about a bad day.

It's like the story of two hunters who came across a bear so big that they dropped their rifles and ran for cover. One man climbed a tree while the other hid in a nearby cave. But the bear was in no hurry for his dinner, so he sat down between the tree and the cave to reflect upon his good fortune. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, the one hunter in the cave came rushing out, nearly runs into the waiting bear, hesitates, and then dashes back in again. The same thing happens a second time. When he runs out for the third time, his companion in the tree frantically called out, "Woody, are you crazy? Stay in the cave till he leaves!" "Can't," panted Woody, "there's another bear in there." That's the picture in Amos. It's so horrible that those left behind on this planet after the Rapture will find trouble in the very places they run to for safety. There is no escape. There is no place of safety.

Most of the book of Revelation focuses on the Tribulation. All we can do today is survey some highlights and share a brief overview of God's prophetic plan of judgment for this world. Yet, studying the Tribulation is important and serves some important purposes: **(1)** The Tribulation should scare the living daylights out of us. God's holiness, as expressed through His justice and wrath, should overwhelm us. It should spark a newfound appreciation for His love and grace. **(2)** The Tribulation should sober us. It should lead us to take our own lives more seriously and to live them according to eternal values. As a result, we'll not put so much attachment upon the things of this world once we see what will become of them. We'll live more thoughtfully for eternity, finding our source and satisfaction in God. **(3)** The Tribulation should compel us to go out into our world as ambassadors for Christ, seeking to warn and deliver the lost from the impending wrath to come. Believe me when I say that no human being will want to go through this time. If all of these terrifying events don't cause us to tell others about Jesus, what will? So as we study this coming terrible day, let's examine it by asking some **key questions**.

**1. What is the Tribulation?** The word *tribulation* comes from the Greek word, *thlipsis* which means “affliction, distress.” The word is used for any kind of testing, affliction or distress people experience throughout life, and particularly of the Church and her problems in this world. Bible students also used the term, “the Tribulation,” to refer to a specific future or eschatological time of trouble, a special time of judgment from God that will be poured out on this world. It will be unprecedented in its affliction and will be culminated by the personal return of Jesus Christ to earth. Many passages in the Bible anticipate this time of trouble under a variety of names.

This Tribulation is referred to as “*the Day of the Lord*” (1 Thes. 5:2), “*the time of Jacob’s trouble*” (Jer. 30:7), “*the wrath of God*” (1 Thes. 5:9). In five of the passages where this Greek word *q̄lipsis* is used, it refers to conditions in the last half of this time period. It’s either described by qualifying terms like “*great*” (Matt. 24:21; Rev. 7:14) or by a clause describing the unprecedented nature of the distress in the last half of this short period of time (Mark 13:19). That’s why you’ll find this seven year period referred to as “the Tribulation” but the last three and a half years as “The Great Tribulation.” The judgments in the Book of Revelation: the seals, the trumpets, and plagues grow in intensity. The last half will be much worse than the first half. For this reason, it’s called “the Great Tribulation.”

The Tribulation is prophesied in the Old Testament, particularly its impact upon the nation of Israel. Jeremiah says it is a time of *terror* and *dread*, and compares the pain to a woman in labor. No wonder the prophet says this period will be the time of Jacob's distress (30:5-7). During the second three-and-a-half years, the Antichrist will unleash his fury on Israel.

Jesus, too, uses the imagery of birth pains in His teaching on the Tribulation (Matt. 24:4-28). Jesus’ reference to “*the abomination of desolation*” (vs. 15) marks the start of “*great Tribulation*” (vs. 21). This is the midpoint of the Tribulation, when the Antichrist crushes Israel and sets up his own image in the rebuilt Jerusalem temple, demanding that he be worshiped as God.

Any woman delivering a child knows that the earliest labor pangs are only the beginning of the painful birth process. The pain only intensifies as the moment of birth draws near. That's what it's going to be like during the Tribulation, as God's wrath against a sinful world comes to full birth.

Most of us wonder why sinful man is allowed to do certain things and why sin is permitted to run its course. It's because of God's longsuffering. God has given humanity some limited autonomy, but that comes to an end when the Tribulation begins. It is the Lord's Day from beginning to end, not man's.

**2. How long is the Tribulation?** No doubt you’re heard the Tribulation referred to as a seven year period of fierce judgment. Maybe you’ve wondered where we get the seven years from. We don’t have time to fully unpack this today but let me give you some of the background for it, Daniel 9:24-27 (p. 747). Here we find the angel Gabriel talking to the Prophet Daniel. The length of the Tribulation (seven years) is based on these verses.

Daniel 9 records the prayer of Daniel, who’s greatly concerned about the future of the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. At the time of this prayer, the nation had

been in Babylonian captivity for almost seventy years. But Daniel knew from Jeremiah's prophecies that the captivity was supposed to last only seventy years. He acknowledged that God was just in disciplining Israel yet also pointed out that God's credibility was at stake (if God did not take His people back to the land). Daniel pleaded with God to fulfill His commitment to restore Israel.

As Daniel prayed for his people and his city, Gabriel was sent to inform him that God was going to have 490 years (seventy "weeks") of special dealings with Israel. When the 490 years had run their course, God would have accomplished several great goals related to Israel. Then, Daniel was told that *after* the sixty-ninth week was over and before the seventieth would begin, two significant events would take place: (1) the Messiah would be cut off, and (2) the Temple would be destroyed. We know from history, that the sixty-nine weeks have run their course, Jesus the Messiah was killed; Jerusalem was destroyed. But what hasn't yet taken place is the final seven years (one "week") of God's special dealings with Israel. These final seven years are still future. They won't begin until the covenant between Israel and the Antichrist is signed. This is the time that we know as the Tribulation.

While the removal of the Church at the Rapture precedes the Tribulation, there's no direct connection between the two events. There could very well be a short period of time (weeks/months) between the Rapture and the beginning of the Tribulation. The Tribulation begins once the Antichrist signs a seven-year covenant with the nation of Israel (Dan. 9:27). This covenant is made to guarantee the safety of the nation of Israel. It's this event that marks the beginning of the Tribulation and the last seven years prior to Christ's return and second coming.

**3. When will the Tribulation take place?** If you're a sports fan, or even if you've spent a minimal amount of time viewing sports on television, you know that frequently the last few minutes...or seconds of the game can be the most dramatic. These moments are often packed with intense activity on the part of players and coaches, and frequently filled with daring or desperate strategies. Every losing football team has its "two-minute offense" where normal plays and procedures are set aside and risks are taken in order to score quickly. The same is true in basketball. Even the most dedicated fan never ceases to be amazed at how much can happen in the final sixty seconds. Every fan can remember games when last-second heroics or errors brought the "thrill of victory" or the "agony of defeat." The final moments can be so crucial and unique.

That's the way it is with those final moments of man's rule and existence on this earth. After thousands of years of human history, it's the final seven years that are so crucial. Daniel's 70th Week is, of course, no game. It's a deadly serious spiritual battle between God and Satan. It decides who will be worshiped as ruler of this world and will determine the eternal destiny of billions of people. In one sense this contest is simply a continuation of the ongoing spiritual conflict since the fall of Satan and man. But it's carried on with much greater intensity because it's clear to all that time is running out. Unlike many sporting events, there's no question about the final outcome of this spiritual contest between God and Satan. Jesus wins! He returns to this planet as the conquering King of kings and Lord of lords, the righteous and powerful ruler of the universe.

While we do not know the date of the Tribulation, we do know when, in that we know that the Tribulation will not occur until after the removal of the Church at the Rapture. We worked through this a few weeks ago. Let's look briefly again at what the Bible teaches about the Rapture, when Jesus returns for His Church before the Tribulation. First, the Tribulation is a time of divine wrath and judgment upon sin. The Bible teaches that the Church has not been appointed to wrath (1 Thess. 5:9; Rom. 8:1; John 5:24). Then, the Church has been specifically promised it will be kept from the Tribulation. The Church and Israel are two distinct groups or peoples of God (1 Cor. 10:32; Rom 9; 10; 11). The Church Age then is a parenthesis in God's program with Israel. The Tribulation is the resumption of God's program with Israel, to conclude it and establish the Kingdom. That's why the Tribulation is called the time of "*Jacob's Trouble*." During the Tribulation God deals once again with Israel and not the Church. The coming of Christ for His Church is seen as imminent throughout the New Testament. By this we mean it's not preceded by signs. Jesus could come for us today, even this very moment (1 Thess. 1:10; Titus 2:13). If the Church had to go through the Tribulation, then His coming could not be imminent, but would be preceded by signs. Finally, the differences between Christ's return for His saints (the Church) and His return after the Tribulation also indicate two separate and distinct events separated by some time.

**4. Why is God going to pour out His wrath on this world?** A ninth-grade civics teacher had to issue one student an F. The boy reacted as though the teacher had caught him by surprise, by asking, "How come?" "You didn't pass a single test," the teacher explained. "You never turned in one homework assignment. You wouldn't participate in classroom work." The boy stood there in silence for a moment, then exclaimed, "And you mean you flunked me for that?" That's our world's attitude. Ours is a day when very few fear God's judgment. The "god" of most is a feeble, tolerant old man, who'd never send anyone, except the very worst, to hell. He'd never, ever judge anyone. This American "god" grades on the curve, and it's a very lenient curve. Unless you're a terrorist, mass murderer, serial rapist, or child molester, you've nothing to fear come judgment day. Yet, it's vitally important that we base our view of God and His judgment on the revelation in His Word, not sentimental notions of popular culture. The Bible promises that judgment is coming. So why does God introduce a time of judgment, why the Tribulation, particularly as it's just prior to Christ's return? The prophetic Scriptures give us at **five reasons**.

**a. God's holiness and justice demands that sin must be punished.** Prominent among them is God's purpose to punish this world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity (Isa. 13:11). Men will try to hide, but there will be no escape from God's wrath and righteous judgments (Rev 6:15-17).

**b. God is disciplining Israel so that the nation will finally repent.** During the time of the Tribulation God will call a "remnant" of His people, back to Himself and prepare them for their place of leadership in the coming Kingdom. He'll refine them as silver is refined and try them as gold is tried (Zech. 13:9). It's not His primary purpose to discipline the Jews at that time; they've known His chastening hand for many centuries. The Jews will pass through dark days with all others living at that time, but their trials

will be tempered with mercy. God will use a restored Israel as His witnesses during the Tribulation.

**c. God is preparing a company of people who will repopulate the earth during the Millennial Kingdom.** We humans do not easily learn obedience to God. Thus, when trouble and affliction become widespread: there will finally be a greater readiness on the part of many to listen to the message being proclaimed everywhere, the gospel of the kingdom (Matt 24:14). Many people will emerge from the Tribulation cleansed by the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:9-14) and Christ will welcome into His kingdom all those who reject the Antichrist and repent of their sins during the Tribulation.

**d. God is preparing the universe for the Kingdom of His Son.** God will remove mountains, cause islands to disappear, and level the rough country (Rev. 16:20; Zech. 14:10). After He shakes the heavens and earth, astonishing changes will take place. The light of the sun will increase (Isa. 30:26). Springs will break out in desert places. Infertile ground will yield crops. Illness and deformity will no longer plague humanity (Isa. 35:1-7). The devil and his minions will be bound and imprisoned, bringing to an end the evils which have troubled the world ever since Satan first introduced sin in the Garden of Eden.

**e. God is demonstrating that He is holy, righteous and just.** C. S. Lewis once heard a young British pastor, fresh out of seminary, who ended his sermon by telling people of the need to receive Jesus Christ. He said, "If you receive Jesus Christ you will have eternal life, but if you do not it will drastically alter your eschatological destiny." C.S. Lewis pulled the preacher aside afterwards and said, "Young man, do you mean that they will go to hell?" "Well, yes," he said hesitantly. "Then tell them that that is what will happen. Say it!"

The hesitancy of that young preacher to speak plainly about hell is shared by many Christians. With the exception of a few "hellfire and damnation" preachers, the subject of God's judgment is strangely missing from most churches today. I say *strangely* because God's judgment is a prominent theme from Genesis to Revelation. Jesus spoke often about hell and judgment, so much so that we can't rightly call ourselves Christians if we deny the topic. Yet, the reality of God's judgment embarrasses many of us. It's out of step with our PC, tolerant culture. Yet, the Bible is clear, though God is patient and compassionate, when people continue to reject His Word, judgment is certain. The Tribulation will demonstrate that God is holy, righteous, just, and still on the throne. It will demonstrate once for all, that God has not ignored man's rebellion or sin, but that He has held back only in mercy and longsuffering, not willing that any should perish (2 Pet. 3:9).

**5. How bad will the Tribulation be?** It's the worst hour in all of human history and it's the worst hour in human history for the nation of Israel. Isaiah minces no words as he describes this horrible period, "*The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the Lord has spoken this word. The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are*

*left*" (24:3-6). In Matthew 24 Jesus gives His disciples a summary of some of the horrible things that will happen during the Tribulation. Turn again to Matthew 24:1-14 (p. 829).

**a. It will be a time of deception**, vs. 4-5. Fake Jesuses weren't just a problem during the time of Christ; we're dealing with them today. Do you remember Jim Jones? Jim Jones started out as a pastor in the Disciples of Christ denomination which is a mainstream church. In 1957 he met a man called Father Divine and those close to him said that from that time on he believed he was God, and no one had any right to question anything he did, and hundreds didn't...right to their death. Then, there was David Koresh of the Branch Davidians. Or, Rev. Moon of the Unification church who declared himself to be Christ. Maybe you remember Marshall Applegate of the Heavens Gate cult. His followers thought he was the reincarnation of Christ. According to *Time Magazine*, a psychiatric hospital in Jerusalem treats over fifty people a year who think they're Jesus. It's estimated since 1900 there have been over 1,100 people who have claimed to be Christ. They've deceived many and had innumerable followers.

**b. It will be a time of wars and rumors of wars**, vs. 6-7a. Rumors of wars in all areas of the world now occur frequently thanks to instantaneous media coverage and scores of 24-hour news sources. In just the past fifty years there have been some 60 world conflicts that have taken the lives of over 100 million people. In an article entitled *Ongoing World Conflicts* the writer said, "At any given time, it is a sure bet that there are anywhere from 50-100 wars going on somewhere in the world."

**c. It will be a time of terrible disasters**, vs. 7b. The East coast is still recovering from Hurricane Sandy and that was a small storm. During the Tribulation there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes throughout the globe. Think of the increase we've seen in recent years of sickness, disease, and starvation. They're of epidemic proportions. New diseases appear every day. We now have AIDS, SARS, bird flu, Ebola, and mad cow disease. Superstrains of diseases thought vanquished by antibiotics are rapidly reappearing. The mumps and whooping cough are making a comeback. Between the wars and these disasters, two-thirds of the earth's population is going to die during the Tribulation.

**d. It will be a time of violent persecution**, vs. 9. There will be persecution of believers in an unprecedented scale. Today nearly 150,000 Christians are killed each year. That will be nothing compared to the slaughter that's coming. While Christians will have been evacuated by the Rapture, God will raise up 144,000 Jewish missionaries during the Tribulation, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes. At the Rapture, when the Church Age saints are raptured away, the Holy Spirit's role as Restrainer of evil will come to an end. If God's people suffer this much today with the Holy Spirit present in this world, can you even begin to imagine how brutal it will be for the people of God during the Tribulation?

**e. It will be a time of worldwide evangelism**, vs. 14. Jesus tells us that in spite of all these horrible things that will be happening in the world. Despite persecution, natural disasters, wars and diseases, people will still be open to the good news about Jesus. Even though it will be easy and very tempting to give in to despair and hopelessness, in the midst of all these things we can still take courage that there will still be a hunger for Jesus.

**f. It will be a time of abomination, vs. 15.** It's hard to image that things could become more vile than they are today, but they will be. Today is a Sunday School picnic compared to the Tribulation. Abomination means *disgusting* or *filthy* referring to an idol. The Antichrist will set up a throne in the Holy place of the temple and will sit down declaring himself to be God (2 Thes. 2:4). No priest ever sat in the Temple but always stood in the holy place of the temple. Yet, the Antichrist's false prophet erects an image of him inside the rebuilt temple for worship. The abomination of desolation has to do with idolatry. This is also why it refers to the abomination as both standing and sitting. This False Messiah of the world will set up a throne in the Holy place of the temple and will sit down declaring himself to be God.

**g. It will be a time of spiritual callousness and apathy, vs. 37-39** "*For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.*" As silly as it all seemed, a worldwide survey showed that one in 10 people actually believed the Mayans were right and that the world would end on December 21st. Of course, no one but the most obviously gullible people actually worried about this. These were the same people who still had stored-up water and canned goods for the Y2K apocalypse of 1999. Yet, there's something here that we must pay attention to. It helps us comprehend why Christianity seemed so incredible in the 1st century and why it still seems so incredible today. Our spiritual forefathers, the apostles of the Lord Jesus, looked to their world much like the Mayan apocalypse hawkers. So much so that the Apostle Peter wrote to the churches that scoffers would come, saying "*Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation*" (2 Pet. 3:4).

The ongoing normalcy of the world seems to be an indicator that everything has always been this way and always will be. The expectation of God's judgment and a returning, triumphant Christ seems just as silly to a lost world as the Mayan calendar prophecy.

Peter acknowledged this, but pointed to the same event our Lord Jesus pointed to earlier: *the flood of Noah*. Unlike the prophecy charts of all the pagan nations and the televangelists, the kingdom of God doesn't come with, as Jesus put it, "*signs to be perceived.*" Jesus said this age will whirl on and on, seeming as though God has forgotten the just and overlooks the wicked. As in the days of Noah, we'll have weddings and funerals, and on and on it will go. Until, suddenly – everything changes.

There's something embedded in the human conscience that knows there's a day of reckoning. In our hearts God has implanted a witness to this coming judgment (Rom. 2:13-16). That's why we take note of old prophecies of the end of the world, wherever they come from, and why every culture tells stories, sings songs, makes movies and TV shows about the end of it all.

The Mayans were wrong about the calendar; they weren't wrong that the arc of history is headed toward something cataclysmic. Judgment is coming. God sees, knows and will call man to account. Yet, it's also, for the people of God, a word of promise. God hasn't forgotten us. Jesus hasn't abandoned us as orphans. Yes, it seems like it's been a long time from the Roman Empire to our digital age. Remember a thousand years is

as a day and a day as a thousand years with God. Even the delay is a sign of God's goodness and mercy. Each morning the sun comes up is another opportunity for the lost to repent and turn to God who is *"patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance"* (2 Pet. 3:9).

Amazingly, in spite of wars, famines, earthquakes, pestilence – though billions have died, in the midst of the Tribulation, Jesus told the disciples that before He returned the earth would be as it was *"in the days of Noah."* While Noah was building the ark in preparation for God's judgment, his neighbors were laughing at what they believed were the efforts of a madman. Their lives were so evil and self-centered that God's warnings were ignored. One of the most vivid descriptions of total depravity is found in Genesis 6:5, *"The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."*

In the days before the flood, people were looking out for number one, until that final hour when the Noah family and their animal friends entered the ark. When the flood came, the remaining citizens of earth had no dry ground or life rafts to rescue them. With their last drowning breaths, it was too late to ask God for mercy. Tragically, it's going to be just like that in the Tribulation. But worse, though they see judgment falling all around them, most of them still will not believe.

**Conclusion:** The opening lines of Charles Dickens' classic, *A Tale of Two Cities* begins like this: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way."* It will be the best of times for the believer. We're raptured. We're Home. Yet, it will be the worst of times for the unbeliever. No relief, no escape, only judgment.

Some unbelievers who've heard that judgment is coming think, "Well, when it begins, then I'll turn to Jesus." Scripture indicates that you won't do that. God will harden your heart. Not only will you face His judgment on this earth, you'll face judgment for all eternity. What a tragedy! As Cicero said, *"It is impossible to know the truth and not be responsible."*

But what about us, what about those who know the Lord? The fact that God is going to pour His judgment out on this world, on the people that we love and care for – who don't know Christ – should spur us to live differently, to live distinctly Christlike lives. Sadly, as Christians today, we tend to blend in with the world. We don't want to be seen as a fanatic or some sort of freak.

But is a firefighter a fanatic, even when they yell and scream for people to escape, to get out of a burning building? Isn't that what's happening in our world? Judgment is coming and it's coming soon.

The shortened form of the word *fanatic* is *fan*, which in sports is a compliment. We're not ashamed to be considered a Badger's fan. No one thinks twice about wearing a Badger's hoodie. We're not ashamed to be considered a certain musician's fan. We wear our concert t-shirt proudly. We're not ashamed to be considered a politician's fan. We place their signs in our yard and stickers on our car. But somehow we're often

ashamed to be considered a fanatical Christian and we demonstrate this by conforming to this world. Too many Christians are like a deer hunter during bow season. We cover our bodies with worldly camouflage: Camo jacket, camo shirt, camo pants, boots and gloves. We put on just the smallest amount of Christian orange to get by, hoping the deer, which is the world, won't get a glimpse of our Christianity. After all, we don't want to scare them off.

This world needs to be scared, scared to death of what's coming, scared of the hell on earth they're about to face during the Tribulation period, scared to death of the results of rejecting Jesus as their Savior, scared of the punishment of an eternity in a literal hell, darkness, eternal torment and unimaginable, unending pain. Some may say you don't need to scare people into heaven. My friend, more people need to wake up and smell the brimstone. They need to be scared and world-conforming Christians are very much to blame.

So are you conformed to this world? Are you just barely squeaking by with just enough Christian orange on or are you warning the lost around you that judgment is coming and it's coming soon?