

The Tribulation



Examining scriptural support for the
various views of the Tribulation

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The Majors vs. the Minors

In Christianity, "majors" refer to the core beliefs and doctrines that are essential to the faith, such as the nature of God, the Gospel, and salvation through Jesus Christ. "Minors" are less critical issues that do not affect one's standing with God, such as specific interpretations of scripture or practices, and are not salvation-related. These frequently include topics like eschatology, baptism methods and interpretations of creation. While they may be important, they do not affect one's standing with God.

It's perfectly fine for Christians to debate "the minors", but at some point they should be prepared to "agree to disagree" and move on. They are not critical to what's really important to Christians, i.e. salvation, and thus an exorbitant amount of time should not be devoted to them. Doing so can lead to unnecessary conflicts and divisions within the church, as minor disagreements can escalate into major confrontations.

In my personal opinion, I don't feel I even need to select a side. My main objective is to understand all sides of a debate, be it the age of the earth, end times timing, etc. and to be able to explain to someone what they are. And if they choose to, select a side.

So in this paper, we'll discuss the different views of the Tribulation. Some Christians, known as dispensationalist theologians, believe that the books of Revelation and Daniel foretell a future seven year tribulation period. Others called Amillennists, believe the tribulation is not literal but figurative. Both views will be discussed here. Does Biblical scripture support one over the other? Let's take a look.

Dispensationalist Theology Perspective

The Tribulation is described in the book of Revelation as a seven year period of intense suffering and divine judgment on earth, often associated with the end times. Christian eschatology has developed four primary views regarding the timing and nature of the Tribulation in relation to the Second Coming of Christ and the Rapture: **Pre-tribulation**, **Mid-tribulation**, **Post-tribulation**, and **Pre-wrath Rapture**. All three are considered "dispensationalist theology", which interprets Daniel 9:24–27 and the book of Revelation as describing a future seven-year period of tribulation before Christ's return.

Pre-Tribulation

Pre-tribulation (Pre-Trib) backers holds that the Rapture of the church (believers) will occur *before* the seven-year Tribulation begins. The Tribulation is seen as a time of God's wrath poured out on the earth, and believers are spared from this period by being taken to heaven. After the Tribulation, Christ returns to establish His millennial kingdom.

Key Points

- The church is raptured before the Tribulation, sparing believers from God's wrath.
- The Tribulation is a distinct seven-year period of judgment, often tied to Daniel's "70th week" (Daniel 9:27).
- The Second Coming occurs at the end of the Tribulation, separate from the Rapture.

Supporting Bible Verses

- **1 Thessalonians 5:9:** "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."
Interpretation: This suggests believers are not appointed to experience God's wrath, which Pre-Trib supporters equate with the Tribulation.
- **Revelation 3:10:** "Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth."
Interpretation: The phrase "keep you from the hour of trial" is seen as a promise to remove the church from the Tribulation.
- **1 Thessalonians 4:16–17:** "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."
Interpretation: This describes the Rapture, which Pre-Trib supporters believe occurs before the Tribulation events in Revelation 6–19.
- **Revelation 4:1:** "After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.'"
Interpretation: Some see John's being called to heaven as symbolic of the church's Rapture before the Tribulation judgments (Revelation 6–19).

Additional Notes: Pre-Trib backers often point to the absence of the word “church” in Revelation 6–18 (the Tribulation chapters) as evidence that the church is no longer on earth during this period.

Mid-Tribulation

Mid-tribulation (Mid-Trib) supporters believe that the Rapture occurs at the *midpoint* of the seven-year Tribulation, typically after three and a half years. The first half of the Tribulation involves general tribulation and the rise of the Antichrist, but the second half, known as the “Great Tribulation,” is when God’s wrath is poured out most intensely.

Key Points

- Believers endure the first half of the Tribulation but are raptured before the worst judgments (e.g., the bowl judgments).
- The Tribulation is divided into two 3.5-year periods, with the Rapture occurring at the midpoint, often tied to the “abomination of desolation” (Daniel 9:27, Matthew 24:15).
- The Second Coming follows at the end of the seven years.

Supporting Bible Verses

- **Daniel 9:27:** “And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.”

Interpretation: The “half of the week” (3.5 years) marks the midpoint where the Antichrist’s actions intensify, and some Mid-tribulation backers see the Rapture occurring here.

- **Revelation 11:2–3:** “But the court outside the temple leave out, and do not measure it, for it has been given to the Gentiles, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months. And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.”

Interpretation: The 42 months or 1,260 days (3.5 years) represent the first half of the Tribulation, with the Rapture occurring around this time.

- **Revelation 12:6:** “And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.”

Interpretation: The protection of the “woman” (often interpreted as Israel or the church) for 1,260 days may align with the Rapture at the midpoint.

- **1 Corinthians 15:51–52:** “Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.”

Interpretation: The “last trumpet” is sometimes linked to the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15, which occurs near the Tribulation’s midpoint.

Additional Notes: Mid-Trib supporters see the church enduring persecution but being spared from the most severe judgments in the latter half of the Tribulation (e.g., Revelation 16’s bowl judgments).

Post-Tribulation

Post-tribulation (Post-Trib) teaches that the Rapture and the Second Coming are essentially a single event occurring *after* the entire seven-year Tribulation. Believers endure the full Tribulation, including the Great Tribulation, and are raptured to meet Christ as He returns to defeat His enemies and establish His kingdom.

Key Points

- The church remains on earth through the entire Tribulation, facing persecution and the Antichrist's rule.
- The Rapture occurs simultaneously with or immediately before Christ's Second Coming at the end of the Tribulation.
- Believers are protected spiritually (not necessarily physically) during the Tribulation.

Supporting Bible Verses

- **Matthew 24:29–31:** "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

Interpretation: The gathering of the "elect" after the Tribulation is seen as the Rapture, coinciding with Christ's return.

- **Revelation 20:4–5:** "Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection."

Interpretation: The "first resurrection" includes believers who endured the Tribulation, suggesting they were present during it.

- **2 Thessalonians 2:1–3:** "Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction."

Interpretation: The "gathering" (Rapture) occurs after the "man of lawlessness" (Antichrist) is revealed, implying the church experiences the Tribulation.

- **Revelation 7:14:** "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."

Interpretation: The saints "coming out of the great tribulation" are seen as believers who endured it.

Additional Notes: Post-Trib believers emphasize that the church is called to endure suffering (e.g., John 16:33) and that the Rapture and Second Coming are not separate events.

Pre-Wrath Rapture

The Pre-wrath Rapture view is a newer perspective that places the Rapture *during* the Tribulation but before the outpouring of God's wrath. It distinguishes between the persecution by the Antichrist (which believers endure) and God's wrath (from which believers are spared). The Rapture occurs after the Great Tribulation begins but before the final judgments.

Key Points:

- The Tribulation is divided into three phases: the beginning of sorrows, the Great Tribulation (Antichrist's persecution), and the Day of the Lord (God's wrath).
- The Rapture occurs after the Antichrist's persecution but before the Day of the Lord's wrath, often tied to the sixth seal in Revelation.
- The church endures persecution but is spared from God's wrath.

Supporting Bible Verses

- **Revelation 6:12–17:** "When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ... For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

Interpretation: The sixth seal marks the transition to the Day of the Lord's wrath, with the Rapture occurring just before.

- **Matthew 24:15–22:** "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ... 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."

Interpretation: The "great tribulation" is the Antichrist's persecution, which believers endure until the Rapture.

- **Revelation 7:9–14:** "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, with palm branches in their hands. ... These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation."

Interpretation: The "great multitude" is seen as raptured believers who endured the Great Tribulation but were taken before God's wrath.

- **1 Thessalonians 5:9** (as above): Emphasizes believers are not appointed to wrath, supporting the idea that the Rapture occurs before the Day of the Lord.

Additional Notes: Pre-wrath advocates see the seals in Revelation 6 as sequential, with the first five seals representing human and satanic persecution, and the sixth seal signaling the Rapture and the onset of God's wrath.

Comparison and Key Debates

- **Timing of the Rapture:** The central disagreement is when the Rapture occurs relative to the Tribulation. Pre-Trib places it before, Mid-Trib at the midpoint, Post-Trib at the end, and Pre-Wrath between the Great Tribulation and God's wrath.
- **Nature of God's Wrath:** Pre-Trib views the entire seven years as God's wrath, while Mid-Trib and Pre-Wrath advocates see only the latter part being that way. Post-Trib argues believers are protected through the Tribulation, not from it.
- **Interpretation of "Church":** Pre-Trib notes the church's absence in Revelation 6–18, while others argue the "saints" in these chapters include the church.
- **Key Events:** All views tie the Tribulation to events like the Antichrist's rise (2 Thessalonians 2:3–4), the abomination of desolation (Daniel 9:27, Matthew 24:15), and cosmic signs (Revelation 6:12–17, Matthew 24:29).

Common Verses Across Views

- **Revelation 6–19:** Describes the Tribulation's events (seals, trumpets, bowls), interpreted differently by each view.
- **Daniel 9:24–27:** The "seventy weeks" prophecy, particularly the 70th week, is foundational for the seven-year Tribulation framework.
- **Matthew 24:** Jesus' Olivet Discourse outlines end-time events, including tribulation and His return.

Amillennial Perspective

Another perspective of the seven year tribulation that should be mentioned is the amillennial view, held by many churches within the following denominations: Lutheran church, Anglican/Episcopal Churches, United Methodist Church, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches such as the Presbyterian Church. They all reject "dispensationalist theology", and see the "tribulation" as a symbolic representation of the ongoing struggles and persecutions faced by the Church throughout history until Christ's second coming. They interpret passages like those in Revelation and Daniel as figurative, emphasizing spiritual realities rather than a specific seven-year period. And does not endorse a literal seven-year tribulation.

Key Points

- Daniel's "seventy weeks" (Daniel 9:24–27), often cited as the basis for the seven-year tribulation, is seen as fulfilled in Christ's first coming or as symbolic of the Church age, not a future event.
- The imagery (e.g., seals, trumpets, bowls) found in the book of Revelation describes the ongoing spiritual battle rather than a specific future period.
- Most do not support the idea of a literal seven-year tribulation. Instead, it views tribulation as part of the Church's ongoing experience in a fallen world, with a focus on Christ's ultimate return rather than detailed end-times schedules.

Supporting Bible Verses

- **Matthew 24:29–31** – *“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light... And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds...”*

Interpretation: This passage describes Christ’s second coming as a sudden, visible event without a specific seven-year tribulation preceding it. The “tribulation of those days” is understood as the general trials and persecutions the Church endures throughout history, not a distinct seven-year period. The focus is on readiness for Christ’s return, not a timeline.

- **John 16:33** – *“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*

Interpretation: This verse underscores that tribulation is a continuous reality for believers living in a fallen world. Lutherans use it to argue that the Bible does not limit tribulation to a future seven-year period but describes it as an ongoing condition until Christ’s return.

- **Revelation 7:14** – *“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.”*

Interpretation: In the amillennial view, the “great tribulation” in Revelation is symbolic of the Church’s suffering throughout the entire Church age, not a specific seven-year event. Lutherans interpret Revelation’s imagery (e.g., seals, trumpets, bowls) as cyclical and symbolic, representing spiritual realities rather than a literal future timeline.

- **Daniel 9:24–27** – *“Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin...”*

Interpretation: Dispensationalists often interpret the “seventy weeks” as including a final seven-year tribulation. Lutherans, however, typically view the seventy weeks as fulfilled in Christ’s first coming, particularly his death and resurrection, which atoned for sin. The “week” in verse 27 is not seen as a future tribulation but as symbolic of the time of Christ’s ministry or the spread of the Gospel. This rejects the idea of a future seven-year period.

- **2 Thessalonians 2:1–4** – *“...concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him... that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed...”*

Interpretation: Lutherans, especially in the LCMS, identify the “man of lawlessness” with the Antichrist, often understood as a spiritual force (e.g., false teaching or the papacy in historical Lutheranism) present throughout history rather than a single future figure tied to a seven-year tribulation. This passage emphasizes that Christ’s return follows ongoing deception and rebellion, not a specific seven-year period.

- **Acts 14:22** – *“Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”*

Interpretation: This verse reinforces the idea that tribulation is a normative part of the Christian life across all ages, not confined to a future seven-year event. Lutherans use it to argue that believers should expect ongoing trials rather than a distinct end-times tribulation.

Summary

The Pre-Trib view suggests that the Rapture of believers occurs before the seven-year Tribulation, which is characterized by God's wrath on Earth, allowing believers to be taken to heaven prior to Christ's return to establish His millennial kingdom. In contrast, Mid-Trib supporters believe the Rapture happens at the midpoint of the Tribulation, after three and a half years of general tribulation and before the intense outpouring of God's wrath during the "Great Tribulation." The Post-Trib perspective asserts that the Rapture and the Second Coming are a single event occurring after the entire Tribulation, with believers enduring all its trials.

Additionally, the Pre-wrath Rapture view suggests that the Rapture occurs during the Tribulation but before God's wrath is unleashed, distinguishing between the persecution by the Antichrist and divine judgment.

Lastly, the Amillennial perspective interprets the tribulation symbolically, viewing it as a representation of the ongoing struggles faced by the Church throughout history, rather than a literal seven-year period. This view emphasizes spiritual realities over specific prophetic timelines.

My .02 Cents

So there you go. Which view do you tend to lean towards? Before choosing, however, I'd recommend studying the verses listed above yourself become coming to a conclusion. Me you ask? I like what Bill Graham's wife Ruth suggested: "Hope for Pre-Trib, but prepare for Mid-Trib or Post-Trib". I find it a little hard to understand why Christians would be put through more horror than any other Christians in history by having to experience the Dispensationalist Theology future seven year tribulation just because they happened to be born at the wrong time. Is it just really back luck? Don't get me wrong, scripture is clear that God will be with and help any Christian who goes through a trial, including during the tribulation. But boy, talk about bad timing! Because of that, Pre-Trib or Mid-Trib with a rapture makes a little more sense to me.

Scripture says no one except the Father knows the time of Christ's return. If the tribulation is seven years long, it wouldn't be too difficult for a Christian who knows scripture and is living during the tribulation to approximately determine when the 3 ½ year or seven year mark is. In fact, the book of Revelation lists several events that are supposed to happen during the tribulation, so Christians living during that time could predict each one before they happened. Which doesn't make a lot of sense to me. That said, the Amillennial Perspective could possibly be true.

Anyhow, there's pretty good evidence for all four views, so personally, I think it's more important for me to understand all of the views rather than choosing one. Which I'd rather not do. That, by the way, was my primary motivations for writing this!

So although the timing and meaning of the tribulation is fun to discuss and debate, not everyone is going to agree on it, so it's ok to agree to disagree on it with other Christians. And this topic certainly should not divide believers.