“The Tribulation of the Last Days”
Mark 13:14-23

The second coming of Jesus Christ is perhaps the most perplexing and intriguing subject in all of Scripture. For the church, the return of Christ is nothing to fear but is referred as our blessed hope. On the other hand, for those who do not believe the gospel, the second coming of Jesus is indeed a fearful truth.

Up until this point in the Olivet Discourse, Jesus has given His disciples a telescopic view of at least twenty centuries between His first and second coming, which has proven to be a time of mounting pressure and deception. Now beginning in verse 14, Jesus now begins to describe that final time period of human history known as the end of the age. He describes for us in horrific detail a future time of trouble and trial that is coming upon the world, the likes of which has never before been seen.

This is perhaps the most remarkable passage of the Olivet Discourse in which Jesus describes the time known as the Great Tribulation.

Before we get into the passage, I think it will be helpful for us to keep in mind that there are differing viewpoints of how things will unfold in the last days. There are three major positions that believers hold to when it comes to eschatology and the subject of Christ’s return and future kingdom—premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism.

Those who are premillennialists hold that Christ will come before a seven-year period of intense tribulation to take His church (living and dead) into heaven. After this period of fulfillment of divine wrath, He shall then return to rule from a holy city over the nations for one thousand years. After these thousand years, Satan, who was bound up during Christ's earthly reign, will be loosed to deceive the nations, gather an army of the deceived, and take up to battle against the Lord. This battle will end in both the judgment of the wicked and Satan and the entrance into the eternal state of glory by the righteous. This view is called premillennialism because it places the return of Christ before the millennium.

The postmillennialist believes that the millennium is an era (not a literal thousand years) during which Christ will reign over the earth, not from an literal and earthly throne, but through the gradual increase of the Gospel and its power to change lives. After this gradual Christianization of the world, Christ will return and immediately usher the church into their eternal state after
judging the wicked. Thus, the world will be an increasingly better and bright place. This is called postmillennialism because, by its view, Christ will return after the millennium.

The amillennialist believes that the Kingdom of God was inaugurated at Christ’s resurrection at which point he gained victory over both Satan and the curse. Christ is even now reigning at the right hand of the Father over His church. Thus, the 1000 years of Revelation is symbolic of Christ’s reign in the present church age. Satan is now chained. After this present age has ended, Christ will return and immediately usher the church into their eternal state after judging the wicked. The amillennialist interprets much prophecy non-literally.

The majority of evangelical Christians hold to the premillennial understanding of end-time prophecy, including myself. I believe that a literal future kingdom on earth is the most faithful way to approach the promises that God made to Israel in the Old Testament, and I believe that much of the Olivet Discourse as well as what John records in the book of Revelation describes the tribulation period that will be experienced on earth before Jesus comes to establish His kingdom.

When you look at what Jesus says here as well as what is said in other passages of Scripture about this future time of tribulation, a sobering picture emerges that should capture the attention of every single human being. The final days of earth’s history will be dreadful as God pours out His wrath on an unbelieving world dominated by sin and Satan.

There are three major characteristics of the tribulation of the last days according to what Jesus says here in verses 14-23.

1. **The DEFIANCE of the man of sin**

   “But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”

   Jesus tells His disciples that the tribulation will be marked by an individual referred to here as the abomination of desolation. This phrase comes from the book of Daniel where it is used some three times to refer to a coming world leader who is referred to in other places as the man of sin, the beast, and the antichrist.

   “Abomination of Desolation” - the sign of a man who offers himself to the Jews to be worshiped as God
Jesus says that the definite signal that all these things are coming to pass will be the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy concerning this abomination that causes desolation. There is a parenthetical remark here in the verse that says, “Let the reader understand.” The idea behind this is that the meaning of this text goes beyond what is obvious, going beyond the disciples themselves and speaks to a future generation of readers who will see these events unfold before their very eyes.

The word used for ‘abomination’ refers to something that is vile and disgusting, something that is blasphemous, and is detestable to God.

**John MacArthur** - “What Jesus is describing is a monstrous abomination that causes great desolation. The desolation itself is not what is intrinsically abominable, but the abomination—something like an act of gross idolatry—results in widespread devastation and ruin, most likely by launching a war.”

To understand this more clearly, we need to see what Daniel says. What the book of Revelation is to the New Testament, the book of Daniel is to the Old Testament. No book of the Old Testament has been more criticized and scorned by critics and liberal scholars than Daniel. The entire book is set amidst some fascinating prophecies about the rise and fall of world empires, such as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. The details given in the book of Daniel are remarkable and include prophecies that were fulfilled to the letter. In fact, the pinpoint accuracy of those prophetic passages in Daniel is one of the reasons critics attack it, insisting that it could not really have been written by Daniel during the years of Jewish captivity. The rationale is that because of its accuracy, it had to be written by someone else at a much later time.

Jesus frequently quotes from the book of Daniel, and His very title for Himself, ‘Son of Man,’ comes from Daniel and is a reference to the Messiah who is coming to rule and reign.

This sign that Jesus refers to here, the abomination of desolation, is mentioned three or four times in Daniel. It is first mentioned in the eighth chapter of Daniel in reference to a king who would arise and persecute the Jews, which many believe to be a reference to Antiochus IV of Syria who was of the Seleucid dynasty that ruled after the Greek empire was divided into four parts.

When Antiochus IV stopped the daily sacrifices in the temple and substituted pagan worship, this was called the “abomination” or the transgression that makes desolate according to Daniel.
Antiochus IV is a foreshadowing of the Antichrist to come. Daniel goes on to mention some things about him. In many ways, the antichrist to come, the man of sin, will follow the same pattern of Antiochus in the way that he will oppose God’s people and exalt himself as God in the very temple of God. Daniel tells us about:

His foretold arrival

Daniel 9:24-27 - “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. 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. 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. And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to the 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 wicked character

Daniel 11:36-39 - “And the king shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods. He shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished; for what is decreed shall be done. He shall pay no attention to the gods of his fathers, or to the one beloved by women. He shall not pay attention to any other god, for he shall magnify himself above all. He shall honor the god of fortresses instead of these. A god whom his fathers did not know he shall honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts. He shall deal with the strongest fortresses with the help of a foreign god. Those who acknowledge him he shall load with honor. He shall make them rulers over many and shall divide the land for a price.”

His ordained destruction
Daniel 12:11-12 - “And from the time that the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up, there shall be 1,290 days. Blessed is he who awaits and arrives at the 1,335 days.”

The apostle Paul tells the church in 2 Thessalonians that this coming “man of sin” will one day step onto the scene:

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 - “Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.”

All of these prophetic passages in Daniel, as well as what Jesus says in the gospels, what Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians, and what John writes in Revelation, these specify that one day, a ruler will step onto the world’s stage who will defy the one true Living God, bring desolation in his wake, and persecute God’s people. Jesus tells his disciples here that the appearance of that man on the world scene is the sign of the end of the age.

2. The DISTRESS of all creation

“…then let those in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be.”

As with much of biblical prophecy, there is an element of both an immediate and future fulfillment. During the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., nearly 40 years after Jesus’ words here in the text, many of the Jews literally did hide in the mountains and remote areas outside of Jerusalem. Eusebius, one of the early historians, said that when the tenth Roman legion descended upon the city of Jerusalem, many of the Jews and early Christians fled the city.

According to Luke’s account, Jesus says:

Luke 21:20-24 - “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let
those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infancy in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

The idea is that during the Tribulation period, life on earth will be extremely difficult, especially for the nation of Israel. Jesus says, “Make haste! Flee before it is too late!”

The coming Tribulation will be a time of unprecedented horror that is coming upon the whole world as God pours out His wrath on the antichrist and his wicked system. It will be a time of unparalleled corruption and chaos that will be unleashed upon the world as Satan prepares for his final assault on the people of God before Jesus returns to establish His kingdom.

The situation will be so dire that when the abomination of desolation occurs, the people of God should flee without the slightest hesitation. Delay will prove to be costly as every second will count.

Matthew 24:21 - “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.”

Many have scoffed at Jesus’ words down through the centuries. They've tried to explain them away, having thought it an incredible thing that any event could create such a global upheaval.

For years, scholars and critics alike scoffed at the prospect of a “Doomsday Scenario.” Yet in our time, it is something that even most unbelieving people deem credible, if not even highly likely.

Have you ever heard of the “Doomsday Clock?”

The Doomsday Clock was created by the board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in 1947 as a response to nuclear threats. The concept is pretty simple—the closer the minute hand is to midnight, the closer the board believes the world is to disaster. The clock was originally conceived by a group of atomic scientists who had been involved with the Manhattan Project, which produced the first nuclear weapons. The scientists regularly produced a bulletin detailing
progress and updates in nuclear weaponry and the clock was first designed as an illustration for the cover of the first bulletin.

In 1991 at the end of the Cold War, the clock was moved back to 17 minutes until midnight. You ask, “Where is currently set?” Last year’s Doomsday Clock was stuck at 3 minutes to midnight due to what scientists determined as “unchecked climate change, global nuclear weapons modernisations, and outsized nuclear weapons arsenals,” all of which apparently posed “an extraordinary and undeniable threat to the continued existence of humanity.”

I’m glad the world’s existence is not up to a group of scientists sitting in some board room talking about the minute hand on a hypothetical clock. We believe there is One in heaven who is sovereign architect over the affairs of mankind.

The world is on His clock, on His timetable, and not its own!

Jesus has clearly given the world a warning, and yet many refuse to heed the warning. Thus, our responsibility as the church is to declare the gospel and make disciples among the nations with urgency!

3. The DELIVERANCE of God’s elect

“And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom He chose, he shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ Or, ‘Look, there He is!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.”

The picture that Jesus paints of the tribulation of the last days is painted in the darkest tones possible. The world we live in has experienced its share of crises and catastrophes, but nothing will even begin to compare with what is coming.

Jesus says that unless the days were shortened by God’s providence, no flesh on earth would be saved.

“Shortened” - means to end abruptly or stop instantly

This is for the sake of His elect, a reference to Israel and those who come to faith in Christ during the Tribulation.
Revelation 7:9-14 - “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’…Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’”

The final years on earth before Jesus returns to establish His kingdom will be marked by terrifying events—persecution, deception, destruction, and global upheaval. And yet the Bible says that there will be a countless multitude of people who will come to Christ during those days. Thus, for the sake of His elect, God shortens the days. In wrath, He remembers mercy.

What are some general principles that we should remember about the tribulation period to come?

- Don’t be distracted, but be comprehending
- Don’t be discouraged, but be confident
- Don’t be deceived, but be careful

The world is headed for a confrontation with the full fury of the wrath of God. The Bible warns humanity to flee the wrath which is to come. Yet those who trust in Jesus Christ have nothing to fear! Paul encouraged the church in Thessalonica:

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 - “For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”