

Are We Living in the Time of the End? (Part 1)

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Our study this week and next will focus on those Scriptural terms and phrases which pertain to the end of time. There are many. In fact, that very phrase “end of time” is one of them. We believe that we are living in the times which the Bible describes as the “last days,” and that it behooves us to be acquainted with the timeline which God has so graciously given to us to keep us informed. God wants us to know the basic framework of what is going to take place. Things are happening so fast today that you can hardly keep up with them. I hear newscasters asking questions like, “What is going on?” and saying things like, “The world is falling apart.” Yes, things are going to get worse before they get better.

We believe that it’s important not only to be aware of these things, but to know that above all God is still in charge on the throne of the universe and that He has a plan for this planet. He never intended there to be sorrows and pain, and He has pledged that once this era of sin is over, “affliction will not rise up a second time.” Nahum 1:9. The word “affliction” in that verse is one we’re going to see often in our study today, most often translated “tribulation” in the New Testament. Meanwhile, we each have a choice as to which side of the conflict we will place ourselves; on the side of the Creator God, or the side of the arch-rebel Satan. This conflict began in heaven, was transferred to this earth and now is reaching its conclusion. God will not allow sin to reign forever; He must deal with it.

He has given us the Holy Bible, the Book above all books, to know Him, His plan and His timeline. To this “prophetic Word” we do well to take heed, as unto a light that shines in a dark place until the day dawns. Because there are so many different translations today, I’m going to select the King James Version to be the source of the terms and phrases we are going to study this week and next, which are: the “tribulation,” “perilous times” the “time of the end,” the “last days,” the “sealing,” the “time of trouble,” and “Jacob’s trouble.” In addition to these, we will also find that there are other terms and phrases that we’ll discuss which are associated with these.

We begin with the term “tribulation,” or “great tribulation,” a word coming from the Greek *thlipsis* meaning “pressure” or “affliction.” It is, as noted, the word “affliction” in the LXX of Nahum, which God says will not rise again. This term is used in two different ways in the New Testament. It can mean tribulation in a general way, as in Jesus’ words, “In the world you will have tribulation.” John 16:33. Paul strengthened his converts with the counsel, “We must through

many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” There are a handful of texts which include the word “tribulation” in this general sense, speaking to the afflictions which have tried the hearts of God’s people throughout the ages.

There is also a specific use of the term “tribulation,” referring to a specific time period or event. Of this usage, we find three examples in Scripture. Revelation warned the church of Smyrna, which represented the Christian church from 100 A.D. to 313 A.D., that there would be “ten days” (10 literal years) of tribulation through which they would pass. This was fulfilled during the horrific persecutions of the Emperor Diocletian, from 303 A.D. to 313 A.D, just before Constantine gained the throne and Christianity became recognized as a “legal” religion by the empire.

This ten-year period represented the last convulsion, the death throes of Satan’s attempt to eradicate Christianity through paganism. Following this, there would be a radical shift in the devil’s strategy. Seeing that the persecutions coming from “outside” failed to yield the result he desired, the devil would change his tactics and work from within the Church. That these last persecutions, under Diocletian, were unspeakable is confirmed by the fact that at the convening of the Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325, many of 300 or so delegates bore the physical reminders of that persecution. If you glanced about the room where the representatives met to answer questions dealing with the nature of Christ, your eyes would have been met by the maimed limbs and blinded eyes that testified to the persecutions sponsored by pagan Rome. Those ten last years of Diocletian’s reign represented one specific period of “tribulation.”

We find the word “tribulation” being applied to two other periods of time. Jesus spoke of the “great tribulation,” representing the persecutions of the dark ages. Sweeping through the centuries in His Olivet discourse, He discussed the fall of Jerusalem and the need for believers to leave the city when the appointed sign was seen. Then He said, “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.” Matthew 24:21. He was referring to the great period of papal persecution which lasted during the middle ages, the seven-time mentioned 1260 years of prophecy. It was greater than anything seen before or after in its duration. Keep that thought in mind as we compare another period later in our study. However, in mercy, this period of persecution was shortened, according to the words of Christ, because of the influence of the Reformation and before the close of the period, in 1798, the fires of persecution had waned.

How do we know that He was speaking of the middle ages? We are given a clue as to where to plot this period of time by the words of Christ later in Matthew 24. He went on to say these key words, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven.” Matthew 24:29. We know that the date for the famous “dark day” was May 19, 1780 and the date for the falling of the stars was November 13, 1833. Therefore this period of “great tribulation,” to which Christ referred occurred prior to those events. The period of persecution which took place during the middle ages constitutes the “great tribulation” of Matthew 24.

A third period identified as being a “great tribulation” is brought to view in Revelation chapter 7. John was taken in vision to see the final outcome of the great conflict. He wrote, “Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, ‘Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?’ And I said to him, ‘Sir, you know.’ So he said to me, ‘These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living waters.’” Revelation 7:13-17.

From the context, it seems clear that this “great tribulation” is at the very close of time. The passage contains clues that suggest that these have survived the 7 last plagues, one of which will give the sun power to scorch with great heat; hence the reference “the sun shall not strike them.” We’ll reserve the discussion of this period of “great tribulation” to a little later in our study. So we see “tribulation” used in a general way, as well as referring to three specific time periods.

Next on our prophetic time-line is the phrase, the “time of the end,” which is not to be confused by the phrase “the end of time.” This phrase is found twice in the last chapter of the book of Daniel, where we read, “‘But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.’ And he said, ‘Go your way, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end.’” Daniel 12:4, 9.

Can we know when this “time of the end” begins? Yes. Just after Daniel was told to seal the book until the “time of the end,” he heard the question asked, “‘How long shall the fulfillment of these wonders be?’ Then I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, when he held up his right hand and his left hand to heaven, and swore by Him who lives forever, that it shall be for a time, times, and half a time; and when the power of the holy has been completely shattered, all these things shall be finished.” Daniel 12:6, 7. Accordingly, the “time of the end” begins at the close of the “time, times and half a time,” or the 3 ½ years of symbolic prophecy.

This period of “time, times and half a time” is the same as the 1260 days and the 42 months in prophecy, a period of time mentioned no less than 7 times in the Bible. Because in symbolic prophecy a day is equivalent to a literal year (Ezekiel 4:6; Numbers 14:34), this represents the 1260 year time period of papal domination that lasted from 538 A.D. and ended in 1798 A.D. During this time period, it certainly became true that the “power of the holy people” was “completely shattered.”

The victims of the papal sword, rack and stake number in the uncounted millions. Because the separation of time and geography dim the reality of those horrors, we may not have an accurate picture of the things that took place back then, but you may be certain that the flames of the Inquisition brought these words into living color. We’ve just learned that some fighters captured by the forces favorable to Colonel Qaddafi in Libya are being tortured before they are killed. Terrible. During the middle ages, the bodies and bones of millions were literally shattered by the

rack and the wheel and other unspeakable instruments of torture. This word “shatter” in Daniel 12 is very descriptive. It is the Hebrew word *naphats*, used in the intensive (*piel*) form, and means “to dash or beat in pieces, to spread out.”

We get a picture of this word from a psalm that recalls the invasion of ancient Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. “O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed, happy shall he be who repays you as you have served us! Happy shall he be who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock.” Psalm 137:8-10. Notice the parallel: what ancient Babylon did in Daniel’s day was copied by papal Babylon during the middle ages. In a similar parallel, we could also say that what civil Rome did under Diocletian in the “ten days” was replicated by papal Rome during the “1260” days. They “shattered” the holy people during the long centuries of the 1260 year time period. In place of the word “shattered,” the KJV says, “scattered.” Both are true. The power of the papacy both “shattered” and “scattered” the holy people. Most of us have no conception of what happened back then in the name of religion. The papacy today presents an affable appearance, but her robes cover the blood of the saints.

Here’s the point. Since the close of that great prophetic period, the 1260 years, since the date of 1798 when that period came to a close, we have been living in what the Scriptures define as the “time of the end,” a time especially dedicated to focusing on the completion of God’s great plan for Planet Earth. We’ve been living in earth’s “two minute warning.” From that point on, God has wished to especially place the spotlight on the nearness of His coming and the importance of being ready for it. It was shortly after the close of this period in 1798 that Bible societies were formed, the British Bible Society in 1804 and the American Bible Society in 1816. Through these agencies copies of the Scriptures were translated and sent throughout the world.

In this “time of the end” following the conclusion of the 1260 year prophecy, those remaining prophecies of Daniel which had been sealed up would be opened. Many would “run to and fro” throughout the Scriptures and “knowledge (of prophecy) would be increased.” It was only a few years after this that God raised up William Miller to preach the prophecies and proclaim the nearness of Jesus’ return.

Along with Miller, but coming from completely independent backgrounds, were Lacunza, of South America, a former Jesuit who found his way to Bible truth and preached Christ’s Second Advent; Dr. Joseph Wolff, who ministered to Europe but was known as the “missionary to the world,” who heralded the Second Coming; Bengel of Germany and Gausson of France and Switzerland. These and many others preached the soon coming of Jesus, a teaching which had been largely discarded by the popular preachers. God wanted to spread the news that Jesus was about to come back! Since 1798 we have been living in “the time of the end.”

We’re prepared to equate the phrase “time of the end” with the phrase “last days,” as used by Peter, Paul and James. Notice the characteristics that pertain to the “last days” as analyzed by these apostles. I believe you’ll find them to be a very accurate description of today’s world. Peter wrote, “Knowing this first; that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own

lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.' For this they willfully forget; that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water." II Peter 3:3-6. Peter brings to light the second great geological event of Genesis, the flood, and tells us that the challenge to this event will predominate and be a characteristic of the "last days."

Do we find this to be true? Yes it is! Speaking of the argument of the skeptics, he uses the phrase "all things continue as they were," which could be described as "uniformitarianism." What this word means is that we can measure age by assuming the rate of change has always been uniform. If, for example, you notice that a tomato plant is growing at a rate of ½ inch per day, and it's now 15 inches tall, you might guess that it's been growing about a month. Uniformitarianism is based on the assumption of a uniform rate of change. Its particular application has to do with guessing how old the earth is and how the changes in earth's topography were accomplished. This term teaches that we can judge the age of the earth, not by taking into account the catastrophic event of the Flood, but by extrapolating changes as we see them now and going backward, working by the principle that change has been "uniform."

When did this concept come into being? This is interesting! Toward the end of the 18th century (notice the date!), in 1785 to be exact, Scottish geologist James Hutton presented some new ideas at the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He postulated that the earth was much older than the time line represented by Scripture and that what we see in the earth's topography was not carved by a world-wide flood, as the Genesis story reveals, but instead he suggested that earth's formations were the result of long periods of slow geological changes. Later in 1832 the term "uniformitarianism" was coined by William Whewell. Peter's phrase "all things continue as they were" could be a working definition for that term. It was birthed in the "last days."

Hutton challenged the existence and effect of the biblical flood, which was the model that had been accepted for centuries. He postulated that slow changes were a preferable explanation for the condition of the earth and not supernatural intervention. However, his radical ideas didn't gain much traction until Sir Charles Lyell, a lawyer, 45 years later wrote the three-volume work, Principles of Geology, in which he affirmed the concepts of Hutton, rejecting the Bible's information concerning the Flood.

The effect of these ideas on the soon-to-be-born theory of Evolution is immeasurable. The foundation having been laid to discard the Scriptures and the influence of the divine, Darwin and others went on to dismantle the entire biblical presentation of the origin of life and its Creator. Peter's words could not have been more accurately fulfilled! Precisely in "the last days," that time period which came into being in 1798, "scoffers" came rejecting the Scriptural story of the deluge. "For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water." Amazing!

Notice the inference in Peter's statement. Look at this carefully. He actually equates the philosophy of the scientists before the flood with the scientists of the last days. What did the scientists say when Noah preached that a flood was coming? They said, "That's impossible. It's never rained." They said, "all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation." They believed in uniformitarianism. But they were wrong. God intervened and the rate of change was drastically altered, and their assumptions were washed away. Peter is saying that there will be a revival of that way of thinking and that it will be a characteristic of the last days. The flood story will be rejected. There will be no place given to divine intervention. The Scriptures will be discarded. What Peter said has become too true.

Paul also used the phrase "last days." Writing to his young intern Timothy he said, "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. From such turn away." II Timothy 3:1-5.

Have these things existed before? Yes. But in these last days, in the earth's final moments as God is pushed farther and farther away, these satanic character traits will become more and more dominant. Do we see this today? Yes, sad to say. You could take just about any one of those traits and do a study on how modern society reflects Paul's prophecy. "Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God:" How many people today will think nothing of spending precious dollars, sometimes hundreds of dollars to spend 3 hours or so at a sporting event, sitting on a hard seat with boisterous language surrounding them, paying extravagant prices for refreshments, but would find it a hardship to worship the Lord on a comfortable pew for a similar period of time followed by a delicious fellowship meal. The stadiums seem to be filled while the churches seem to be empty. The most prized seats at the sporting event are the closest and a premium is paid to get a field level box seat. At church, sometimes it seems that the seats at the back are the most coveted.

James used the term "last days" to describe conflict between labor and capital. "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth." James 5:1-4.

Do we see conflict between labor and capital as a characteristic of society today? Have you seen what's been happening in Wisconsin lately? In Indiana? Next Sabbath we'll continue our study of the Bible terms that relate to the end of time. The good news is that God's plan for this planet is coming to completion. Everything on His timeline has been fulfilled or soon will be. Back in Egypt, it might have been sad to see the effects of the plagues as they struck the land, but in the mind of the Israelites it meant only one thing: "'this' is really happening. God is fulfilling His promise. Soon

we'll be leaving here." The words of Jesus were, "When you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near." Luke 21:31.