

Charts: The Tribulation Fork

PREFACE

As we approach the tumultuous time of the Tribulation there are a few things we need to keep in mind to set the stage.

First, a split-second after the Rapture, there is not one Christian on earth. The population of this planet will consist entirely of those who have rejected Christ Jesus for who He truly is.

Second, just as in the Flood, God has every reason and every right to inflict on this unbelieving generation the wrath that is about to come. God's word testifies over and over again of God's longsuffering; even as He has released measured out portions of it over the millennia since Adam, God has held back the full force of His righteous fury until the day after the Rapture of the church (as well as at the close of the Millennium).

Third, don't fall into the easy habit of thinking the events of the Tribulation are being orchestrated by Satan or his servants—Antichrist, the false prophet, et al—or that the misery of the period is all *their* idea. The Bible makes it clear that God and His Christ are running the show. Just as He did in the life of Job, God, for a brief period, grants Satan the opportunity to do his worst—but in that, Satan is only implementing the foreordained plan of God.

THE WORD ITSELF

Any study of what we call the Tribulation would be made easier if the writers in the Bible had used a unique term for that period in future history. But they did not. The same Greek word, *thlipsis*, translated “tribulation,” to refer to the seven-year period immediately following the Rapture, is also used

- by Paul to describe what awaits him in his journeys: “And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and **afflictions** await me” (Acts 20:22-23).

- in 1 Corinthians 7:28 to describe what awaits one if they marry: “But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such will have **trouble** in this life, and I am trying to spare you.”

- by James to describe the lives of orphans and widows: “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their **distress**, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

Because of this it can sometimes be challenging to isolate references to *the* Tribulation. Then, as well, we have the two terms: “Tribulation” and “*Great* Tribulation,” both of which refer to the period immediately after the Rapture, but which are used in different ways in different contexts. I suggest the following guidelines:

- In comparison to the common tribulation we experience simply by dwelling in flesh on this earth, the *entirety* of the seven-year period can rightly be called “The Great Tribulation.”

- If, however, we are confining the context to just those seven years, then the second three-and-a-half years of that period comprise the “*Great* Tribulation,” for it will be decidedly worse than the first half.

PLACING THE BEMA SEAT AND MARRIAGE SUPPER OF THE LAMB

As one peruses older eschatological charts and books that address the eschatological events, one sees these two components of the Last Things—the *Bema* Seat and Marriage Supper of the Lamb—floating around to different places on the timeline. That is, these are events that are challenging to place, and cases can indeed be made for the various options. The events, in general, described in Revelation do not necessarily represent a contiguous narrative thread; sometimes they do, sometimes they do not. The “bride” preparing for the “marriage of the Lamb” is referenced both in Revelation 19:7-9 and in 21:2; in the first it seems clearly to refer to the redeemed, while in the latter it states clearly that it refers to the “new Jerusalem.” ([more on this in a moment](#)) Some see the “supper,” or feast, of this marriage being never-ending, some see it as a singular event.

I will be addressing my reasons for their placement in a moment, but right now I would like to focus, once again, on the poetic symmetry of what I have termed “The Tribulation Fork”—as in “fork in the road.” When I comprehended this, it represented for me one of those glorious, breath-taking revelations one periodically discovers when studying such things. As I mentioned in the fourth session, think of the Rapture (along with the subsequent events in heaven) as the end times reenactment of Noah’s Ark, and the Tribulation (on earth) as the end times reenactment of the flood.

While everything is going south on earth, where subterfuge and misery are seemingly being orchestrated by Antichrist—and where the Lord God and His Christ will soon pour out their wrath upon those who have rejected Them—all believers in and followers of Christ Jesus (prior to the Rapture) are safely with Him in heaven, having their work for Him judged, receiving their various rewards, and sitting down to a joyous wedding feast.

THE BEMA (OR JUDGMENT) SEAT

Bema (bay' ma) is the Greek word translated “judgment seat” (of Christ) in 2 Corinthians 5:10. There the apostle Paul gives us the reason for it.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:9-10.

Frankly, the case could be made that this passage in Paul’s second letter could refer to either the (first) judgment of believers or the (second) Great White Throne judgment. The wording is rather flexible—especially that word translated “bad,” the Greek *kakon*, which can mean something evil, or simply something of no worth. In his first (extant) letter to the Corinth church Paul goes into greater detail about this judgment.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-15.

With his mention of the element of fire as a component of the judgment, depending on one’s position on the Last Things, some say that Paul is speaking of the final Great White Throne of judgment that takes place at the end of the Millennium. I do not believe this to be the case; at that *last* judgment it will be the *unbelievers* who are consigned to an eternity of flames—not their works—while at the judgment of believers only (wherever it takes place) it will be some of their *works* that are consumed by fire, not the individual. The picture in this passage is that if much of his or her deeds are required to be burned up, because they were worthless, then the believer just might leave the place smelling of smoke. But, indeed, “he himself will be saved.”

Every believer will stand before his or her Lord for an examination of the work they have turned in in His name. Some of the works will survive the trial, and a reward will be rendered; other works will not survive, but be consumed by fire, and no reward for them—those works burned up—will be forthcoming. Yet none of this will threaten the believer’s eternity with Christ.

Placement

These passages do not tell us *where* to place the believer's judgment on the timeline of the Eschaton. In a number of older charts I have included in my resources, the authors blithely insert, under the "judgment seat of Christ" for believers, a reference to Revelation 4-5 (chapters four and five).

Well, I have read and re-read those chapters and cannot find anywhere in them a mention of believers before the *bema* seat. Chapter Four is all about the overwhelming majesty and glory and holiness and power of God the Father. Chapter Five introduces the "Lamb standing, as if slain"—that is, Christ Jesus—whose role in this scene is to open "the book...with seven seals" and release the corresponding events upon the earth, inaugurating the Tribulation.

Some take the position that since chapters two and three are all about the churches on earth, and chapter four immediately ("After these things...") switches to heaven, with no more mention of the churches on earth, that this indicates that "the church" is no longer there but now in heaven. Even if that be the case, that doesn't mean that the *bema* seat occurs immediately after the Rapture. What we have instead of solid statements of sequence are hints in sub-text. So permit me to set forth my reasons for placing the *bema* seat where I have.

- First (and least), at the end of Luke's abbreviated version of the Olivet Discourse Jesus says something that hints at a connection between the Rapture and our standing before His throne.

Read Luke 21:34-36.

This is, admittedly, thin, but one can at least see a logical progression from the Rapture ("escape all that is about to happen" to "those who live on the face of the whole earth") followed by standing "before the Son of Man."

- Second, in Luke 14 Jesus, invited to a Pharisee's house for a meal, offers His host some counsel on who to invite to a meal the next time.

Read Luke 14:12-14.

Here again the idea of reward is closely associated with the "resurrection of the righteous," clearly speaking of the Rapture.

- Last, not only is there poetic justice in believers being judged for their works for Christ, while unbelievers on earth are receiving His wrath for their *rejection* of Christ, there is also a logical order to each believer's work being, as it were, put through the furnace of refining to get rid of the chaff, *before* sitting down to the celebratory wedding feast. Twice in the Revelation we read of Christ's bride being "made ready" for the Groom.

Read Revelation 19:7-8.

If we are clothed in (only) "the righteous acts of the saints" for the wedding, it certainly must mean that we have already passed through the cleansing judgment that rids us of any acts ("works") worthy only of being "burned up" (1 Corinthians 3:15). We cannot say if the believers' judgment occurs *immediately* after the Rapture, but it is my contention that it occurs before the marriage and subsequent marriage supper of the Lamb.

THE MARRIAGE AND MARRIAGE SUPPER OF THE LAMB

In Chart #6 there is no significance to the spans, or widths of the blocks "Bema Seat" and "Wedding and Marriage-supper of the Lamb." I have made the case for the *bema* seat judgment taking place prior to the marriage, and thus the marriage takes place next. It is doubtful, however, that the bema seat and marriage and supper each literally fill the entirety of the seven year Tribulation.

If we take the latter portion of the Revelation text as a relatively sequential timeline of events (which we do), the marriage comes just after the fall of the harlot "Babylon" and the four-fold Hallelujah celebrating God's victory over the evil that has transpired during the seven-year Tribulation. If you are struggling to understand the purpose of the Tribulation, and the need for God to pursue it (and if you are *now*, just wait until we detail all that occurs during that period), vv1-6 will help place it into the heavenly perspective.

Read Revelation 19:1-6. (Hallelujah = Praise the Lord)

Some commentators conclude that vv7-8 represent John's *foreshadowing* of the later passage (21:2) that refers to the descending new Jerusalem "coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband." Perhaps.

But note:

v19:7 - “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come **and His bride has made herself ready.**” (emphasis added)

v21:2 - “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, **made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.**” (emphasis added)

There is no more beautiful sight for a groom than the sight of his bride coming down the aisle toward him. And that’s how beautiful will be the sight of the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, as beautiful as a bride adorned for her husband. But this does not seem to be the actual wedding moment.

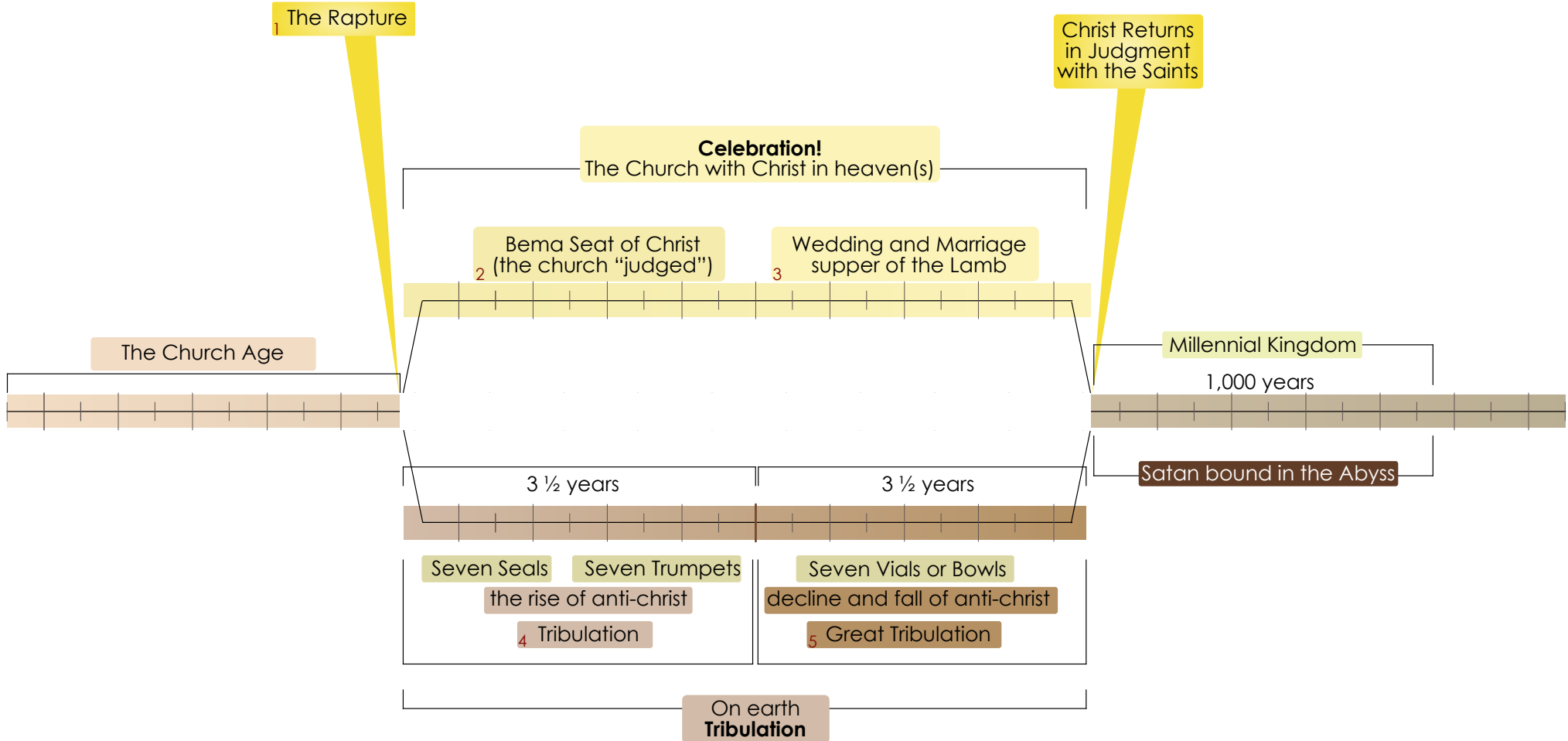
Most older charts show the marriage supper taking place near the end of the Tribulation period on earth, just before Christ returns in judgment *with His church*—and that is where I would place it.

We cannot say what the heavenly wedding and marriage supper will be like; we have only the biblical picture of the earthly version to go by: “In Jewish culture, the marriage supper was the best banquet or party anyone knew; it always was an occasion of tremendous joy,” (David Guzik) and went on for days.

In the “Tribulation Fork” we see the unfiltered wrath of God against those who reject His Son, set against the love and care of His Son for those who did not. I can think of no more dramatic contrast than this: for some, Tribulation; for others, Celebration.

Next time: The Tribulation, An Introduction.

THE TRIBULATION "FORK"



Footnotes

1
1 Corinthians 15:20–24
1 Thessalonians 4:16–17
Hebrews 9:27–28

2
Romans 8:1
Romans 14:10–12
1 Corinthians 3:9–15
2 Corinthians 5:10
2 Timothy 4:7–8

3
Isaiah 54:5–7
Ephesians 5:25–27
Ephesians 5:31–32
Revelation 19:7–9

4
Matthew 24:4–14
Revelation 6:1–17
Jeremiah 30:4–9

5
Matthew 24:15–28
Revelation 13:13–15
2 Thessalonians 2:3–4

