

Do Christians have to go through the seven-year tribulation?

Paul wrote to the church in Thessaloniki about the return of Jesus because some believed that the return of Jesus had already taken place. Many thought Nero was the Antichrist and that the persecution of Christians was a sign that the tribulation had already begun. Paul writes: "Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him [in the air], we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled ... as though the day of Christ had come" (2 Thess 2:1-9). The day of Christ is the return of Jesus at the end of the seven-year tribulation when Jesus returns to the Mount of Olives with his saints and destroys the Antichrist with the breath of his mouth (verse 8). But the Antichrist cannot come until the one who hinders his coming is taken away (verse 7).

"And now you know what is holding him [the Antichrist] back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming" (verses 6-8).

Who is the one who is holding the Antichrist back and preventing his appearing? It is the body of Christ on earth. Jesus said the gates of hell would not prevail against the church. That means as long as the body of Christ is on earth, we hold the darkness back and prevent the Antichrist from appearing and being revealed. The Antichrist spirit has already been here for 2000 years and Satan has always tried to take on world dominion, but the body of Christ is the resistance that keeps evil in check.

When the one who holds the Antichrist back is taken away, evil can develop to the full. That means that first the rapture of the body of Christ must come before the Antichrist can take over the world and rule.

Paul writes about us being caught up together with Jesus in the air (1 Thess 4:17; 2 Thess 2:1), which has to take place first, and then the man of lawlessness will be revealed (2 Thess 2:3). The age of the church began in Acts, chapter 2, and ends in Revelation, chapter 3, with the rapture of the church. After chapter 3, the church is no longer on earth but in heaven. Then comes the seven-year tribulation, which ends with the return of Jesus on the Mount of Olives. The devil is waiting for the day of the rapture so that he can take dominion here on earth. Jesus will first come for his church (in the air) and seven years later he will come back with his church to the Mount of Olives, destroy the Antichrist and his followers, and the 1000-year reign will begin. The church first has to be taken away before the last seven years for Israel begin, which Daniel prophesied about. 490 years are decreed for Israel, the angel says to Daniel (Dan 9:24). Until the Anointed One, the Messiah, is killed (crucifixion) there would be 483 years (verse 26). After that came the age of the church, which will end with the rapture of the church. Then begin the last seven years before the 1000-year reign.

Luther translated the Greek word "apostasia" as falling away. "that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed," (2 Thess 2:3). This word "apostasia" means: separation, leaving, departure. Here, in this context, it means the body of Christ being taken away from the earth. Paul is speaking in this chapter about the rapture of the church, about us being taken away and meeting Jesus in the air. The rapture has to happen first and then the Antichrist will come to rule for seven years. That means that during the Great Tribulation we will not be on earth but in heaven. Every country calls its citizens and ambassadors back when there is a threat of war. God does the same for his children before he judges the godless. He did it for Noah and for Lot. The return of Jesus is the living hope that we have. We are not waiting for the Antichrist and the Great Tribulation. That would be no comfort. We are waiting for the return of Jesus, for the rapture. "Therefore comfort one another with these words," Paul writes (1 Thess 4:18).

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