

WHY SHOULD WE STUDY THE TRIBULATION?

By Steve Schmutzer

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In my role as a teacher, I get asked a lot of questions, and here's one. It's asked various ways, but it's basically this: *"Why should we study The Tribulation if we as Christians won't experience it?"*

I believe problems arise if we assign value to the study of certain doctrines or portions of scripture, based on whether we believe we will or won't experience the circumstances of a particular text.

I'll begin high-altitude here.

First, this sort of rationale runs the risk of regarding much of the Word of God as irrelevant. If one believes in the pre-trib Rapture as those who ask this question do, then *any* element of Scripture which finds fulfillment after the Rapture could be conveniently set aside. *"We'll be with Jesus! Everything will be great for us then, so what does it matter what comes next, right?"* I've heard people say these things.

Secondly, this posture steps into a tar pit of uncertainty. Since the Rapture is imminent, no specific event must occur before it can take place, so there's no way to know when the Rapture will happen. Which Scriptures are worth studying now, and which ones are not? Anyone's guess is as good as the next person's.

Thirdly, it's not just future things which are vulnerable to this pattern of flawed thinking, but also past events. For example, none of us were around when Creation took place. Maybe we should just ignore this whole topic of Scripture too - and most of the Old Testament. We weren't present for any of that either.

Finally, the notion that it's unnecessary to study anything we will not directly experience unwraps the double standard of many who feel this way. To illustrate, genuine Christians will participate in the future Millennial Kingdom when Christ physically reigns on earth. But most Christians choose to ignore this doctrine entirely - or they twist it to mean something else. This is intellectual inconsistency.

If this all feels ridiculous, it's because it is!

Qualifying Scriptures based on whether we will or won't be around to experience what's being discussed is immature and irrational. I don't plan to be in hell, but I do my best to be informed

about it. What we have in the Bible is what God wants us to have, and what we have is what He wants us to study and understand.

Now let's be candid. This question about studying The Tribulation exposes another layer of important issues below that absurd stuff. These deeper issues should be much more convicting to all of us.

My overarching concern is this: Any rationale which gives priority to some Scriptures over others has the net effect of devaluing the entire Word of God. According to God's own words revealed in 2 Tim. 3:16, the standard is set; ALL Scripture is essential and profitable. ALL of it is also eternal (Psalms 119:89; Isaiah 40:8), powerful (1 Thess. 1:5), and complete (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19), among other virtues. The moment we elect to assess the Bible by human sensibilities is the moment we've decided the immeasurable attributes of God are best defined by a box.

Failure to regard God's Word as we are instructed to regard it remains one of the easiest traps to fall into, and it's been happening for a very long time. Remember, the serpent asked Eve, "Did God really say....?" (Gen. 3:1). The seed of doubt was planted and it found root. Things went downhill for her and all the rest of us from there. To doubt the intent and benefit of God's standards is to place one's own spiritual welfare at risk.

Grading the relative importance of scripture is a dangerous exercise that pits man's foolishness against God's wisdom. Unfortunately, this practice is much more commonplace in our churches than we realize, and here are a few ways it shows up:

ASSUMING CERTAIN BIBLICAL DOCTRINES ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN OTHERS.

While I feel that the doctrine of Salvation holds value that the doctrine of demonology for example, does not, my greater concern is how some people feel it's within sound judgement to make sweeping and careless claims. Here are three comments I found from discussion forums which illustrate my point:

"How we view pre-trib or post-trib beliefs or when we think Jesus will come has NOTHING to do with salvation. So my question is, why even bother with any of it?"

"It's not important if some people believe God used evolution to create us. Science irrevocably proves that evolution played a significant part somewhere. What matters is Jesus died for our sins and that's all that matters."

"The church is new Israel, and the 'land' is its spiritual blessing. The Jews are no more special to God than anybody else. Some Christians wouldn't be so narrow minded if they would focus on the NT and understand how everything changed for all of us after the cross."

Unfortunately, these statements express views that are not uncommon in the pews and behind the pulpit, and they show how easy it is to elevate man's opinion over God's truth. The first

comment belittles prophetic Scripture, the second one subordinates the facts to fables, and the third one chooses to overlook God's unconditional promises.

In all three examples, important Biblical doctrines are subordinated to personal bias. The first quote deemphasizes Christ's Second Advent and His arrival as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the second one doubts God's supernatural creation, and the third completely ignores God's unchangeable character.

All three comments show a motive to frame God as something less than He really is, and the results are irreverent and foolish. They show the grave danger of dismissing God's complete revelation.

ASSUMING THE NEW TESTAMENT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

If confronted about this issue, I believe most churches would deny any culpability. Yet, the familiar cliché says, "*Actions speak louder than words,*" and most churches swim endless laps in the New Testament while they rarely dip their toes in the Old Testament.

It seems to me that the average church has adopted the second portion of the Bible as their chief text. All one has to do is peruse through the sermon archives of a broad number of churches to discover that the passages of the New Testament dominate by far.

In addition, only certain portions of the New Testament seem to be emphasized. When was the last time your church took a deep dive into the entire book of Revelation? Or how about Jude, 2 Peter, or even 2 Thessalonians? When did your pulpit last resound with an accurate exposition of chapters 9 – 11 of Romans, or did your "study in Romans" dodge those chapters?

This inequity exposes the immaturity of many pastors and teachers today. While they may be educated by man's benchmarks, they lack the Godly wisdom and humility which translates into more responsible service. Rather than diligently seeking to model the standards of Scripture, they prefer to mimic the methods of popular movements and preachers.

In a misguided fixation to attract the lost, many church leaders have become convinced the Old Testament holds little relevance. It's easier to package contemporary themes with familiar passages of the New Testament. These may seem germane to daily life on the surface, but these strategies generally fall short of the greater Biblical priority to "*....equip the saints*" (Eph. 4:11-12).

Ironically, it is within the pages of the New Testament that we discover a strong emphasis on the Old Testament. Consider the following:

- 1. Jesus taught from the Old Testament** – We hear it's "*all about Jesus*" these days. OK, fair enough. So, "What would Jesus do?" Well, Jesus used the Old Testament for everything He taught. If it's good enough for Jesus, it should be good enough for us.

2. **The early church was raised on the Old Testament** – The early church didn't have the New Testament, or at least most of it. Yet they flourished under the sort of challenges and trials that much of the modern church has never faced. The meat in the Old Testament sustained them, grew them, and gave them hope. It's there for us too.
3. **The salvation plan originates in the Old Testament** – While Jesus is the fulfillment of salvation, the wonderful plan of redemption begins in the Old Testament. Both testaments tell the same story. The One True God who began to reveal Himself in the Old Testament shows Himself fully in Jesus Christ, and the New Testament testifies of this connection (Heb. 1:1-2).
4. **Both advents of Jesus are prophesied in the Old Testament** – The modern church focuses on Jesus' first coming, though it often sidesteps the Old Testament prophecies which foretold it. Sadly, 8 times as many Old Testament prophecies about Jesus' second coming are also overlooked. And although the theme of Christ's Second Advent is contained within one-fifth of all New Testament verses, it's generally discounted there too.
5. **The Gospel was proclaimed in the Old Testament** – The gospel's roots are in the Old Testament. When John the Baptist said, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29), that good news was based on centuries of Old Testament Jewish rituals. In all respects, the gospel played out "*according to the Scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:3-5), a clear reference to the Old Testament.

The Old Testament endures as a vital part of God's revelation to His church today just as it was in earlier times. Churches which discount it are willfully short-circuiting God's best intentions for us.

ASSUMING IT IS OK TO TEACH DERIVATIVES THAT ARE NOT INTENDED BY THE TEXT

Many churches engage in the practice of grading the importance of Scripture by spinning certain Biblical texts to support themes that are not there in the first place.

The passive way of doing this seeks to extract applications that should not be formulated at all. A major trend in churches now is to impose a gospel message upon every phrase, every verse, and every passage of the Bible. While I believe God intends to reveal the good news of salvation to all people through His written Word, this coercive micromanagement of specific Biblical texts is nothing less than irresponsible exposition.

Arguing that certain Biblical texts do not mean what they are plainly saying is a more active means of getting off track. It is a convenient way to overlook the truth of God's Word as well as the accountability it demands in our lives. It amounts to the same thing as saying a particular passage or doctrine is not important if we choose to take that Scripture's divine intentions in a completely different direction.

In wrapping up these issues, a sobering question emerges. *What good is the Bible to us if we force it to mean something it is not saying, or if we ignore something it is saying?* I believe this

dilemma looms large over many teachers and pastors as they flirt with reckless principles every week.

While reasons may be offered for any reluctance to responsibly study The Great Tribulation and other important elements of Scripture, the root problem under of all of them is an improper view of God. When we are stripped of all our rationales, our pontifications, our defense tactics, and our sleights of hand, it's our choices that define us and show who we are.

A. W. Tozer once said, *“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”* Our failure to regard God as He must be regarded shows up whenever we dilute, dismiss, discount, or deny any element of His divinely-inspired Word.

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