

## Dispensations, Part 4

### The End of the Church Age

Much of the following material is derived from a study by Dwight Pentecost of Dallas Seminary and his book, *Things to Come*.

We have been discussing the Church Age, also known as the Age of Grace. With this new age, God changed the way He related to man. He transitioned from interacting with mankind through a rigid set of rules known as the Mosaic Covenant or Law of Moses, where daily righteousness was to be achieved through human effort to keep these Laws, to a new system in which righteous living is made possible through faith and God's grace available through the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is a benefit not available to believers in previous dispensations except for a select few.

Yet, even with the presence of that power source in the indwelling Holy Spirit, man failed to fully utilize it and live righteously. By disregarding the reality of nature as displaying God's Person and glory, mankind fails to give God His proper place, which results in greater degradation of mankind.

**Romans 1:18** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

<sup>26</sup> For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; <sup>27</sup> and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. <sup>28</sup> And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. <sup>29</sup> They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup> Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Self-righteousness and pride can lead to a failure to believe or trust in the gospel message (Acts 26:28, Romans 10:2). Additionally, the refusal to recognize one's need for deliverance or divine salvation may stem from various sins that contribute to a hardened heart (Hebrews 3:7-11). As a result, individuals may refuse to believe and must face the consequences (John 8:24).

Corporately, nations fail due to the large number of people who, in rejecting the gospel for themselves as individuals, allow evil to grow (Matthew 13:31-33), resulting in the moral, social, and political disintegration of society (Proverbs 28:5, 29:16, Isaiah 5:20).

The Church Age began shortly after the Cross on Pentecost in AD 30, interrupting the Age of Israel with one "week" remaining in the countdown of Daniel's Seventy Weeks prophecy. With man failing the grace test and that failure resulting in a degenerate society that perverts the intentions of God, the Church Age concludes with an event known as the Rapture or the Resurrection of the Church, when born-again believers, as opposed to nominal Christians, are taken from Earth to be with the Lord forever. Meanwhile, the apostate church of nominal Christians is left behind to endure the trials of the Tribulation as God resumes His dealings with Israel and fulfills Daniel's Seventy Weeks prophecy.

## What is the Rapture?

In the Rapture, Church Age believers are taken away in a supernatural event, as the dead in Christ are resurrected and living believers are called out to join our Lord in the clouds.

**1 Thessalonians 4:16** For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words.

We exchange our physical bodies for incorruptible bodies.

**1 Corinthians 15:51** Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. <sup>53</sup> For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

There are four schools of thought regarding when the Rapture occurs.

- 1) Pre-Trib – Before the Tribulation starts
- 2) Mid-Trib – Approximately at the midpoint of the Tribulation
- 3) Post-Trib – At the end, just before Christ's Return (Second Advent)
- 4) Multiple Raptures – Several Rapture events occur primarily during the Tribulation.

The correct answer is number 1, a Pre-Trib Rapture, which I will attempt to demonstrate here with the help of Dr. Pentecost. The true Church is removed before the Tribulation begins. With the Church, the Bride of Christ, taken to be with the Lord forever, God returns to dealing with Israel again.

## The Tribulation

Most Christian denominations subscribe to a Tribulational period in some form. Many believe the Tribulation is historical and concluded with events related to the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70) and early church persecution. This

view must “spiritualize” the events associated with the Tribulation and seen in Revelation. Since they cannot be found in history, they are seen as allegorical rather than literal. Since the Book of Revelation foretells these events, it necessitates assigning a date of writing before AD 70 when Jerusalem fell, while all evidence indicates a much later date, usually around AD 90-93. If the Tribulation is past history, then we are currently in what is referred to as the Kingdom Age (also known as the Millennium). The Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations adhere to this theory.

Most evangelical Protestant denominations view the events of the Tribulation as both literal and future, primarily because they believe the Bible should be interpreted literally unless there is clear contextual evidence to suggest otherwise.

While there are differences of opinion, the Tribulation is generally characterized as follows:

- 1) Since the Church has been removed, the Tribulation begins populated entirely by the unregenerate.
- 2) The Antichrist seeks to establish a one-world government.
- 3) The Jewish people will be targeted for destruction.
- 4) It is a time of judgment when God judges the unbelieving world: Jew and Gentile.
- 5) The false religious systems of the world are ultimately revealed for what they truly are: inspired by Satan.
- 6) It ultimately shows that the only way to live is through a personal relationship with Christ and that we need Him.
- 7) It lasts for about seven years.
- 8) This is a time when God’s wrath is unleashed upon the unbelieving world. Some perceive the first half as relatively normal, while the second half is seen as more wrathful. However, Scriptural evidence indicates that the entire period is filled with wrath.
- 9) A significant event occurs at the midpoint: the antichrist erects a statue of himself in the new Temple in Jerusalem and demands worship as God.
- 10) It concludes with the victorious return of Christ and the defeat of Satan’s forces.

- 11) Then, we have judgments in which Jesus distinguishes believers from unbelievers, separating the “sheep from the goats. ” Only the sheep will enter the final dispensation, the Kingdom Age/Millennium.
- 12) This is followed by the earthly reign of the Lord of Lords and King of Kings during the Kingdom Age, which lasts for 1,000 years. The Jews view this period as more eternal than limited to 1,000 years, and that is because the 1000 years extend into eternity following the creation of the new heavens and new earth at the end of the Millennium. That detail is part of the *musteron* revealed only to the Church.

I would add several other points.

- 1) The true Church will be removed and will not endure this period. The true Church consists of born-again believers from the Church Age – those who have placed their faith in Christ as the sole means of salvation and are not relying on any personal works to make salvation possible. Faith alone in Christ alone!
- 2) The nominal church (in name only) will experience the Tribulation and even play a major role aligned with the Antichrist.
- 3) The true Church will be in Heaven during the Tribulation, experiencing its own judgment known as the Bema Judgment.
- 4) The true Church will return with Christ at the Second Advent.

A key passage about these future events is found in the Old Testament, Daniel 9:20-27, known as the Seventy Weeks Prophecy. In this prophecy, Daniel receives a vision concerning “his people” (verse 24), referring to the Jews in Babylonian Exile. The vision reveals a series of times hacks and events associated with them. We have discussed this in a previous session, so I will only summarize it here.

**Daniel 9:24** “Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. <sup>25</sup> Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with

squares and moat, but in a troubled time. <sup>26</sup> And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. <sup>27</sup> And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.”

“His people” have seventy weeks remaining to put an end to rebellion, to bring sin to completion, to atone for iniquity, to bring in perpetual righteousness, seal the prophetic vision, and anoint a most holy place. “Seventy weeks” refers to groups of seven years, which can be weeks of days or weeks of years. The latter is the only interpretation that makes sense of the prophecy. If “seventy sevens” is seen as seventy groups of seven years, the prophecy remarkably aligns with historical events.

The seventy weeks are divided into three distinct periods: seven weeks (49 years), sixty-two weeks (434 years), and one week (7 years). Daniel states that from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem, which was destroyed by the Babylonians, there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks until the Messiah comes.

Three decrees to rebuild Jerusalem were issued, but only one resulted in work beginning and being completed: that of Artaxerxes in 445 BC. Exactly 49 years later, the Temple was completed and dedicated, and Jerusalem was considered rebuilt. Sixty-two weeks (434 years) later, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to fulfill the second part of the prophecy!

Daniel states that after the sixty-two weeks, the Messiah will be cut off (killed), and the "prince of the people who shall come will destroy the city and the temple." Jesus was crucified, and forty years later, in AD 70, the Romans under Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, leaving "not one stone upon another," just as Jesus predicted.

We have a literal seven weeks and a literal sixty-two weeks, but not a literal one week from the death of Messiah to the destruction of Jerusalem, so the

historical interpretation of the Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations must be wrong.

If the seventieth week has not yet occurred, then it must still be in the future. The period we are currently in, the Church Age, interrupts the Seventy Weeks. This occurred because Israel rejected their King and, consequently, the promised Kingdom. Thus, God is calling out a people of His own from among the Gentiles. There will be Jews who come to Christ during the Church Age, but the Church is distinctly Gentile focused, while the previous age is distinctly Jewish. Daniel's prophecy concerns Israel and not the Church.

The Church is never mentioned in the Old Testament, and Paul refers to it as a *mysterion* (mystery) in his writings. The Church Age is first mentioned only in the very last part of Jesus' ministry when He refers to the "mystery." (Romans 11:25; 16:25; 1 Corinthians 15:51; Ephesians 3:1-9; among others). The Church Age was "kept secret since the world began" (Romans 16:25). This is why Daniel was not shown the Church Age in his vision; he was presented only with the seventy weeks and not the inserted Church Age. We refer to the seventieth week as the Tribulation, and most of the Book of Revelation pertains to it.

On the Day of Pentecost, following the Cross, the Age of Israel was interrupted, and the Church Age began. God still owes Israel seven years.

The Bible is full of symbolism. In the last session, we examined the steps in a traditional Middle Eastern wedding in the first century and how they related to the Church.

The mechanics of a Middle Eastern wedding differ significantly from ours today. The process consists of three parts:

- 1) Betrothal - The wedding was arranged by the parents, the dowry was agreed upon and paid, and a contract was signed. The couple was considered legally married at this point, and only a writ of divorce based on adultery could dissolve the marriage. Remember how Mary was pregnant *before* Joseph had been "with her," and he considered divorcing her quietly because she could have been stoned for adultery.

- 2) The Bridegroom departs and returns to his father's house to prepare a place for his bride. He is only allowed to go get his bride when his father declares all is ready. The groom does not know when that permission will be given.
- 3) The Bridegroom arrives for his bride at a future date, which may be months or even up to a year after the betrothal. He comes with his wedding party, accompanied by shouts and the blowing of a ram's horn. He calls for his bride to come out to him, and then takes her to his father's house to consummate the marriage and celebrate with a wedding feast.
- 4) The marriage is consummated, and after seven days of seclusion, the couple presents themselves to the guests for the wedding feast.

The Church is said to be the Bride of Christ. The betrothal is analogous to the Church Age believer accepting Christ as their personal Savior. The believer becomes contractually bound to the bridegroom. The groom stealing away his bride and taking her to his father's house symbolizes the Rapture of the Church. Jesus stated that he would go away to prepare a place for us and return to receive us (John 14:1-4). The seven days of seclusion mirror the seven years of the Tribulation. The wedding supper represents the Millennium when Jesus will reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords after He has revealed His bride at the Second Advent.

This suggests that the bride is removed and taken to a place of safety (the Father's house) but is revealed at the Second Advent, which will end the Tribulation and begin the Kingdom.

#### Other Arguments for a Pre-Tribulation Rapture:

- 1) The Second Advent is described as having many signs to watch for, while the Rapture is seen as imminent, with no signs provided as warnings. It will arrive suddenly. Therefore, the doctrine of the imminence of the Rapture prohibits the Church from participating in any part of the Seventieth Week.
- 2) The Restraint is removed during the Tribulation (2 Thessalonians 2:15-16). There currently exists a level of restraint on Satan and evil; however, we are told that this restraint will be lifted, allowing evil to act unrestrained. Some suggest that the "Restraint" refers to government, law, or the visible church, but all three will still be



present during the Tribulation. The “Restrainer” signifies the active ministry of the Holy Spirit within *believers*, who serve as the Temple of the Holy Spirit during this age and will be removed at the Rapture.

- 3) The necessity of an interval between the Rapture and the Second Advent – The word *apantésis* (to meet) in Acts 28:15 implies the idea of meeting and returning with. Some argue that its use in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 necessitates an immediate return, suggesting a Rapture right before the Second Advent, but the Greek word does not require such an interpretation, and events following the translation make the insertion of an interval between the two events necessary.
  - a. The judgment seat of Christ, where Church Age believers will be evaluated,
  - b. The Marriage of the Lamb.
- 4) Passages like 2 Corinthians 5:9; 1 Corinthians 3:11-16; and Revelation 4:4, 19:8, 14 indicate that the Church has been examined and has received her rewards prior to the Second Advent. A certain period of time is necessary for this.
- 5) Revelation 19:7-9 indicates that the consummation of the union between Christ and the Church precedes the Second Advent.
- 6) Differentiation between the Rapture and the Second Advent
  - a. The Rapture involves the removal of all believers, while the Second Advent involves the revealing of the Son.
  - b. The Rapture involves the Saints being caught up in the air, while the Second Advent witnesses Christ returning with them in glory.
  - c. In the Rapture, the Groom comes to claim His bride; in the Second Advent, He returns with His Bride.
  - d. The Rapture involves the removal of the Church, while the Second Advent signifies the establishment of the Kingdom.
  - e. The Rapture offers a message of comfort, whereas the Second Advent presents one of judgment.
  - f. The Rapture remains a mystery, whereas the Second Advent is detailed in both Testaments.
  - g. The Rapture pertains to the Church, whereas the Second Advent pertains to Israel. The Tribulation serves as a continuation of the Age of Israel, as outlined in Daniel 9:24-27.
  - h. At the Rapture, believers are judged, while at the Second Advent, Jews and Gentile unbelievers face judgment.

- i. The Rapture is exclusively for believers, whereas the Second Advent is intended for all mankind.
- j. The Church expects to be taken into the Lord's presence at the Rapture, while Israel expects to be taken into the Kingdom at the Second Advent.

### **The Twenty-Four Elders**

In Revelation 4:4, we are given a vision of twenty-four elders seated on thrones, clothed in white, crowned with golden crowns, and in the presence of God in Heaven. Some argue these are angels, but that cannot be true, as this description does not apply to angels. Sitting on thrones and wearing white denotes righteousness and royal dignity. The crowns (*stefanos*) are crowns of reward, like the laurel crowns awarded to athletes, not crowns of rulership. The number 24 symbolizes the priesthood; the Levites had 24 orders, and only the Church is referred to as a Royal Priesthood (1 Peter 2:5, 9). These twenty-four represent the Raptured, evaluated, and rewarded Church in Heaven.

### **The Thessalonians**

The church in Thessalonica faced intense persecution very early on and was worried that the Tribulation had begun and they had missed the Rapture. Paul's letters reassure them that this is not the Tribulation and they have not missed the Rapture.

### **Guidance Absent in the Epistles**

If the Church were to experience the Tribulation, the epistles would have offered some guidance on how to deal with it. None is provided.

### **The Two Witnesses**

Two witnesses will emerge during the Tribulation, and their message, attire, character, and assumed identities appear connected to Israel.

### **The Destiny of the Church**

The destiny of the Church is said to be heavenly with all her promises seen as heavenly, while Israel is said to be earthly (Matthew 25:24).

### **The Remnant at the Second Advent**

Passages indicate that there will be a remnant of believers on earth at the Second Advent. If believers are raptured at the Second Advent, how can there still be believers remaining?

### **The Chronology of the Book of Revelation**

Chapters 1-3 illustrate the development of the Church in the present age. Chapters 4-11 discuss the events of the Seventieth Week and conclude with the return of Christ in 11:13-18. Chapters 12-19 also survey the Seventieth Week, this time revealing the actors on the stage. This renders a mid-Trib Rapture impossible and allows for only a pre-Trib Rapture.

### **The Object of the Satanic Attack During the Tribulation**

The only organized church mentioned during the Tribulation is the apostate Jezebel system (Revelation 2:22) and the harlot system (Revelation 17 and 18). There is no reference to the true church as distinct from this apostate system. If it were present, it would need to be considered part of the apostate system and subject to the same judgments. However, faithful witnesses are said to have kept themselves from defilement. Since the true church is not mentioned, we must conclude that these are believers who come to Christ *after* the onset of the Tribulation; they are separate from the apostate church, indicating that the true Church is not present.

### **The Church Is Not Appointed to Wrath**

Revelation 3:10 states, "I will keep you from the hour of temptation..." The Greek does not say "during" or "through" the hour of temptation; instead, it says "*from*" the hour of temptation. This distinction is determined by the use of the Greek word "*ek*," which means "out from."

1 Thessalonians 5:9 states, "God has not appointed us to wrath...." This passage contrasts light and darkness, and a comparison to Joel 2:2, Zephaniah 1:14-18, and Amos 5:18 will identify "darkness" as the Seventieth Week.

### **Conclusion:**

The evidence strongly supports the notion that the Tribulation signifies a time when God returns to dealing with Israel, as indicated by Daniel's Seventy Weeks vision. Israel and the Church are two distinct entities in God's plan, each having its own economy. Israel is not the Church, and the

Church is not Israel. Indeed, there are Gentile believers during the Age of Israel and Jewish believers during the Church Age. Both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed that the “Kingdom is at hand.” Following that rejection, God intervened in the Age of Israel to call a people of His own from among the Gentiles. Once that group is complete, which we cannot know when, Jesus will come for His bride, the Rapture, and take us to His Father’s house for the wedding. Then Christ and His bride will be revealed at the Second Advent.