

# What Does The Bible Say? Tribulation and Wrath

By Jack Kelley

Recently I was reading a new book on Revelation by an author who subscribes to the pre-wrath Rapture position. I don't recommend this or any other mid-Trib, pre-Wrath, or post-Trib book. I only read them myself because my belief in the pre-Trib position is solid enough to not be shaken, and I feel the need to know about the current thinking on other positions in case I'm asked.

When you depart from a literal, contextual interpretation of Scripture, as you have to do when you're trying to justify the other rapture positions, anything becomes possible. For that reason some of these books, like the one I just read, are so far off the mark as to be ludicrous. But there are two things they all seem to have in common. One is their confusion about the difference between tribulation and the Great Tribulation and the other is the meaning and duration of the phrase "Wrath of God."

Here are some examples of what I mean. In **John 16:33** Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation, but take heart because I have overcome the world." This verse is often used to refute the pre-Trib belief that the church will not be present during the end times judgments. "After all," they say, "Jesus said we will have tribulation in this world."

Another is **1 Thess. 5:9** where Paul said, "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." Here they say the wrath Paul was talking about is not the end times judgments associated with the Day of the Lord, which is the context of the passage, but the eternal punishment to be endured by non-believers. They say that's the only wrath our salvation protects us from.

So let's take a closer look at these two words as they pertain to the end times and see what the Bible says about them.

**Tribulation.** In English, the word "tribulation" appears 22 times in the Bible. Three of them are in the Old Testament, although the Hebrew word from which it is translated can be found 105 times, having a number of different meanings. The other 19 are in the New Testament, but there are also 26 times where the Greek word is translated in different ways as well, for a total of 45. In both testaments the other meanings are similar; distress, affliction, trouble, etc.

The phrase "great tribulation" makes only three appearances, all in the New Testament (**Matt. 24:21**, **Rev. 2:22**, and **Rev. 7:14**). In its first one the Lord actually coined the term, identifying its beginning as the time when the abomination of desolation occurs.

"So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress (tribulation), unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again" (**Matt. 24:15-21**). A few verses later He said it would end just before the Second Coming.

"Immediately after the distress (tribulation) of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory" (**Matt. 24:29-30**).

**Daniel 9:27** tells us the anti-Christ will set up an abomination of desolation in the middle of the 70<sup>th</sup> Week (**Daniel 9:27**), or 3 ½ years from its end. It's the same event Jesus identified as the sign that the Great Tribulation will have begun. This tells us the Great Tribulation will have a duration of 3 ½ years.

Daniel also made reference to the Great Tribulation in **Daniel 12:1** when he wrote:

“At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress [tribulation] such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then.”

Notice that Daniel's words are very similar to the ones Jesus used in **Matt 24:21**. The phrase “at that time” refers back to **Daniel 11:36-45** where the angel was telling Daniel about the reign of the Antichrist. For these reasons, it's safe to assume that Daniel and Jesus were talking about the same thing. In fact, Jesus confirmed this in **Matt. 24:15**.

Put together, these references identify the Great Tribulation as a specific period of time with an identifiable beginning and end. That makes this 3 ½ period distinct from the periodic times of tribulation that believers experience in this world. Daniel and Jesus both said this time of tribulation would be the worst the world has ever seen. Jesus said it has never been equaled before and would never be equaled again, and if He didn't return to put an end to it no one would survive (**Matt. 24:22**). This is definitely not the everyday variety of tribulation you and I face in life. This is the one and only Great Tribulation.

## **And Wrath**

The word “wrath” also has a general as well as a specific meaning, and again the two are differentiated by time. When used in connection with God, the word “wrath” appears in 18 verses, of the Old Testament and usually describes God's feelings toward Israel during their periodic times of disobedience.

In the New Testament there are 16 verses where wrath appears in connection with God. Some of them refer to the eternal destiny unbelievers will face after they die and others are about the end times judgments. We can tell which is which by the context in which they are used. Here are some examples.

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them” (**John 3:36**).

In this verse the context is eternal life. Those who believe in the Son will receive it but those who reject Him will not receive it for God's wrath remains on them. There are only two possible dispositions for mankind, eternal life and eternal punishment. Belief in the Son brings life, and rejection of the Son brings punishment. Only one generation of mankind will experience the end times judgments, but **John 3:36** pertains to all mankind. Therefore the Lord had to be using God's wrath in reference to eternal punishment here.

Now let's take the example we used earlier from **1 Thess. 5:9**: “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul began chapter 5 by talking about the timing of the Day of the Lord. He said the world would not know the day or hour in advance, and that it would come like a thief in the night (**1 Thess. 5:2**). At a time when people are saying “peace and safety” it will come upon them suddenly, like labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape (**1 Thess. 5:3**).

By this we know Paul was not talking about the actual day of the Lord's return, because earlier we learned that He will come to put an end to the worst period of devastation the world has ever known, not while people are thinking peace has come. And from other passages we know that Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week will begin with a perception of peace (**Daniel 8:25**) which will quickly be replaced by war. Therefore Paul's reference to “peace and safety” points to the beginning of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week, not the actual day of the Lord's return.

He said believers should not be surprised by this, and changed his narrative from the third person (they) in verse 3 to the second person (you) in verse 4. He did this to distinguish between the unbelieving world, who will be surprised, and the believers, who won't. Being sons of the light (having the knowledge of Scripture) we will be able to see the signs of its approach, and when we do we should be awake and alert. After expanding on that thought (vv. 5-8) he came to verse 9: "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Obviously, believers will not suffer the eternal wrath of God that awaits unbelievers. But the context of **1 Thess. 5:1-9** is the Day of the Lord, when the end times judgments will fall upon an unbelieving and unsuspecting world. That's the wrath Paul was talking about.

So, just like we can differentiate between the periodic times of tribulation we all experience and the Great Tribulation which will be the single worst thing ever to happen on earth, we can also differentiate between the eternal wrath of God to be visited on all unbelievers after they die, and the time of God's wrath, the end time judgments that will come upon one generation of unbelievers before they die, and which will have a discernible beginning and end.

### **Is It Time Yet?**

Now let's look at the time of God's wrath...

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