

# Is the Great Tribulation

## Future or Fulfilled?



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William R. Kimball, president of "Disciples Indeed" Bible School in South Lake Tahoe, California, has written a book entitled *What the Bible Says About the Great Tribulation* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1983, paper, 291 pages). The book is primarily a study on Matthew chapter 24 and the author seeks to prove that the great tribulation (mentioned in Matthew 24:2 1) is not a future time of trouble but was fulfilled in history. He believes its historical fulfillment took place at the time of the Jewish war, around the year 70 A.D.

This is a common position taken by nondispensationalists. They do this in order to explain away a whole host of prophetic passages which they do not wish to interpret literally. Kimball is but one spokesman for the popular but erroneous view which says that the Great Tribulation has already been fulfilled in history in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. This paper was written not just to answer Kimball, but to answer all those who share this position with him.<sup>1</sup>

This same author, in 1985, wrote an attack against dispensationalism in general and against the pretribulation rapture in particular entitled *The Rapture-A Question of Timing* (published by Baker, paper, 193 pages).

The foundation of Kimball's system of eschatology is his teaching that the great tribulation is FULFILLED in history and not FUTURE. If this one point can be refuted from the Scriptures then this man's entire system of eschatology has nothing to stand upon. Therefore the purpose of this paper is to consider the question of the great tribulation and the timing of its fulfillment. Such a paper almost seems unnecessary to write since the answer to the question is so obvious to those who take God's Word at face value (it would be like writing a paper trying to decide if the second coming of Christ is future or fulfilled!). But the enemies of dispensationalism are producing volumes trying to demonstrate that the tribulation has already taken place in history, so it is needful to counter this with solid Biblical arguments. We will look at the question through different windows. A view through just one window might not be enough to convince certain people, but looking through many windows and seeing the same thing is quite compelling.

May we be guided by the God of truth and by the truth of God (his Holy Word) as we proceed:

## **1. Looking Through the Window of Israel**

In Jeremiah 30:7 the tribulation is considered from the nation Israel's point of view and is called "the time of Jacob's (Israel's) trouble." It is a unique time of trouble ("none is like it") just as our Lord said in Matthew 24:21. This cannot refer to 70 A.D. for two reasons:

1) the verse clearly teaches that in connection with this time there will be DIVINE DELIVERANCE ("he shall be saved out of it"), whereas the 70 A.D. invasion of Rome was a time of DIVINE JUDGMENT. Israel was judged but not delivered.

2) Jeremiah 30:8-9 (the verses which immediately follow) indicate that after this time of trouble Israel will no longer be in bondage but they will serve God and David their King. This was certainly not fulfilled after 70 A.D. but awaits millennial fulfillment. This passage teaches that tribulation (v.7) is followed by the kingdom (v.8-9) just as the dispensationalists teach.

Also Revelation 12 teaches that Israel, during the second half of Daniel's 70th week, will suffer intense Satanic persecution lasting 1296 days (v.6), "a short time" (v.12), 3½ years (v.14), and this time period is elsewhere said to be the time of the reign of the antichrist (Rev. 13:5 "42 months"). That this period must be future is proven by the simple fact that the antichrist will be destroyed when Christ returns (Rev. 19:20 and 2 Thess. 2:8). It is then that his reign will come to an end. Christ did not return in 70 A.D. His second coming is yet future.

## **2. Looking through the window of *Christ's* promise to the Church found in Revelation 3:10.**

If the tribulation spoken of in Revelation 3:10 refers to the great tribulation (as even posttribulationists such as Gundry would strongly admit), then it is impossible to say that the great tribulation occurred in 70 A.D. because the book of Revelation was not written until about 20 years later, and this "hour of temptation" is spoken of as a future event ("which *shall*

come upon all the world"). Thus the promise of exemption from this hour of testing which was made to the church of Philadelphia had reference not to 70 A.D. but to a future tribulation which would be world-wide in scope.

### **3. Looking through the window of the book of Revelation.**

Some try to say that the Book of Revelation was written in the reign of Nero prior to 70 A.D. If this were true, then it would be conceivable that the judgments and tribulations spoken of in the book of Revelation were fulfilled in 70 A.D. (though it is obvious to anyone who interprets the Revelation literally that those things mentioned in chapters 6 through 19 were never fulfilled in 70 AD. and have never yet been fulfilled in human history).

The evidence is clearly against the early date for the book of Revelation (see *Introduction to the N.T.* by Everett F. Harrison and *An. Introduction to the N.T.*, Vol. III by D. Edward Hiebert). It was the testimony of the early Church that the Apocalypse was written during the latter part of the reign of Domitian, who was emperor from A.D. 81-96. The earliest known witness is Irenaeus who wrote that John saw his visions "no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign" (*Against Heresies* 5.30.3). Irenaeus wrote some 85 years after the death of Domitian (see Hiebert, p.253).

But even if we were to accept the early date, we still could not accept the position which says that the described in the book of Revelation were fulfilled in 70 A.D. Let's take Revelation 13 as just one example. This chapter describes the following: 1) a political leader so powerful that no one can make war with him (v.4); 2) the forced worship of this man by all those who dwell on the earth (v.8); 3) a required mark received on the right hand or in the forehead (v.16); 4) those not having this mark unable to buy and sell (a situation which many feel would be impossible apart from 20th century computer technology). Who would dare say that any of these things have yet been fulfilled? And if they have not been fulfilled, then there must be a future fulfillment or else God would be a liar and the book of Revelation would not be true. The only other alternative would be to abandon the normal sense of language and make the words mean something other than what they say.

### **4. Looking through the window of the antichrist (the beast of Revelation and the man of sin of 2 Thessalonians).**

Kimball has little to say about the antichrist in his books apart from referring to dispensationalists as those who believe in a personal antichrist at the end of the age. But Revelation 13 and 2 Thessalonians 2 cannot be avoided. Even J.C.Ryle (not a dispensationalist), in commenting on Matthew 24 says, "I think it well to say, that Irenaeus, and Hilary among the fathers, and Ferus in the sixteenth century, all refer the fulfillment of this part of our Lord's prophecy to the end of the world, when a personal Antichrist shall appear. Hilary considers that the verse which speaks of 'the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place,' will be fulfilled by the rise of a mighty personal Antichrist, who shall be worshipped by infidels. In connection with this verse 2 Thessalonians 2:4 deserves attentive study" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, comments under Matthew 24:15-18).

The antichrist, the day of the Lord, and the tribulation all go together. Where the antichrist is, there you will find great tribulation. If the antichrist appears at the end of the age, then the tribulation must take place then as well! Proof that the antichrist appears at the end of the age

is found in the simple fact that the personal antichrist (the man of sin, the lawless one) is destroyed with the brightness of Christ's coming (2 Thess. 2:8 and Rev. 19:11-20). Christ did not come and the man of sin was not destroyed in 70 A.D. Nero may have been antichrist (against Christ and against believers) in many ways, but he was not *THE* antichrist

## **5. Looking through the window of Satan.**

Why is the great tribulation so great and terrible? This question is answered in Revelation 12:7-12. The devil is cast out of heaven for a period of 3½ years ("a short time"-v.12), and he comes down to the earth having GREAT WRATH (v.12, thus the GREAT TRIBULATION). The world will experience Satan's concentrated fury as it never has in the past ("WOE to the inhabitants of the earth!"-v.12). This time of Satan's fury is identical to the time that the beast is given power (Rev. 13:5). Indeed it is the dragon (devil) who gives the beast his power (Rev. 13:2). This period of the great tribulation for earth dwellers will end after these 3½ years when the beast is destroyed by Christ's coming (2 Thess. 2:8) and Satan will be bound in the bottomless pit or abyss (Rev. 20:1-3). The Roman invasion of 70 A.D. was a difficult time but not worthy to be compared to the future time of "great tribulation," the time of Satan's concentrated fury upon the earth.

## **6. Looking through the window of the abomination of desolation.**

The great sign of Matthew 24 is the abomination of desolation mentioned inverse 15. Kimball interprets this as the heathen (Roman) armies standing upon the sacred soil of Israel in 70 A.D. Kimball is correct in identifying the abomination of Matthew 24:15 with that mentioned in Daniel 9:27, but he is wrong in seeing both of these references as finding their fulfillment in 70 A.D. First of all, Daniel 9:27 is describing the 70th week of Daniel. The first 69 weeks (483 years) brings us to "the Messiah the Prince" (Dan 9:25), and these 483 years conclude prior to the crucifixion of Christ (the cutting off of Messiah--Dan. 9:26). The abomination of desolation takes place in the middle of the last week of seven years (Dan. 9:27). If there is no gap between the 69th and 70th week (as some non-dispensationalists believe) then the date of the abomination would be approximately 3½ years after the crucifixion. This would certainly not fit 70 A.D. chronology. Also, if the abomination of desolation took place in 70 A.D. as Kimball teaches, then according to Daniel 9:27 a treaty with Israel must have been signed 3½ years earlier. Is there any record in history of a seven year covenant having been made with Israel 3½ years prior to 70 A.D? Of course not. Kimball's theory does not fit the literal statements of Daniel's 70th week prophecy.

It should be obvious to any student of prophecy that the abomination of desolation is the great sign which marks the beginning of the last 3½ years prior to the return of Christ. The book of Revelation (which is God's commentary on Daniel) mentions this time period again and again: 1260 days (Rev. 12:6,14); 42 months (Rev. 11:2; 13:5); 3½ years (Rev. 12:14; Dan. 7:25; 12:7). This period of intense trouble and tribulation begins with the abomination of desolation (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15) and ends with the return of Christ (2 Thess. 2:8). Thus, according to the book of Revelation (which Kimball largely ignores), Daniel's 70th week is that seven year period immediately prior to the return of Christ.

Further proof is found in Daniel 12:11 which declares that there will be 1290 days from the abomination to the end (this includes the 3½ years plus 30 additional days). Would Kimball have us believe that the end of the world took place about 3½ years or 1290 days after the

Romans stood upon Israel's sacred soil in 70 A.D.? His view does not make sense (Kimball makes no mention of Daniel 12:11 in his book, avoiding data that conflicts with his prophetic theories).

## **7. Looking through the window of Christ's clear prediction.**

The Lord Jesus Christ did not leave us in the dark concerning the time of the great tribulation. He mentions this time of great tribulation in Matthew 24:2 1. He tells us that it will be a "short" time (Matthew 24:22) which is in harmony with all of the passages in Daniel and Revelation which speak of 3½ years (and see Rev 12:12 "a short time" which refers to this same 3½ year period). Christ then tells us in plain language that His coming will take place immediately after this great tribulation (Matthew 24:29-30). Thus we are told by the Lord that the great tribulation occurs immediately prior to His return, not in 70 A.D. nearly 2000 years before His return. This harmonizes with the book of Revelation which presents the tribulation in chapters 6-18 and the return of Christ in chapter 19. This harmonizes with 2 Thessalonians 2 which places the man of sin on the earth immediately prior to the coming of Christ. This harmonizes with the book of Daniel (especially Daniel 12:1-2) which places the tribulation just before the resurrection which takes place at Christ's coming. Even Kimball admits the force of this argument: "At first glance, the word 'then'(Mt.24:30) would seem to strongly suggest that the second coming was to follow immediately after the tribulation of those days".

But Kimball interprets it differently. He sees a great span of time (a gap) between Matthew 24:29 and 24:30 (nearly 2000 years). His order of events is this: 1) tribulation upon the nation of Israel, 2) followed *immediately*, by an extended period characterized by unrest and instability among the nations (his non-literal understanding of what happens to the sun, moon, and stars of verse 29), 3) *then* ending with the second coming of Christ in power and glory. It is interesting that those who accuse the dispensationalists of inventing a 2000 year gap for the church age can sometimes come up with some very impressive gaps themselves! The problem with this interpretation is that it takes away any meaning from verse 33. Christ was giving clear signals of His coming (see Matt. 24:3), but Kimball's scheme removes all these signs and says that there are no signs, and thus we can never know when He is near (v.33)! Kimball's view would also make Luke 21:28 meaningless.<sup>2</sup>

## **8. Looking through the window of Daniel's 70th week.**

This has already been discussed under point #6. Gleason L. Archer, in his commentary on Daniel in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Vol. 7), says this: "The reason for our detailed discussion of the six goals of Dan 9:24 is that the *terminus ad quem* of the 70 weeks must first be established before the question of the 70th week can be properly handled. If all 6 goals were in fact attained by the crucifixion of Christ and the establishment of the early church seven years after his death, then it might be fair to assume that the entire 490 years of the 70 weeks were to be understood as running consecutively and coming to a close in A.D. 37. But since all or most of the six goals seem to be as yet unfulfilled, it follows that if the 70th week finds fulfillment at all, it must be identified as the last seven years before Christ's return to earth as millennial King" (p.113).

Kimball, in his book, gives little attention to Daniel's 70th week and he does not discuss when this 7 year period begins and when it ends. This is typical of Kimball's writings. He deals with passages which tend to support his position but seems to conveniently ignore large portions

of prophetic Scripture which certainly have bearing on these questions but which do not harmonize with his system of eschatology. For example, in his book on the Great Tribulation, no mention made of Revelation 3:10 and very little is said about the rest of Revelation. Also 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 is basically ignored and hardly anything is said about a personal antichrist (except for the fact that dispensationalists seem to believe in such a person!).

### **9. Looking through the window of the resurrection,**

In Daniel 12:1-2 the great tribulation (v.1) is followed by the resurrection (v.2). This is in harmony with the Book of Revelation which also places the resurrection (chapter 20) after the tribulation (chapters 6-19). This is not in harmony with Kimball's system because it is obvious that no resurrection took place at or around 70 A.D.

### **10. Looking through the window of Israel's deliverance.**

Daniel 12:1-2 and Jeremiah 30:7 both speak of the great tribulation and both teach that Israel will be divinely delivered from this terrible time of trouble. Israel's great Deliverer did not come to the aid of His nation in 70 A.D., but Romans 11:26 teaches that Christ the Deliverer will come to deliver His people at the end of the age (after the fullness of the Gentiles has come in--Rom. 11:25). At this time the new covenant promises made to Israel will be literally fulfilled (Romans 11:27) according to the promises found in Jeremiah 31:31-34, which promises have never been disannulled (Jeremiah 31:35-37)! In other words, the great tribulation is immediately followed by God's deliverance (Dan.12:1; Jer. 30:7) which is brought about by the second coming of Christ (Rom. 11:27). The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was a time of God's judgment upon the nation, not a time of joyful deliverance.

### **11. Looking through the window of the uniqueness of the tribulation.**

The Bible repeatedly states that the great tribulation is a unique time of trouble such as has never been before and such as will never be in the future. Here are some examples: Matthew 24:21 "such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be"; Daniel 12:1 "a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time"; Jeremiah 30:7 "for that day was great, so that none is like it."

Was 70 A.D. really the worst time of trouble that Israel has ever experienced? Was it worse than what happened to that nation during the World War II under Hitler when millions of Jews were murdered? The Jewish war was a very difficult time for the Jewish nation as Kimball documents (quoting from Josephus, etc.) and perhaps it did rival the holocaust in its severity. However when the true great tribulation comes at the end of the age it will be foolish to even compare it with 70 A.D. or with the Second World War. It will be by far the greatest time of trouble the nation has ever known. It will be an unparalleled time of trouble. Because of the fury of Satan (Revelation 12) and the terror of the reign of the "beast" (Revelation 13), the future time of trouble will be far worse than what the Romans did in 70 A.D. and what Hitler did in the 20th century, as terrible as those days were.<sup>3</sup>

### **12. Looking through the window of the entire world.**

In the Jewish war, God used the Romans as His instrument of judgment against the nation Israel who had rejected their Messiah. The world at large was not involved, only the nation

Israel. It was a time of trouble for Israel, but not for all the other peoples of the world. This does not fit the descriptions of the great tribulation as given in the prophetic Word. The Bible says that this future time of trial will come upon All. THE WORLD (Rev. 3:10). The judgments depicted in the book of Revelation are worldwide in scope involving all the earth dwellers. See also Revelation 13:7,8,12,14,16 etc. Even Matthew 24 indicates that the whole world is in view, not just one nation (see verses 6,7,9,14,21 etc.). That which took place in 70 A.D. does not match the descriptions of the great tribulation which point to a world-wide time of distress.<sup>4</sup>

### **13. Looking through the window of religion.**

During the tribulation there will be a unique situation on the earth. There will be the forced worship of a man (Revelation 13; 2 Thessalonians 2) and this worship of the man of sin will be observed throughout the world and enforced by the death penalty (Rev. 13:15). The world has never known such a situation and certainly nothing like this took place in 70 A.D.).

### **14. Looking through the window of politics.**

During the tribulation there will be a one-world dictator such as the world has never known (Rev. 13:1-5). He will have complete political control over the world for 42 months. He will get his power and authority from the devil (Rev. 13:2-3). Today the balance of power among nations gives some measure of security and safety to the world, but in the future all power will be controlled by Satan's man. Nothing like this took place in 70 A.D.).

### **15. Looking through the window of commerce.**

During the tribulation some kind of "mark" will be placed on individuals and without this mark no one will be able to buy or sell. Before the 20th century it was hard to imagine how this could ever be. Today it is not difficult to understand how some kind of implanted computer chip technology could make Revelation 13:16-18 a reality. This was not fulfilled in 70 A.D. and this has never yet been fulfilled in history. Thus it must have a future fulfillment because "the Scripture must be fulfilled." Kimball and others can ignore such passages or can spiritualize them away or can mock dispensationalists for taking them at face value, but the fact remains that the day is coming when these things will come to pass just as the Scripture says.

### **16. Looking through the window of the nations.**

In 70 A.D. ONE NATION, Rome, came against Israel in judgment At the end of the age MANY NATIONS will gather together (Rev. 19:19; Psalm 2:2; Zech. 12:9). Zechariah 12:9 (as one example) was not fulfilled in 70 A.D.). but it will be fulfilled at the end of this age. The future great tribulation involves all of the nations, not just one nation.

## *CONCLUSION*

These sixteen windows, considered individually and taken all together, should provide ample evidence to show that the prophetic Scriptures point us ahead to a time in the future just prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ when the world will experience the greatest time of trouble that it has ever known. As believers in Jesus Christ we can rejoice that God will keep

us from that hour of trial that will come upon all those who dwell upon the earth (Rev. 3:10). Kimball's system of eschatology stands upon a foundation of sand. The entire house which he has built upon this foundation (such as his denial of the pre-tribulational rapture) is unsound and must fall.

<sup>1</sup> The following authors are examples of non-dispensationalists who believe the great tribulation was fulfilled in connection with the Jewish War during the first century A.D. Savid Chilton (*The Great Tribulation*), Kenneth Gentry (*The Best of Revelation*) and John L. Bray (*The Great Tribulation*).

<sup>2</sup> Kimball's position is clearly refuted in a doctoral thesis entitled *A Chronology of Matthew 24:1-44* by John F. Hart (275 pages, available through the inter-library loan from the Grace Theological Seminary Library, Winona Lake, Indiana).

<sup>3</sup> For example, under Hitler approximately one-third of the world's Jewish population was wiped out. During the great tribulation, two-thirds will perish (Zech. 13:8).

<sup>4</sup> See also Luke 21:25-26: "upon the earth... those things which are coming on the earth"; and remember these things will take place at the end of the age (Luke 21:28), not throughout the interadvent period as Kimball believes. True, men live in perplexity and fear today, but this is not worthy to be compared with the perplexity and fear that will overwhelm them in the coming days of vengeance.

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