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The Great Tribulation

Review

In chapter 13, I examined the nature of the new heavens and the new earth as well as the New Jerusalem that comes down to the new earth after the Genesis earth is destroyed. The eternal city represents a real place for the glorified saints who will have real resurrected bodies. We just do not know what the New Jerusalem will be like, any more than we can know what kind of bodies we will have after they are transformed to be like Christ's ascended body.

I also discussed the way in which John portrayed the New Jerusalem as the bride of Christ that has been purified and rewarded for her good deeds. We are engaged to Christ today, but on the last day, the wedding is consummated as the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from the Father, who gives the bride away to be joined to Christ. John used two aspects of the Roman world as metaphors to describe the eternal city: a magnificent Roman city and a Roman bride dressed in fine linen, decked out from head to toe in gold and precious stones.

Satan's Control over Mankind

This book has followed a general flow of successive events. In this chapter, I will backtrack and readdress the Tribulation that occurs before the millennium. The Scriptures reveal a great deal about this period of unparalleled persecution against the saints. Currently,

Satan is operational in this world, instigating all sorts of evil schemes to keep fallen man alienated from God. Because of their sinful nature, unbelievers are naturally responsive to Satan. As John taught, “We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19 NIV). Satan’s control over the minds of unbelievers takes many forms. It could be convincing unbelievers to ignore God completely as they live in a materialistic world. Or it could be leading them to accept any number of false beliefs about the supernatural realm.

But God does rescue people from Satan’s control when we respond to the gospel and are reconciled to him. God then begins a long process of educating his people, progressively bringing them under his righteous influence through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. In the mean-time, Satan remains in this world and continues his assault on believers. He tempts us to sin and be unfaithful. And when we succumb to his temptations, he appears in heaven before God to accuse the saints of moral or spiritual failures.

But God restricts Satan’s attempts to exercise control over the saints. He must approach God in heaven to gain permission for many of the evil things he does to the saints. For example, he appeared before God to question the sincerity of Job’s faith in God, and he had to ask God for permission to test and persecute Job. God granted him permission to test Job, and Job’s life became like hell on earth. In the end, Job’s faith survived the test, and his life was restored to health and prosperity.

Satan can be compared to a rabid dog, driven mad with evil. This dog, however, is on a leash; God restrains how much evil Satan can accomplish. But one day this rabid dog will be unleashed on the world and an age of demonic humanity will begin. All the saints living at that time will experience a period of great persecution, similar to Job’s testing.

But why would God allow an unrestrained Satan to have so much influence and power over the world? That is a very good question. It is important to remember that when Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they inadvertently let Satan into this world and it has never been the same. It is also important to realize that God did not have to intervene with a gracious plan of redemption for mankind. He did not have to show love and mercy to fallen man. He could have let mankind

go the way of demons that have no hope of salvation. Perhaps God wants heaven and earth to witness what would have happened to fallen humanity if he had not intervened with a plan of redemption. What would the world be like if sinful man, under the unrestrained influence of Satan, was given free rein to act out a godless existence? During the Tribulation, we will find out.

The book of Daniel contains a wealth of information about the Great Tribulation. We learn that the Tribulation period will last about seven years and that it revolves around Israel and its temple. The Great Tribulation begins when a highly skilled and influential man negotiates a peace treaty between Israel and her surrounding enemies. At this point, Satan is still restrained by God, although God allows a great delusion to come upon unbelievers. They will begin to believe this leader is the Messiah who will bring peace and prosperity to the world. This period of peace only lasts for three and a half years before Satan deludes this leader into believing he is the Messiah. As the Antichrist, this leader enters a rebuilt Jewish temple and claims to be God incarnate. Satan is then released from heaven, and he is given unrestrained influence over unbelievers who are under his control. Satan will convince people that this leader really is God incarnate. The saints will reject these claims and refuse to worship him, and a period of intense persecution will break out against God's people, which lasts for three and a half years.

In his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul discusses the coming of the Antichrist. It is likely that Paul had been teaching the Thessalonians about Daniel's prophecies of the future Tribulation, for he assumes that they already know certain details about these future events. For example, Paul taught that one day the Antichrist will arrive on the scene, enter the temple, claim he is God, and demand to be worshiped. But Paul taught that Satan is currently restrained from initiating this phase of the Great Tribulation. Theologians have debated about who restrains Satan. Is it the Holy Spirit or is it the church?

Daniel clearly identified the restrainer as Michael the archangel. And Paul assumed that his readers already knew this detail, so he did not bother to reference him by name. Michael is an archangel, as was Satan before he fell. As such, Michael is just as powerful as Satan, if not more so. God tasked Michael with restraining Satan and protecting Israel against his attacks. Let's first read Daniel's prophecy, and then

read Paul's exposition of it in his letter to the Thessalonians. Daniel revealed that the removal of Michael's restraint of Satan marks the emergence of the Antichrist:

At that time *shall arise Michael*, the great prince who has charge of your people [Michael, who protects Israel against Satan, is removed from restraining Satan]. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time [the unprecedented Great Tribulation begins]. (Dan. 12:1)

Once Satan is no longer restrained by Michael, he works through a king who claims to be God incarnate:

And the king shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god [he makes himself out to be God], and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods. (Dan. 11:36)

When the Antichrist enters the temple and discontinues the regular burnt offering by the high priest, he sets himself up as the Messiah and demands to be worshiped. The temple sacrifices are then no longer necessary because God himself has supposedly come to the earth through the Messiah. This false messiah also sets up an idol of himself in the temple and demands that people worship this idol. This idol in the temple and the false Christ are an abomination to God.

Christians will refuse to worship the idol and the false messiah, and they will be attacked with a vengeance. After learning about this horrible future period of persecution against his people, Daniel asked the angel Gabriel how long this period of great tribulation will last:

"How long shall it be till the end of these wonders?" And I heard the man clothed in linen, . . . "And from the time that the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up [the Antichrist enters the temple and exalts himself as God], there shall be 1,290 days [three years and seven months]." (Dan. 12:6–11)

In his exposition of Daniel, Paul taught that when the restrainer is removed, the Antichrist will be revealed when he enters the temple:

Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come [the second coming and the end of the world], unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed [the Antichrist], the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God [“the abomination that makes desolate”]. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know [from the teachings of Daniel] what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work [Satan is already instigating persecution against the saints]. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way [when Michael the archangel is removed]. And then the lawless one will be revealed, . . . The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders. (2 Thess. 2:3–9)

Because they were already experiencing significant persecution, the Thessalonians were well aware that Satan was at work in this world. Yet, Paul informed them that Michael still limits Satan, preventing him from having full rein over the world through the Antichrist. When Michael arises, or is removed from restraining Satan, the Antichrist will be revealed. He will then enter the temple, make himself out to be God, and a time of trouble unlike any other in the history of the world will begin.

In Revelation, John also pictures Satan in heaven accusing the saints. But notice what happens when Michael is involved in a battle with Satan, and Satan is released from heaven and sent down to the earth with permission to persecute the saints during the Great Tribulation:

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the

whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him [Satan is unleashed on the world]. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, . . . “the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. . . . Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short [the Great Tribulation begins]!” (Rev. 12:7–12)

Michael is involved in this celestial battle with Satan that results in Satan being cast out of heaven. Satan comes down to the earth in great wrath against God's people because he knows that the days before he ends up in the lake of fire are numbered. Satan has been instigating periods of terrible evil throughout human history, but the severity of evil that will take place after Michael is removed from restraining Satan has no rival.

The Antichrist and the Rebuilt Temple

For the Tribulation to begin, a Jewish temple must be in place for the Antichrist to enter and make himself out to be God. However, the Jewish temple was torn down by the Romans in AD 70 and an Islamic mosque, the Dome of the Rock, currently occupies what is known as the ancient temple mount. As long as a rebuilt temple is not in place for the Antichrist to enter, we know that the Tribulation is not at hand. Someday, however, according to Daniel's prophecy and Paul's teachings, there must be another temple in existence for the Antichrist to enter.

Some historians believe that the current temple mount is really the old Roman fort or garrison used when the Romans occupied Jerusalem. They believe that the actual location of the Second Temple is below this site in the old city of David. In other words, the temple could be rebuilt without the Dome of the Rock being demolished. Regardless of where the temple is to be rebuilt, a Jewish organization in Israel presently has detailed plans for a rebuilt temple, once there is political will to construct one.

The future construction of a temple will undoubtedly cause another major conflict in the region. This war over the temple's construction

could be the event that leads up to the beginning of the Tribulation. The book of Daniel informs us that the seven-year tribulation period begins with a peace treaty between Israel and her many enemies, which means there is probably a major war that precedes this treaty:

And he [the Antichrist] shall make a strong covenant with many [a covenant of peace] for one week [seven years], and for half of the week [after three and a half years] he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering [when the Antichrist enters the temple claiming to be God]. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate [the Great Tribulation begins], until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator [when the Antichrist is destroyed after seven years]. (Dan. 9:27)

The Antichrist will have to be a very gifted leader if he is to negotiate a covenant of peace between Israel and her many enemies. How the Antichrist will accomplish this stunning act of diplomacy, we do not know. But one thing is certain: he will be universally admired for the accomplishment. Perhaps he allows this admiration to go to his head and begins to delude himself into believing that he is the savior of the world. Then, with God allowing Satan to use his powers of deception to create a delusion among unbelievers, the world will rapidly begin to believe this lie as well.

According to Revelation, the Antichrist will be assassinated and then resurrected, leading to an even greater deception. Satan will likely use this supernatural event to increasingly delude the world into believing that the Antichrist is the true Messiah. John described his vision:

And the beast [the Antichrist] that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon [Satan] gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound [he is killed], but its mortal wound was healed [he is resurrected], and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast [as the savior of the world]. And they worshiped the dragon [Satan], for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast [the Antichrist], saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" (Rev. 13:2-4)

The beast imitates Christ when he receives a mortal wound but is resurrected and healed. When the beast dies, however, he will find himself in hades and will know with absolute certainty that he is destined for hell in a few short years. The Scriptures teach, "And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). When a man dies, God immediately judges him to determine whether his spirit goes to heaven to be with the Lord or whether his spirit goes to hades. Hades is a temporary form of hell, where the spirits of unbelievers are kept away from God's presence until Judgment Day.

When the Antichrist is mortally wounded, he will find himself in hades, where he will be confronted with the finality of his ultimate destiny of hell. When his human spirit is resurrected from hades, after getting a taste of hell, he will know with absolute certainty that he is like a demon, with no hope of redemption and destined for the lake of fire for all eternity. He will realize that he has only a few years to experience any carnal pleasures on this earth before being sent to the lake of fire.

As a result, he will direct his wrath against God and his saints. His rule over this world will be one of madness, vengeance, and rage. He will be possessed by Satan himself and will be an incredibly powerful and evil human being, with legions of other demons at his disposal. Satan will also know that his time is short before he, too, is sent to the lake of fire. When Satan is thrown down to earth from heaven, a loud voice in heaven warned, "Woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (Rev. 12:12). Jesus also warned that this outpouring of demonic wrath is unprecedented in the history of the world: "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (Matt. 24:21).

A false prophet, who will imitate the prophet Elijah, will accompany the Antichrist. The false prophet will perform many signs and wonders that will further deceive unbelievers into believing the Antichrist is the true Christ. In a showdown with the prophets of Baal, Elijah called fire down from heaven (1 Kings 18:37–39). Malachi prophesied that Elijah will be sent before the coming of the Lord to "turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:5–6).

John taught that the first beast is the Antichrist and the second beast is the false prophet:

Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth [the false Elijah]. . . . It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. It performs great signs, even making *fire come down from heaven to earth* in front of people, and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth. (Rev. 13:11–14)

Because of his ability to perform such miracles, people will be deceived into believing this beast is Elijah, who is to return to earth as a forerunner of the Christ. During the Tribulation, there will be a great deception and distortion of many other Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah and the messianic kingdom.

Most of the early church councils were formed to refute heretical teachings that denied that Jesus was fully God and fully human or to refute false teachings about the Trinity such that the only begotten Son did not eternally coexist with the Father. The Antichrist will probably espouse other heresies about the Trinity. He might teach that there are two Sons of the Father: the first Son (Jesus of Nazareth) was sent as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, and the second Son (the Antichrist) is being sent to establish the Messianic kingdom, or world empire. And since we are followers of the sacrificial Son, we, too, should be sacrificed. He might also distort the following teachings of Paul to convince the followers of the Antichrist into believing that tracking down and sacrificing the followers of Jesus completes the mission of the first Son: “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, *becoming like him in his death*” (Phil. 3:10). Or, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, *and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions* for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col. 1:24).

Many pagan religions throughout the ancient world included human sacrifice. John alluded to a similar sacrifice during the reign of the Antichrist: “And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (Rev. 17:6).

Believers in the Tribulation

What happens to the saints who do not believe the deceptions of Satan and the Antichrist? Many premillennialists are also pretribulationists, meaning that they believe the church is raptured, or removed from this earth, before the persecution phase of the Great Tribulation begins. They claim that we are saved from God's wrath and therefore do not have to experience God's anger poured out on the earth during the Tribulation.

But God's wrath during the Tribulation is very different from God's wrath on Judgment Day. It is at the Great White Throne judgment that we are saved from the eternal wrath of God because as believers in Christ, we escape the lake of fire. This is the wrath of God we are saved from because we are covered in the blood of Christ.

Those who believe in the any-moment rapture of the saints also point out that John only refers to the word *church* in the beginning of the book of Revelation when he is addressing specific congregations. And as the Great Tribulation unfolds in Revelation, John uses only the word "saints." They interpret this lack of reference to the word "church" to indicate that the church has been raptured before the Tribulation begins.

But there is a much simpler reason that John no longer refers to the church. The church is an assembly of saints who worship and fellowship together. Once the Tribulation unfolds, these saints will no longer be meeting as congregations in public. Rather, they will have headed for wilderness areas and will be hiding from the Antichrist and his followers. If they appear in public without the mark of the beast, they will immediately be recognized, imprisoned, and tortured.

This would be similar to what the Jews experienced in Nazi Germany. Before Hitler began rounding up the Jews, many of them continued to meet and worship in their synagogues. But after the Final Solution to exterminate them was implemented and the Nazis began arresting them, they went into hiding and no longer met together in their synagogues.

Moreover, the case has already been made that the rapture of the saints occurs at the final resurrection, which is *after* the millennium on the last day of this Genesis creation. Therefore, believers will surely experience the Tribulation. Revelation is quite clear on the matter. In

fact, the evidence in Revelation indicates that Satan will attack with a vengeance believers living at that time:

And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months [three and a half years]. . . . Also *it was allowed to make war on the saints* and to conquer them. . . . If anyone has an ear, let him hear: If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. (Rev. 13:5–10)

But how can the saints endure such persecution and martyrdom? By looking forward to the joy set before them when they will experience the first resurrection and a thousand years of paradise on this earth. Satan will be bound as Christ exercises his reign from his throne in heaven. This is how Christ endured his suffering on the cross—he looked forward to his resurrection, his ascension to heaven, and his glorious kingdom:

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who *for the joy that was set before him* endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1–2)

During the Tribulation, the days for nominal Christianity will be over. As the Tribulation unfolds, the tares in the church will receive the mark of the beast, whereas the wheat, or God's elect, will not. The tares will no longer believe it beneficial to be part of a persecuted group of believers. Jesus warned us that Satan will delude the social Christians and they will become hostile to committed Christians:

Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. . . . the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matt. 24:9–13)

Because the demonic tyranny of the Tribulation is worldwide, it will be difficult for Christians to escape capture or death. Satan's universal system of personal identification will make survival almost impossible without allegiance to the false Christ:

Also it [the second beast] causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. (Rev. 13:16–17)

The saints who refuse to accept this mark of the beast will surely stand out, and unbelievers will report any Christian they find, considering it an act of service to their god, the Antichrist.

Today there is a large underground church in China despite periodic persecution from the communist government. When these Chinese believers are in public, they look like every other citizen. As long as they are careful about sharing their faith in public, they can carry on normally. In contrast, the unmarked believers during the Tribulation will be easily identifiable in any public setting as the enemies of the Antichrist. As a result, believers will have to remain in seclusion, hiding from everyone except fellow believers.

God's Wrath During the Tribulation

Revelation describes the Tribulation as a period when God will pour out his great wrath on the earth as a result of the extreme evil perpetrated against his saints. Much of Revelation is devoted to describing God's fury during the Tribulation. As the blood of hundreds of millions of innocent Christians flows, it is little wonder that God begins to visit such intense wrath on the world.

As the world becomes unbearably evil in his sight, God displays his anger by creating a variety of plagues. Revelation 16 describes some of the forms of God's wrath: "harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bear the mark of the beast and worshiped its image"; another bowl causes the sun "to scorch people with fire"; another angel sent from heaven "poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues

in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores” (16:2–11). And many more plagues follow.

Revelation informs us that the saints are exempt from God’s acts of vengeance on those with the mark of the beast, in much the same way that the Jews in Egypt were passed over by the angels of wrath sent by God. The angels of wrath will only direct their vengeful anger at those with the mark of the beast, and they will pass over the saints, who do not bear this mark:

So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon *the people who bore the mark of the beast* and worshiped its image [unbelievers]. (Rev. 16:2)

Believers will also have a special seal of God on their foreheads that will allow the angels of wrath to identify and pass over them:

They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have *the seal of God on their foreheads*. (Rev. 9:4)

Revelation further reveals that it will be a blessing for the saints to be killed rather than continue to endure satanic torture during the Tribulation:

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors [from enduring torture], for their deeds follow them!” (Rev. 14:12–13)

From the letter to the Hebrews, we learn that the departed saints are a cloud of witnesses in heaven, watching the events on the earth unfold (Heb. 12:1). With so many Christians slain during the Tribulation, John has a vision of the multitude of departed saints in heaven praising God:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, . . . and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" . . . Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" . . . And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Rev. 7:9–14)

By the end of the Tribulation, the world will be a wreck. Virtually all the saints will have been slain during the Antichrist's reign of terror. Only a small number of them will have successfully hidden in wilderness areas. Many unbelievers will also have been killed. Earthquakes and plagues will have devastated the planet.

But a significant number of unbelievers will have survived. There will be enough to send an army to join the Antichrist in one final battle against Christ. During the battle of Armageddon, Christ will demonstrate the full measure of his anger over the evil perpetrated against his people during this terrible period of human history.

As the armies of the Antichrist gather, Christ will appear in the celestial realm of heaven on a white horse. By his word, described as a sword, he then destroys these armies. He sends the Antichrist and his false Elijah directly to the lake of fire, bypassing the Great White Throne judgment. Satan is then bound, and the millennial reign of Christ begins when Christ sits on his throne in heaven and governs the world.

Summary

When Adam and Eve sinned, mankind became spiritual children of Satan and he entered our world. That is why mankind remains hostile to God and the world remains an unrighteous place. God's chosen people have been rescued from Satan's dominion of darkness, but we remain in this fallen, demonic world. And Satan continues to instigate all kinds of evil against us.

But God, through his archangel Michael, currently restrains Satan in how much harm he can inflict on us. When God removes Michael, Satan will be unleashed on the world, and an unprecedented period of tribulation against the saints will begin.

Why does God allow Satan to delude mankind and create the Great Tribulation? Perhaps God wants to reveal to heaven and earth the full extent of the fallen nature of mankind as spiritual children of Satan. He wants to reveal what a truly godless humanity under the direct influence of Satan is capable of. The Tribulation will also reveal the righteous indignation of a holy God who will vent “the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” against demonic humanity.

In contrast, the 1,000-year messianic kingdom that follows the Great Tribulation will demonstrate what the human experience would have been like had Adam and Eve not rebelled and allowed Satan into our world. Through the power of resurrection, God will restore all his ransomed people to an Edenic paradise on this earth to demonstrate what redeemed humanity will be like without Satan. The millennium will be an age of righteous humanity when it is ruled by its divine Creator.