

# The Biblical Case for Mid-Tribulationalism

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Jesus instructed the church that even He did not know the exact hour of His return (Matt. 24:36, Mark 13:32). The focus of the church should be preparing for the return of Christ rather than speculating when it might occur (Matt. 24:36-25:46, Mark 13:32-37, Luke 21:34-36). However, Christians have existential reasons for searching the Scriptures to discern hints concerning the events leading up to the second advent.

The mid-tribulational view advocated in this paper does not have a long history in the study of eschatology, but in recent years a number of respected conservative evangelical scholars have endorsed this perspective as the one most faithful to the scriptural record.<sup>1</sup> It is offered here with a great deal of epistemological humility, in light of the small number of people in the history of Christendom who have advocated this perspective, and in the spirit that is appropriate for all millennial or tribulational perspectives that would not claim to know more than Christ Himself claimed to know.

Allow me to explain how I came to this minority perspective. I was not taught the mid-tribulational interpretation in either church or seminary. Most of my teachers were either pre-tribulational premillennialists or post-tribulational amillennialists. Nor was I not persuaded of the mid-tribulational perspective by reading a compelling argument for it in a book or listening to a speaker. In fact, I had never even heard of the mid-tribulational perspective before I came to hold it. So, how did I come to hold that perspective? Some years ago, I was assigned to teach a class in Eschatology at a Christian college. At that point in time, although I was broadly premillennial (because that was the main perspective I had read and been taught, and I still affirm), I had not given great attention to researching it. However, I determined that I needed to be clear about my own eschatological perspective before attempting to teach the class. So I did a fairly exhaustive inductive Bible study of all the relevant Bible texts about eschatology. Then I tried to put down on paper how the various Scripture texts (especially in Daniel, the Olivet Discourse, Paul's epistles, and Revelation) organized the end time events. As I did so, I kept noticing a two-fold structure in each of these accounts, with a pause in the middle (see the outline of the ordering of

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<sup>1</sup> Conservative evangelicals who have supported versions of the mid-tribulational view include Gleason Archer, "The Case for the Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture Position," *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?*, ed. Richard Reiter (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984); Norman B. Harrison, *The End: Rethinking the Revelation* (Minneapolis: Harrison, 1941); James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963); and Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), who also cites Harold J. Ockenga as an advocate of the mid-tribulational view. However, as I'll note later, I came to this position simply from a straightforward reading of the Biblical texts, not from any of these authors. It was not until after I had already formulated this perspective directly from Scripture that I looked for and found other evangelicals who held similar (but usually somewhat different) perspectives.

these texts at the end of this paper). I was also struck by the repeated reference in eschatological passages to a time period of about three and a half years (Dan. 7:25; 9:24, 27; 12:7, 11-12; Rev. 12:14)<sup>2</sup>. Why this repeated specific time in both the Old and New Testament? So it seemed to me that the mid-tribulational view best accounted for and harmonized this biblical data, better than any of the alternative views (although not in exactly the same way as some of the mid-tribulational advocates whom I later read). Since coming to the mid-tribulational perspective, I have been surprised to find many other people who have independently come to that perspective. However, since mid-tribulationalism is such a minority view within Bible and Theology scholars throughout Christian history, I do not hold this view dogmatically, but with humility. I'll rejoice whenever the Lord comes for believers, but the biblical evidence leads me to expect a mid-tribulational rapture. I hope you'll find this evidence compelling as well.

### **Hermeneutical Presuppositions**

All millennial and tribulational views are based upon a particular set of hermeneutical presuppositions which inform those perspectives. The following are the hermeneutical presuppositions of this proposal:

- (1) All Scripture is divinely inspired. Therefore, all texts relevant to the tribulation will be given approximately equal weight, rather than relying on one passage alone.
- (2) All biblical prophecy is true. All the events described in biblical prophecy will come to pass, although their significance or proper interpretation may not be discerned by the people at that time.
- (3) Scripture is the best clue to interpret Scripture. Therefore, this study attempts to harmonize the key eschatological passages concerning the millennium and tribulation into a single synoptic picture.
- (4) There is an essential unity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. However, the New Testament eschatological accounts are more precise and detailed. Therefore, this perspective will attempt to harmonize the Old Testament and New Testament accounts. Old Testament prophecies will be viewed as having meaning within their own historical setting, but these prophecies may have a dual fulfillment or be typologically duplicated in later events. Greater predictive weight will be given to passages so understood by New Testament writers.
- (5) All biblical language has ontological referents; that is, the words point to realities beyond themselves. Therefore, while acknowledging the symbolism inherent in apocalyptic literature, this view assumes that even apocalyptic passages refer to realities rather than merely allegory, myth, or fable. The language should be understood by its plain sense

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase "time, times, and half a time" in Dan. 7:25, 12:7, and Rev. 12:14 is commonly understood to mean 3.5 years. Likewise, the "42 months" in Rev. 11:2 and 13:5 is also 3.5 years. The 1,290 days in Dan. 12:11 and the 1,335 days in Dan 12:12, though describing different specific timelines, also approximate 3.5 years.

meaning and in chronological order, unless clear markers indicate otherwise.

- (6) Biblical interpreters should put themselves under the authority of Scripture, rather than to impose an external agenda or pattern upon it. Therefore, this study will not impose the interpretive framework of any particular millennial view on Scripture, but will allow Scripture to speak for itself.

### **An Outline of the Mid-Tribulational View**

*This reading of the biblical accounts interprets the events surrounding the return of Christ to take place in this order:*

- (1) The events of the end will be preceded by the **signs of the end**, as indicated in the Eschatological Discourse (Matt. 24:1-18, 29-31; Mark 13:1-23, 24-27; Luke 21:5-24, 25-28). This twofold division is paralleled in both Daniel (Dan. 7:25, 9:24-27, 12:7-12) and in Revelation (Rev. 11:2-3, 12:6, 12:14, 13:5). The division in half is also represented by the distinctive narratives contained in the scroll (Rev. 5:1) and the little scroll (Rev. 10:1). The first scroll describes the signs of the end, in which the seven seals (Revelation 5-9) precisely parallel the signs of the end in the Eschatological Discourse; the little scroll describes the events of the end (Revelation 10-22).
- (2) The signs of the end will inaugurate the **tribulation**, described in Revelation as the seven seals and the seven trumpets (Revelation 5-9). The tribulation will involve suffering and difficulty for believers and unbelievers alike, although Christians will be spared the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9). This tribulation will last three and one half years (Dan. 7:25, 9:24-27, 12:7-12; Rev. 11:2-3, 12:6, 12:14, 13:5). It is possible that the three and one half years may symbolize an indefinite period, although the accounts seem to specify a very specific period even to the number of days. At any rate, there will be a period marked off for the tribulation.

Because the signs of the end are events that happen periodically to some degree at all times, the precise moment of the beginning of the tribulation will probably not be clear even to those who are undergoing it. The gradual worsening of events may be suggestive but not obvious that one is in the tribulation. We may be in the tribulation now. However, like a frog in a slowly heated pot, those undergoing the tribulation may not discern the meaning of the events. The beginning of the tribulation would not be clearly noticed, thus no one would be able to set accurately the date of the events of the end based on the date of the beginning of the signs of the end. Therefore, one should expect the **imminent** return of Christ at any time.

- (3) When all the signs of the end spoken of in all the eschatology passages (Daniel, Eschatological Discourse, Thessalonians, and Revelation) have been fulfilled, the **events of the end** will begin. The events of the end will be inaugurated with the shout of the archangel, the return of Jesus Christ in clouds with great glory, and the premillennial rapture of the church. The striking similarity of the language used and events described in Revelation 14, Daniel, the Eschatological Discourse, and 1 Thessalonians makes it clear

that this is the scriptural locus of the rapture.<sup>3</sup>

- (4) While the saints enjoy their rest, the bowls of wrath will be poured out on the unbelievers who remain on the earth (Rev. 14:17-18:24). This is the **Great Tribulation**, which will have many similarities to the plagues which were poured out on Egypt before the exodus. The Great Tribulation will last the second three and one half years, a length of time which may be literal or symbolic.
- (5) After the Great Tribulation, Christ will come again in the **second advent** to establish His **millennial reign**, perform the **final judgment**, and usher in the **eternal destinies** of heaven and hell.

### **Why Not Pre-Tribulationism?**

*Mid-tribulationists share in common many key beliefs with pre-tribulationists:*

- (1) Both views have a high view of the inspiration and authority of the Bible.
- (2) Both views affirm that believers will not suffer the wrath of God. Both mid-tribulationists and pre-tribulationists believe in a pre-Great Tribulation rapture (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10, 5:9).
- (3) Both views fit most naturally with a premillennial interpretation. Mid-tribulationism would require adjustments to fit with any popular millennial view, however, it would require less adaptation to match up with premillennialism.

*Mid-tribulationism differs from pre-tribulationism in the following key points:*

- (1) Mid-tribulationists affirm that it is a clear teaching of Scripture that although Christians will not experience the wrath of God, believers are not exempt from tribulation in this world (Matt. 5:11-12, 10:34-35, 24:1-31; Mark 13:1-27; Luke 21:1-28; John 16:33, 17:15; James 1:2-15; 1 Pet. 4:12-19). Mid-tribulationism could be described as “post-trib, pre-great trib.”
- (2) Mid-tribulationists understand the overwhelming majority of Christ's teaching to apply to the church, not merely to Judaism. Hence mid-tribulationists do not interpret Jesus' eschatological discourse (Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21) as applying only to the Jews, as do some pre-tribulationists. Equating the “elect” with only Israel in Jesus'

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<sup>3</sup> Some mid-tribulationists place the rapture at the sounding of the seventh trumpet (Rev. 11:15). They cite the evidence that in previous songs praising Christ, He has been described as “He who was, who is, and who is to come” (Rev. 1:4, 8; 4:8). Now the elders praise Him as “He who was, and is” (Rev. 11:17), suggesting that He has already come. The mid-tribulationist view, by placing the rapture in Revelation 14, likewise takes this verse as an accurate indication that the events being described in the immediate context suggest the events surrounding the return of Christ.

teaching in the eschatological discourse (Matt. 24:22, 31; Mark 13:20, 27) is inconsistent with His teaching in other parts of the gospels where statements addressed to the disciples clearly had the broader intent of addressing the church (Matt. 16:18-19, 18:18-20, John 17:20). It is also inconsistent with Paul's equation of the elect and Israel with the church (Rom. 2:28-29, 8:33, 9:6-8, Gal. 3:2). Since Paul wrote his Epistles at about the same time as the Gospel accounts, it would seem logical that he used the terms in the same way the Gospel writers did. Thus the church is best understood as being included in those that the Lord in the eschatological discourse warns will experience tribulation.

- (3) Mid-tribulationism provides a better explanation than pre-tribulationism of the persistent pattern in Scripture of dividing the end times into two major sections. In the prophecy of Daniel, the seven weeks (years) are divided into two halves (Dan. 7:25, 9:24-27, 12:7-12). There is a natural break in the chronological narrative of the eschatological discourse (Matt. 24:1-18, 29-31; Mark 13:1-23, 24-27; Luke 21:5-24, 25-28). George Eldon Ladd notes this distinction by describing the first section as the “signs of the end” and the second section the “events of the end.”<sup>4</sup> George Beasley-Murray likewise distinguishes between the earlier “tribulation” and the later “parousia.”<sup>5</sup> In Revelation, this division of time manifestly echoes the Daniel account (Rev. 11:2-3, 12:6, 12:14, 13:5). The division in half is also represented by the distinctive narratives contained in the scroll (Rev. 5:1) and the little scroll (Rev. 10:1). The first scroll describes the signs of the end (Revelation 5-9); the little scroll describes the events of the end (Revelation 10-22). Such a unanimous verdict in all the key eschatological passages suggests a major division in the end time events for which pre-tribulationism does not adequately account.
- (4) Mid-tribulationism provides a better synoptic account of all the relevant eschatological passages, as the chart provided suggests, than does pre-tribulationism. Mid-tribulationists do not read the rapture event into Rev. 4:1, as do many pre-tribulationists. The context of Rev. 4:1 contains none of the signs prophesied by the Old Testament prophets and by Jesus Himself. Where are the wars and rumors of wars (Matt. 24:7, Mark 13:7-8, Luke 21:9-11) in the context of Rev. 4:1? Where is the persecution (Matt. 24:9-14, Mark 13:9-13, Luke 21:12-19)? Where are the earthquakes and other dramatic upheavals in nature? Where is the removal of the one who restrains (2 Thess. 2:6-7)? Where is the sound of trumpets (1 Cor. 15:52, 1 Thess. 4:16)? Where is the preaching of the gospel to all nations (Matt. 24:14, Mark 13:10)? Where is the coming of the archangel with a shout (1 Thess. 4:16)? Where is the coming of the Son of Man in clouds with great glory (Dan. 7:13-14, Matt. 24:30, Mark 13:26, Luke 21:27)? None of these predicted events is present in Revelation 1-3, but every one of them is present in the immediate context leading up to Revelation 14: war, famine, and persecution (Rev. 6:1-11); dramatic upheavals in nature (Rev. 6:12-17); the sounding of

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<sup>4</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 201.

<sup>5</sup>See Moo's perspective in “The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position,” in *The Rapture*, ed. Richard Reiter, 177.

trumpets (Rev. 8-9, 11:15-19); the preaching of the gospel to all the earth (Rev. 11:1-14); the archangel coming with a shout (Rev. 12:7-12, 14:15); the restraint or removal of the one who restrains (Rev. 12:12, 20:2); and the coming of the Son of Man in clouds with great glory (Rev. 14:14).

Furthermore, Rev. 14:14-20 contains the symbolism of reaping absent in Rev. 4:1. Rev. 14 has two reapings: one for the saved (Rev. 14:14-16); and the other for those bound for wrath, utilizing the vineyard language which is consistently used in Scripture for judgment (Rev. 14:17-20). One could thus say that although many pre-tribulationists claim to have an exalted view of the inspiration of Scripture and a rather literal and chronological hermeneutic, placing the rapture at Rev. 4:1 is at least highly symbolic. Scriptural warrant is lacking to place the rapture at Rev. 4:1, because it does not fulfill the signs of the end predicted in Holy Scripture. Understanding the rapture as being described in Rev. 14 is more consistent with the hermeneutical principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture.

- (5) The radically futurist interpretation of Revelation made by pre-tribulationists makes the book of Revelation have virtually no meaning to the people of its day. Pre-tribulationists view only the first three chapters of Revelation as taking place in the era of church history, little of which related to the first-century church. What hope did those distant future events offer to John suffering exile on Patmos or to the other believers undergoing excruciating persecution? Pre-tribulationists tend to make the same hermeneutical mistake regarding Old Testament prophecy and the book of Revelation: their interpretation is so futurist it robs any real meaning of the message delivered to people in that time. If God's message offered hope primarily for people many centuries later, what hope did that offer to people centuries earlier? Why would God give them a message not relevant to them?

### **Why Not Post-Tribulationism?**

*Mid-tribulationists and post-tribulationists share in common the following beliefs:*

- (1) Both views share a high view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture.
- (2) Both views are easily adapted to some varieties of premillennialism, especially historical premillennialism.
- (3) Both views affirm that believers must go through a period of tribulation.
- (4) Both views reject the radical division of the church and Israel propounded by some pre-tribulationists.
- (5) Both views reject the radical futurist placement of the rapture in Rev. 4:1.

*Mid-tribulationists differ from post-tribulationists on the following points:*

- (1) Mid-tribulationalism affirms the clear scriptural teaching that believers will not suffer the wrath of God (Luke 21:36; Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10, 5:9), while post-tribulationalists affirm that believers will suffer being on earth while God's wrath is poured out. While Scripture allows that believers will undergo *tribulation* (θλ ῥψις) simply by virtue of being a Christian in this world (John 16:33), believers will not suffer the *wrath* (ἐργή) of God (Rom. 5:9, 1 Thess. 1:10, 5:9). The word θυμός (outburst of anger or wrath) is used nine times in the book of Revelation; in each case nonbelievers (not believers) are the object of this wrath (Rev. 14:8, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19:15). Likewise, the word ἐργή (settled wrath) is used of God twenty-seven times in the New Testament; in no case are believers the object of this wrath. However, of fifty-five times the word θλ ῥψις (tribulation) is used, forty-seven times this is an experience to be endured by believers. Scripture thus draws a clear distinction between *tribulation* and *wrath*. Post-tribulationalism does not adequately account for this distinction.
- (2) Mid-tribulationalism offers a better account of the scriptural division of the events of the end times in two halves than does pre-tribulationalism. Post-tribulationalists, like pre-tribulationalists, ignore or gloss over the precise language separating the signs and events of the end into two distinct periods.
- (3) Mid-tribulationalists take the rapture mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4 as a distinctive event, while post-tribulationalists view it as merely synonymous with the second coming of Christ. Since Scripture affirms that believers will not suffer the wrath of God, as explained above, the rapture is a logical necessity as well as a scriptural promise. Mid-tribulationalists claim the promise of Rev. 3:10: "Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth." Furthermore, Rev. 7:14 speaks of saints coming "out of the great tribulation." Both passages refer to believers coming "out of" (ἐκ) the trial of the great tribulation. What could these passages possibly mean, if not to suggest that believers will be taken out of this world during the time of great tribulation? Furthermore, the return of Christ in Scripture is not only for the saints but with the saints (Jude 14-15, Rev. 19:11-16). This would suggest that the saints were with Him in heaven.

The chart which follows this paper details a chronological, synoptic account of all the major Scriptures dealing with eschatology. This synoptic account of the signs and events of the end provides the most direct scriptural warrant for the mid-tribulational view.

### Conclusion

On the basis of the scriptural texts in the chart below, it seems evident that Revelation 14 is the appropriate scriptural locus for the return of Christ for believers. Only mid-tribulationalism adequately takes into account the sharp division in time emphasized in all the major eschatological passages. Mid-tribulationalism appears to provide the most synoptic account that best harmonizes the chronological pattern in Scripture of all the signs of the end and events of the end prophesied in the major eschatological passages. On the basis of this argument, given our limited knowledge, a mid-tribulational rapture of believers appears to be most consistent interpretation of the scriptural accounts. However, none of us knows the day or the hour of the

Lord's return, and the most important thing is to be ready whenever the Jesus does return. Even so, come Lord Jesus!

### THE SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR THE MID-TRIBULATIONAL ACCOUNT

<i>Event of the Eschaton</i>	<i>In the book of Revelation</i>	<i>In the Eschatological Discourse and Other New Testament Passages</i>	<i>In the Old Testament</i>
<b>The throne, the scroll, and the Lamb</b>	Revelation 4-5		
<b>The Signs of the End begin: The First Seal -- the white horse of conquest</b>	Revelation 6:1-2	Matthew 24:7, Mark 13:7, Luke 21:9	
<b>The Second Seal -- the red horse of war</b>	Revelation 6:3-4	Matthew 24:7, Mark 13:8, Luke 21:10	
<b>The Third Seal -- the black horse of famine</b>	Revelation 6:5-6	Matthew 24:7, Mark 13:8, Luke 21:11	
<b>The Fourth Seal -- the pale horse of death</b>	Revelation 6:7-8	Matthew 24:7, Mark 13:8, Luke 21:11	
<b>The Fifth Seal -- persecution</b>	Revelation 6:9-11	Matthew 24:9-14, Mark 13:9-13, Luke 21:12-19	
<b>The Sixth Seal -- earthquake, moon turns red, stars fall, sky rolls as a scroll, people run to the mountains</b>	Revelation 6:12-17	Matthew 24:15-29, Mark 13:14-25, Luke 21:29-28	Joel 2:10, 3:15-16; 3:30-31; Zechariah 1:14-18
<b>Interlude -- the sealing of the 144,000</b>	Revelation 7:1-17		
<b>The Seventh Seal -- the seven trumpets</b>	Revelation 8:1-9:21	1 Corinthians 15:51, 1 Thessalonians 4:16	Exodus 7-10
<b>Interlude -- the angel, the little scroll, and the two witnesses</b>	Revelation 10:1-11:14	1 Thessalonians 4:16	
<b>The Seventh Trumpet -- the 24 elders sing</b>	Revelation 11:15-19	1 Thessalonians 4:16	
<b>Michael the archangel defeats the dragon</b>	Revelation 12:1-17	1 Thessalonians 4:16	Daniel 12:1-2
<b>The beast enacts the abomination of desolation for 42 months</b>	Revelation 13:1-18	Matthew 24:15, Mark 13:14, 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4	Daniel 7:25, 9:27; 11:31; 12:11
<b>The Events of the End begin: The Mid-Tribulation Rapture</b>	Revelation 14:1-16	Matthew 24:30-31, Mark 13:26-27, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17	Daniel 7:13-14
<b>The Seven Bowls of Wrath -- God's wrath poured out on unbelievers</b>	Revelation 14:17-18:24		Exodus 7-10
<b>The Second Coming, Final Judgment, and Eternity</b>	Revelation 19:1-22:21		Amos 9:13-15, Micah 4:1-8

