

**“The Great Tribulation”**  
**Revelation 15-16**  
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The word “tribulation” means distress, affliction, oppression, coming from the root word meaning to crush or squeeze to press down.

The word “tribulation” obviously has negative connotations.

Starting with the prophet Daniel (600 years before Christ) and continuing through Jesus and the Apostles there were many references to a coming time of “tribulation” in the world that would be unlike any time preceding it.

This world has experienced plagues with millions dying in the middle ages, earthquakes, typhoons and floods even in recent years with whole cities wiped out and thousands killed.

We have seen pictures of the awful effects of the bombing of Dresden, Germany and Hiroshima, Japan.

But according to the biblical writers, all such examples from history pale in comparison to the devastation in the world that will come in what Jesus called “The **Great** Tribulation.”

People seem to always have had a fascination with what the end of the world will be like.

Even recent motion pictures such as “Independence Day” and “Contact” flirt with the concept of a “doomsday” end of the world.

Jesus taught his disciples that the world and life as we know it were coming to an end. In three of the gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) the disciples, in their “to be expected” curiosity asked how they would know when the end of the age was coming - what would it be like.

Jesus answered this way: “For then there will be great tribulation (distress), unequalled from the beginning of the world until now - and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.... Immediately after the tribulation (distress) 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. At that time the... Son of Man will appear in the sky...” Mt 24

Jesus clearly teaches that just before he comes the next time there will be a period of time on the earth that will be so bad that unless it is a short time everyone on earth will die.

But he doesn't give us much detail.

That will come in the book of Revelation.

And so the Apostle John's book of Revelation begins with these words:

"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John who testifies to everything he saw." (Rev 1:1)

In a series of visions Jesus reveals to John what will take place at the end of this age - how the world will come to an end - what it will be like.

And, frankly, it is a frightening description!

As more socially conditioned Christians we may be embarrassed by street corner preachers in downtown Denver who yell out "repent or perish" but although their methods may be less than effective their message is strikingly biblical.

The Bible says this world is coming to an end - a violent end.

We come to a passage today that describes that "end" in the fullest detail found anywhere in the Bible.

Before we look at that specific text, I want you to see again that we have had previews of this terrible end of the world, several times already, in this book of Revelation.

In chapter 6 with the opening of the 6<sup>th</sup> "seal" we received a preview when John wrote:

Revelation 6:12-17 "I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth... and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

In what I think is obviously symbolical language, John envisions a time of terrible events that are so horrible that people **wish** they could die.

In chapter 8 John again sees a preview of the end:

8:5 "Then the angel took the censer filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake."

When we came to the latter part of chapter 8 and then chapter 9 we saw a fuller description of what that period of tribulation would be like.

Described as judgments announced by trumpets we saw ecological disasters predicted and then flying locusts that looked like horses stinging everyone except the people of God.

Then in Chapter 11:19 once again there is a summary description of this period of tribulation -

“And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.”

Time and again throughout the first half of the book there are previews or summaries of what that time will be like.

In chapter 14 John again gives a summary description.

14:9-10 “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath.”

And then in the latter part of chapter 14, as we saw last week, this period of tribulation is described this way:

14:16 “So he (Jesus) who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth and the earth was harvested.”

And again in 14:19 “The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the winepress of God’s wrath. They were trampled in the winepress...and blood flowed...”

What all of these passages have described symbolically or literally and in greater or lesser detail IS NOW in chapters 15 and 16 described in the fullest detail in the Bible.

But before we look at this text there is one more thing I wish for you to bear in mind:

The period of time which we generally call the “tribulation” is a period of time that begins with the establishment of a world government/religion by the antichrist and false prophet described in chapter 13 and ends with the second coming of Jesus described most fully in chapter 19.

Whether it is exactly 7 years in length or not is reasonably debated but we do know that at least it is a relatively short period of time.

The two beasts (the antichrist and the false prophet) assume world-wide leadership and institute a governmental/religious system that controls the whole world.

Because of their rebellion against God, instigated by Satan (the dragon of chapters 12 and 13), this world government persecutes the people of God.

That persecution is described in chapters 11 and 13.

It is likely that early in this period unbelievers are relatively free of any tribulation - they are thriving, and they are being deceived into believing that this world government/religion and the leadership of the antichrist is exactly what the world needs.

But at some point in this false paradise on earth while the unbelieving of this world are persecuting God's people the judgment of God begins to fall on them.

It appears that the "trumpet" judgments of chapter 9 come first as less severe and then these "bowl" judgments of chapter 16 come last.

But it is just as possible that the "trumpet" and "bowl" descriptions are describing different aspects of the same judgments of God.

While John sees the persecution of believers during this time as severe - it is not for that reason it is called a "tribulation" - it is called a "tribulation" because of the judgment of God on unbelievers.

**And it is that "tribulation-judgment" that probably comes toward the end of this relatively short period of time before Jesus comes again that we now see described in detail in chapter 16.**

**Please stand in honor of God's word, as I read excerpts from chapters 15 and 16:**

15:1 "I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues - last, because with them God's wrath is completed.

15:7 "Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God...

16:1ff "Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, 'Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth.

The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.

The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died.

The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood...

The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent or glorify him.

The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East.

Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet.

They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

"Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, "It is done!" Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake.

The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible."

What a description!

Can you imagine being alive at such a time?

During this period of time Jesus called the "great tribulation" as the persecution of God's people grows ever more severe so God's judgment on unbelievers grows ever more intense.

As the world government turns up the heat on God's people - God really turns up the heat on the world.

During that time, the closer it gets to the day that Christ will come, the more severe and deadly is the judgment of God.

Lest you think these days are remote, removed from our experience, please remember that these things could begin to happen at any moment.

There is no prophecy that must be fulfilled before these things can begin to happen.

Having witnessed the entire Soviet empire changed virtually overnight, it ought to come as no surprise to us to think that the kind of antichrist government/religion described in Revelation could grow up very quickly in our world.

These events described in Revelation 16 could take place soon.

I'm not saying they necessarily will happen soon but we must be aware that these things could be happening to us or at least our contemporaries very soon.

Seven plagues are poured out on the earth.

John sees it as seven angels each holding a shallow dish - a bowl - the contents being God's wrath in a particular form.

I want you to be very clear however on whom these plagues are inflicted?

Who bears the wrath of God?

These tribulation plagues are not on God's people!

Before John describes the terror of those days of God's wrath he sees the people of God.

In 15:2 he writes, "I saw...those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb."

John pictures them as already successfully through the persecution of the antichrist. He sees them as standing victoriously on the other side of the second coming of Jesus.

Just as Moses and the Israelites rejoiced in song at their deliverance by God from Egypt so God's people rejoice in song over their deliverance from the antichrist.

These are God's people who did not yield to the threats of the evil one.

These are God's people who did not believe the lies of the antichrist.

These are the people who didn't slide back into the old ways of the world when there would have been every temporal advantage to doing so.

These people are not the subjects of God's wrath - they are subjects of God's ultimate protection.

But notice also 16:2 The first plague "broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image."

The plagues don't fall on God's people but on those who rejected God's way, those who wanted what the world governmental/religious system had to offer.

They pledged their allegiance to the antichrist and now they were receiving their reward.

Again, I emphasize, God's people are not the subjects of this wrath of God that is poured out.

Look briefly at this judgment of God:

The first plague is described as ugly and painful sores breaking out on everyone except God's people.

Are these like Job's painful sores that covered him from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet?

Are these like the boils that God inflicted on the Egyptians so that they were agony as a result of their refusing to obey God?

Whatever they are, they are disfiguring, putrifying, loathsome sores that won't go away - no cure for it.

People are horrible to look at and the pain never ends.

The second plague is poured out and the sea turns to blood and every living thing in it dies.

Imagine such a disaster - the stench!

John said the blood was like that of a dead man - coagulated and rotting.

Is this literally "blood"?

I don't know for certain but whatever it is it causes death.

There have been years when something called a "red tide", a natural contamination strikes certain oceans and causes unimaginable destruction of marine life.

In Florida a number of years ago the carcasses of fish were pushed into piles sixty miles long. (John Phillips p201)

But in Revelation 16 the death to marine life is universal - not just a part of an ocean but all the oceans turn to blood and it destroys everything in them.

In the third plague, just as in Moses' day, the fresh water sources turn to blood.

But this time it is apparently **all** fresh water - world wide.

I have no doubt it could be literally blood - Jesus who made everything from nothing, and who turned plain water into wine could do precisely as it says.

In the fourth plague something happens to the sun - It's delicate balance of gases are somehow altered and the earth heats up to the point that people are scorched from the heat.

We think it can't happen but even our scientists tell us how vulnerable we are to even minor changes to our earth's relationship to the sun.

The fifth plague is the opposite of the fourth. Now it is darkness.

When we saw the effects of the trumpet judgments in chapter 9 we saw how the earth was subjected to total darkness for a period of a third of a day and the kind of panic that would set in.

Here the entire world is thrust into complete darkness but not just for a third of a day but for some unspecified period of time.

But long enough that world-wide panic sets in.

The combination of sores, undrinkable water, heat and darkness cause people to gnaw their tongues in pain.

The sixth plague is not so much a direct attack on the people as it is a preparation for the battle that will occur when Jesus comes again.

At this point in the chronology of events - we are at the threshold of Jesus' return.

The river Euphrates is dried up so that the kings of the east and their armies can join the rest of the world to fight against the Lord Jesus when he returns.

That battle is described in chapter 19.

The seventh plague, just like the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet is a description of a cataclysmic geological upheaval just before Jesus comes or maybe as he comes.

Back in chapter 8 when the seventh seal was opened it says, "The angel took...fire from the altar and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake."

In chapter 11 when John described the sounding of the seventh trumpet he wrote, "there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a great hailstorm."

And here with the seventh bowl poured out those previews become reality - lightning, thunder, an earthquake that splits mountains, inundates islands, and a hailstorm the likes of which has never before been known.

You could well ask, "Is this to be taken literally?"

That John uses words symbolically to describe the indescribable seems clear but what is also clear is that he uses those words to describe a literal and physical calamity on the earth that will strike terror to the souls of people.

I think we have exegetical and theological reason to say that the judgment, the destruction, the fear and the death are literal - they are real.

That is what will happen just before and as Jesus comes again!

Why is John shown this horrible vision of the future and why does John tell it to the people of Asia Minor and to us?

I think it is a warning:

A warning to both unbelievers and to believers.

Two times in John's description of those horrible last days on earth, he mentions something specifically:

Twice he mentions that in spite of the agony of the judgments of God people "cursed the name of God and they refused to repent and glorify him" 16:9 and they "cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores but they refused to repent of what they had done." 16:11

He or she is a fool who thinks they can wait and come to God whenever they want to.

A day is coming when even the most awful punishments from God will result not in repentance but in a hardening of the heart toward God.

Do not wait for those days to come and say then I will turn to God - it won't happen. Now is the day of salvation!

Heed the warnings of God.

In our day and age many evangelicals are embarrassed by the concept of “repent or perish” but God isn’t.

Yes, God says, “Come to me because I love you.”

That is true, but there is another issue as well.

God also says “Come to me because ‘He who does not have the Son does not have life but stands condemned.’”

We don’t only say to our young children, “Don’t run into the street because I love you.”

That is true but we also say, “Don’t run in the street because you can be killed.”

When driving instruction Bill Robbins teaches driver safety he shows pictures of accidents.

His hope is that one day when one of his students approaches a blind intersection one of those pictures will pop into their mind and they will heed the warning.

God has placed some very real pictures in front of our faces and he says in essence “Don’t go there!”

“There is a way, he said, that seems right to a person but the end of it is death.”

God’s warnings are because of his grace.

John Newton wrote it this way in his well known hymn “Amazing Grace” - “Grace has taught my heart to fear.”

And he went on to add - “and grace, my fears relieved.”

“Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

God graciously, freely, offers forgiveness of our sins, and eternal sanctuary from the wrath of God, if we will turn in trust and obedience to Jesus.

Have you? Will you?

But I said John describes the terrible end of this age for another group of people - for those who are already believers.

Right in the middle of John’s description of the plagues he inserts this:

Revelation 16:15: “Behold I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”

Using the analogy of a soldier who is supposed to be on guard he suggests there might be some of who will be tempted to sleep.

There might be some of you who will get lulled into believing the lies of the enemy.

You too are susceptible to desiring what the world has to offer more than you want what God has to offer.

You too might be tempted to reduce your Christianity to something you believe in your head but it doesn't really affect your living.

But Jesus says through John, "don't do it!"

Know that the consequences of unfaithfulness are deadly - eternally deadly.

There is grace to see you through - will you ask for and receive his grace?

Don't fall back!

Remember - in the midst of it all - no matter how hard it gets - Jesus wins!

And those who are in Christ are saved from the wrath of God.