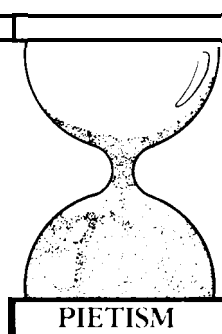


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## THE GREATNESS OF THE GREAT TRIBULATION

(Part 7 of a Survey of Matthew 24:1-36)

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The most sophisticated argument presented against the **preterist** interpretation of Matthew 24:1-34 is contained in the classic words, "Yes, but. . . ." In this case the "but" is **invariably** followed by a reference to Matthew 24:21-22, which reads: "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened."

Let us consider some of these "Yes, but" arguments and then expose them to the light of Scripture. All of these are taken from contexts dealing with Matthew 24:21-22.

### "Our Tribulation is Bigger than Your Tribulation"<sup>1</sup>

Charles C. Ryrie argues: "the fact that this period is yet future will be even more evident as the characteristics of the period are given . . . . First, it is a unique **period**."<sup>2</sup> Then he cites Matthew 24:21.

Gleason L. Archer points to our text as indicating "a level of horrible and overwhelming destruction surpassing anything ever known **be fore**."<sup>3</sup>

Douglas Moo comments that it is "the greatest distress in world **history**."<sup>4</sup> Who would argue that A.D. 70 was the greatest distress in world history, considered simply in terms of human loss?

Charles L. Feinberg speaks of World Wars I and II, then asks, "who can legitimately equate them with . . . Matthew 24:21?"<sup>5</sup> The indication being that if two world wars did not meet up to Matthew 24:21, surely the Jewish War with Rome did not.

David L. Turner writes that "the stress on the unparalleled nature of this judgment (24:21-22) does not seem to be exhausted by the A.D. 70 destruction, as severe as it was."<sup>6</sup>

John F. Walvoord loves writing about the Great Tribulation more than anyone other than Hal Lindsey. He calls it a "time of unprecedented trouble," a trial that "would exceed any judgment of the past or the future." In fact,

"never in the history of the world has there been destruction of human life described **here**."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, "the trials and cliff **iculties** of that day would be so severe that it would exterminate the entire human race if it were not for the fact that they are cut short by the return of Jesus **Christ**."<sup>9</sup> "Interpreted literally, the tribulation clearly eclipses anything that the world has ever known by way of **destruction**."<sup>10</sup>

### "Where Shall I Begin, to Tell the Story of How Great a Tribulation Can Be?"<sup>11</sup>

The Lord does say there "has not been [such a judgment] since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be." His warning speaks of the danger "no flesh would be saved." How are we to reconcile such dramatic statements to the A.D. 70 event? As a matter of fact, reconciliation is possible. And such is much more consistent with the Scripture than the futurism of dispensationalism.

### The Time Frame

First, Christ *did* say "all these things" will happen to "this generation" (Matt. 24:34). And He *did* say this in the context of dealing with the destruction of the very Temple then standing (Matt. 23:36-24:3). We know as a matter of indisputable historical fact that the Temple was destroyed by Titus' August, A.D. 70, siege of the Temple.<sup>12</sup> As Jesus bears His cross to Calvary He exhorts the "daughters of Jerusalem" to weep for themselves because of this coming judgment (Luke 23:28-31, cp. Rev. 6:16). Revelation mentions the Great Tribulation (Rev. 7:14) in a similar time-constrained context (see: Rev. 1:1, 3; 22:6ff.).

### The Jewish Setting

Second, we must understand this passage from the Jewish perspective in Christ's day. The Jewish War with Rome from A.D. 67 to 70 brought about the deaths of tens of thousands of the Jews in Judea, and the enslavement of thousands upon thousands more. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who was an eye-witness, records that 1,100,000 Jews perished in the siege of Jerusalem. J. L. von Mosheim wrote that "throughout the whole history of the human race, we meet with but few, if any, instances of slaughter and devastation at all to be compared with this."<sup>13</sup>

8. *Ibid.*, p. 556.

9. John F. Walvoord, *The Nations, Israel, and the Church in Prophecy* (3 vols. in one: Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 2:110.

10. *Ibid.*, 3:129.

11. Sung to the tune of Andy Williams' "Love Story." Usually played in the key of G-Whiz, at Rapture parties such as those held under host, Edgar C. Whisenant.

12. Josephus, *Wars* 7:1:1.

13. John Laurence von Mosheim, *Historical Commentaries on the State of Christianity* (New York: Converse, 1854), 1:125.

1. My title for this issue is borrowed from my book, *The Greatness of the Great Commission*, and is used by permission of myself. If you do not believe me, just ask me.

2. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1953), p. 141.

3. Gleason L. Archer, in Archer, et al., *The Rapture: Pre, Mid, or Post-tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 109.

4. Douglas J. Moo, in Archer, et al., *The Rapture*, p. 165.

5. Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (3rd ed: Chicago: Moody, 1980), p. 167.

6. David L. Turner, "Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments," *Grace Theological Journal* 10:1 (Spring 1989) 13.

7. John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), 00.521. 564.

But as awful as the Jewish loss of life was, the utter devastation of Jerusalem, the final destruction of the temple, and the conclusive cessation of the sacrificial system were lamented even more. The **covenantal significance** of the loss of the temple stands as the most dramatic outcome of the War. Hence, any Jewish calamity after A.D. 70 would pale in comparison to the redemptive-historical significance of the loss of the temple.

Josephus laments the absolute destruction of Jerusalem in several places, with words similar to our Lord's: "Whereas the war which the Jews made with the Romans hath been the greatest of all those, not only that have been in our times, but, in a manner, of those that ever were heard of" (*Wars*, Preface, 1). "The misfortunes of all men, from the beginning of the world, if they be compared to these of the Jews, are not considerable as they were" (*Wars*, Preface, 4). "Neither did any other city ever suffer such miseries. . . from the beginning of the world" (*Wars* 5:10:5).

### The Divine Perspective

**Third**, we must understand the significance of the event from the divine perspective. It must be regarded as the holy judgment of God<sup>14</sup> for the wicked crucifixion of His Son by the Jews.<sup>15</sup> This is clear in the Parable of the Vineyard, which ends: "Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vine-dressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-dressers? They said to Him, 'He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vine-dressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons'" (Matt. 21 :37-41).

See also Luke 19:41-44: "Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation.'"

### The Noahic Flood

**Fourth, just a few verses after Matthew 24:21-22, the Lord mentions the Noahic Flood (w. 38-39), which actually did destroy the entire world, except for one family. Even the dispensational statements above see their Great Tribu-**

**lation** as stopping far short of leaving only *one family* alive!

Christ's language is *not* meant to be taken literally. It is dramatic hyperbole, justified by the gravity of the situation. Not every Jew was killed, but its devastation was such that had God not limited it,<sup>16</sup> then surely *all of Israel* would have been totally destroyed (cp. Matt. 24:22).

### Prophetic Paralance

**Fifth**, this unique-event language of Christ is fairly common stock-in-trade terminology in prophetic writing.<sup>17</sup> The Old Testament has a number of such statements, which support our view that the language is hyperbolic.

Regarding the woe of the tenth plague upon Egypt, the Scripture says: "Then there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, *such as was not like it before, nor shall be like it again*" (Exe. 11 :6). According to **dispensationalists**, the Great Tribulation **affects the entire earth**; consequently, it affects Egypt. But this passage says Egypt will *never again* experience such a terrible event as the tenth plague!

In a prophecy regarding the Babylonian captivity and the destruction of Jerusalem, God employs language reminiscent of Christ's. "And I will do among you what / *have never done, and the like of which I will never do again*, because of all your abominations" (Eze. 5:9). Even **dispensationalists** admit this prophecy is about the Babylonian captivity of the distant past!<sup>18</sup> And this is specifically about Jerusalem, which is very prominent in the Matthew 24 passage.

Daniel speaks of the Babylonian captivity in similar language. "And He has confirmed His words, which He spoke against us and against our judges who judged us, by bringing upon us a great disaster; for *under the who/e heaven such never has been done as what has been done to Jerusalem*" (Dan. 9:12).

Clearly, the unique-event language is common parlance in prophetic literature. It is not to be pressed literally, as is evident from the all the evidence above.

### Conclusion

You have heard it said by them of Dallas: "The Great Tribulation looms in our near future and there has been nothing like it. Our future prospects are lamentable." But Christ says unto you about the Great Tribulation: "This generation [in which I live] will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled" (Matt. 24:34).

Why halt ye between two opinions: If dispensationalism be correct, then go sit ye upon a mountain and lament. But if preteristic postmillennialism be right, then go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding (Matt. 22:9).

14. My understanding of Revelation is that it represents God's divorce decree against Israel (Rev. 4-5), her judgment has an adulteress wife (Rev. 6-19), and God's turning to take a new bride, the New Covenant Church (Rev. 20-22). See: Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Christ Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, forthcoming), ch. 17 and *The Divorce of Israel: A Commentary on Revelation* (forthcoming).

15. So emphasized in the New Testament. The Jews were responsible: Acts 2:22-23; Acts 3:13-15a; Acts 5:30; 7:52; 1 Thess. 2:14-15. They demanded the Romans crucify Him: Rev. 17; Matt. 20:18-19; 27:11-25; Mark 10:33; 15:1; Luke 18:32; 23:1-2; John 18:28-31; 19:12, 15; Acts 3:13; Acts 4:26-27.

16. It was limited to three and one-half years: Spring A.D. 67-August/September A.D. 70. See my *The Beast of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

17. This issue was a major point in an informal debate I had with futurist postmillennialist Willard Ramsay, author of *Zion's Glad Morning*. If interested, send \$5.00 for a tape to me at: 124 Meadowbrook Dr., Mauldin, SC 29662.

18. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, p. 160. Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 180. Charles "Babylon" Dyer, "Ezekiel," in Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), p. 1236.