

The Inaugurated End-Time Tribulation and Its Bearing on the Church Office of Elder and on Christian Living in General

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I. INTRODUCTION

The lecture yesterday and today represent a rehash and minor revision of parts from a couple of chapters in a forthcoming book to appear next fall through Baker Book House. The book is titled *A New Testament Biblical Theology* and subtitled *Transformation of the Old Testament in the New*. The thrust of the book is to show that eschatology was not a mere doctrine of futurology for Jesus and his followers but was a present reality, which shaped their thinking about every facet of the Christian faith.

There is debate in the Pastoral Epistles about how normative certain things are for the church. Some commentators think that the office of “elder” is due to time-bound circumstantial factors, so that this office is not normative for all churches in all times and places throughout the church age. I will contend that the origin of the creation of the office of elder is likely related, at least in part, to the inaugurated latter-day tribulation. We discussed only very briefly at the beginning of yesterday’s lecture how the expected eschatological tribulation prophesied in the Old Testament had begun in the early church but was not consummated. It is important to go into some depth on that topic here in order to see how it could form a background against which the church position of elder can be seen as arising. Therefore, I ask for the reader’s patience in elaborating on this topic for the majority of this essay. Afterward I will discuss how this inaugurated end-time tribulation relates to the office of elder and how it may help shed light on the debate about whether or not this office is one limited to Paul’s churches in the first

century and possibly to certain churches thereafter that suffer the precise problems found in the Pastoral Epistles but is not mandated for all churches in all times and places during the inter-advent age. In addition, at the end of the essay, there will be reflection on how the inaugurated latter-day tribulation affects Christian living in general. This last section looks at a motivation for godly, alert Christian living from another angle than the one looked at in yesterday's lecture (on the relation of the indicative to the imperative).

II. THE INAUGURATION OF ESCHATOLOGICAL TRIBULATION IN THE NEW COVENANT COMMUNITY

The Old Testament predicted that a final tribulation would precede the dawning of the new cosmos. For example, Dan 12:1–2 ff. prophesies a time of great distress before the climactic resurrection of the righteous and wicked. We have noted earlier that Daniel refers to the coming trial as one in which there will be deception within the covenant community and persecution of non-compromisers. In addition, other Old Testament and New Testament texts affirm that the final tribulation will be one in which there will be a breakdown of various parts of the natural order of the cosmos, which will be culminated by complete destruction of the heavens and earth.¹ Against this background, one can see how the final tribulation is but an inextricable prelude to the eventual destruction and recreation of the cosmos. Actual phenomena of cosmic dissolution are not the typical characteristic of the inaugurated phase of the tribulation, rather false teaching and deception are among the predominant expressions of this initial stage. Nevertheless, we have seen above that literal physical phenomena of cosmic breakup were expressed at Christ's death: "darkness fell upon all the land" (Matt 27:45) and "the earth shook; and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened" (Matt 27:51–52a). Such literal expressions of initial destruction will again occur at the very end of history when the body of Christ, the Church throughout the world, will experience climactic, universal persecution like Christ before them (cf. Rev 11:3–13; 20:7–10). The apparent Old Testament prophetic perspective about the coming tribulation was that (1) deception and persecution were seen to occur at the same general

¹For New Testament examples, cf. Mk. 13:8 and Lk. 21:11, 23–26 ("earthquakes" and "famines," which are "the beginning of birth pangs"), which are inaugurated before the very end of the age. For some Old Testament and especially scattered early Jewish texts which depict similar convulsions of nature, cf. Allison, *End of the Ages*, 5–25.

period as (2) the convulsions of nature. The New Testament, however, understands these to occur in stages in which the first feature predominates throughout the age but then the two converge at the very end.

Throughout the Synoptics, Paul, 1 Peter, and Revelation, false teaching, deception, and Christian “suffering” as a result of “persecution”² is an essential feature of the inaugurated end-time tribulation. When saints refuse to compromise with false teaching, they often must face persecution (cf. Dan 11:30–35; Rev 2:8–17). Every manner of suffering is part of the scheme of the overlap of a fallen world which is passing away in the midst of an inaugurated new world.³ It is important to note that even the saints’ persecution must be seen against the background of their resistance to compromising with false teaching, whether within or outside the covenant community (e.g., the latter, for example, when Roman authorities would threaten Christians with death lest they compromise and worship idols, especially the Emperor).

Specific Evidence of the Inaugurated End-Time Tribulation in the New Testament

The Son of Man in the Synoptics

Identification of the “Son of Man” in Daniel 7

When I lecture on Daniel 7, I first ask my students to read very carefully and silently in class verses 15–28 of Daniel 7. Before they read, however, I summarize for them verses 1–14: Daniel has a vision of four beasts arising from a wind-blown sea, one after another. The vision

² Accordingly, in the Synoptics, suffering is related to following the Son of Man, whose own suffering is rooted in the prophecy of Daniel 7 (and 8, 11–12), where the Son of Man, representing true Israel, must be confronted with the deception and suffer hardship for not compromising (among the closest equivalents in the Synoptics, cf. Matt 8:18–22; Mark 8:31; 14:21, 53–65); Paul also links the church’s sufferings as the “body” of Christ with her identification with “Christ’s afflictions” (Col 1:24), as does Hebrews (cf. 9:26 with 12:1–7), James (cf. 1:2–4 with 5:1–11), 1 Peter (cf. 1:5–6 and 1:20 with 2:19–23 and 3:14–5:10), and Revelation (e.g., cf. 1:5–6 with 1:9 and 5:6 with 6:9).

³ Cf. Rom 8:18–23 with 8:35–39, where in the former text suffering of believers, and of all creation, is viewed as a result of being part of a new creation emerging from the old corrupted creation, which is portrayed by the image of suffering birth pangs.

continues with a description of “the Ancient of Days” on his throne (vv. 9–10), then the last beast undergoing judgment (vv. 11–12) and, finally, the “son of man” approaching the Ancient of Days’ throne and receiving eternal rule over all the earth (vv. 13–14). I then explain to my students that verses 15–28 are the formal interpretation of the vision. Then I say something quite apparently unprofound. I tell them that visionary literature typically has a pattern of vision followed by interpretation, and that the interpretative section interprets the vision; accordingly, I declare to them that the interpretative section of Dan 7:15–28 simply interprets the preceding vision. The students sometimes look at me as if I thought I were teaching first-grade students. Then I tell them to start reading the interpretative section and to tell me how it interprets the “son of man” figure of the vision, since such a key figure in the last part of the vision would certainly be identified in the interpretative section.

After they have finished reading, I ask them to tell me whom the interpretative part of Daniel 7 identifies as the “son of man.” It is clear that many students have experienced hermeneutical and theological anxiety because they have discovered that the interpretation does not apparently identify the “son of man” as an individual messianic figure. In fact, the expression “son of man” does not even occur in the interpretative section. The anxiety of the students is intense because the students, of course, know that Jesus himself repeatedly identifies himself as the “son of man” in all four gospels. After a few minutes of reflection some of the students offer an answer about the identification: some timidly and tentatively propose that the “son of man” is identified as the “saints of the Highest One,” i.e., faithful Israel. Their reasoning is that the “son of man” receiving an “eternal kingdom,” found in the vision of 7:13–14, is not mentioned in vv. 15–28 but only the “saints” of Israel “receiving the kingdom forever” is found repeatedly:

But the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, for all ages to come (Dan 7:18).

Until the Ancient of Days came and judgment was passed in favor of the saints of the Highest One, and the time arrived when the saints took possession of the kingdom (Dan 7:22).

Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of *all* the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; his kingdom *will be* an everlasting

kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey him (Dan 7:27).

I then say, “yes, you are right. The ‘son of man’ is the saints of Israel.” Of course, the question then arises, “What do we make of Jesus’ claim in the gospels that he is ‘the son of man’?” My answer is that, while the interpretative section does identify the “son of man” with the saints of Israel, there are indications both in the vision itself and in the following explanation that the “son of man” is also an individual messianic-like figure. First, the fact that the figure “comes with the clouds of heaven” is a curious portrayal, since elsewhere it is only God who flies on the clouds⁴ (indeed, the rabbis sometimes called God the “cloud rider”). This means that the son of man is portrayed as a divine being as he approaches the Ancient of Days’ throne. One major version of the Greek Old Testament (the Old Greek) interprets this in the following manner: “upon the clouds of heaven one like a son of man came and as the Ancient of Days he came” (whereas the Aramaic and Theodotonic Greek Old Testament have “he [the son of man] came *up to* the Ancient of Days”). Thus, the earliest extant interpretation of Dan 7:13 depicts the “son of man” as deity like the Ancient of Days!⁵

There is also a part of the interpretation that suggests how both an individual messianic king and the Israelite saints could be the “son of man.” Verses 17 and 23 refer to the four beasts both as “kings” and “kingdoms,” thus apparently distinguishing between individual kings and the kingdoms over which they rule and which they represent, though there is also some kind of identification of these kings together with their kingdoms. Some Old Testament theologians have referred to this kind of relationship as “the one and the many” or “corporate representation,” whereby a king, priest or father represents respectively a kingdom, a nation or a father his family. Even though the king, priest or father is, of course, technically distinct from the kingdom, nation or family, they nevertheless are corporately identified and represent the kingdom, nation or family. Such representation means that what is true of the representative is true of the represented. In the case of Daniel 7, the interpretative section refers to the “son of man” as the faithful nation Israel, presumably because he as the individual king of Israel representatively sums up the people in himself. Consequently, certain of

⁴E.g., see 2 Sam 22:10–12; Job 22:14; Ps. 97:2–5; 104:3; Jer 4:13; Nah 1:3.

⁵Other early interpretations of Dan 7:13 in Judaism will be addressed in the chapter on “Christology” of the forthcoming volume mentioned in the opening of this lecture.

his actions become representative of them and vice versa. Their general identity is also the same. Both can be conceived of as Israel (just as when David was battling Goliath, one could refer to the battle as Israel vs. the Philistines, since both nations were represented in the battle by these two individuals).

There is one last possible hint about an individual “son of man” in the latter part of v. 27: “Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of *all* the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; his kingdom *will be* an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey him.” A few commentators identify “his kingdom” and “him” at the conclusion of the verse to be an individual “son of man” from vv. 13–14. But, first of all, this presupposes that the figure of vv. 13–14 is only an individual. While this is possible, especially in the light of the above-discussed indications of such an individual in Daniel 7, the last part of v. 27 is, at least, ambiguous. The more likely identification is either that “his” and “him” refers to the directly preceding antecedent “the Highest One” or, plausibly, the singular pronoun is a corporate reference to the closely preceding “saints” of v. 27a (as the ESV, e.g., takes it). Thus, the “kingdom” at the end of v. 27 either refers to the kingdom of “the Highest One” or of “the saints.”

The “Son of Man,” the “Saints,” and the Tribulation in Daniel 7

Having identified the “son of man” as focused primarily on the saints and secondarily on an individual king, we are now ready to address the issue of the tribulation depicted in Daniel 7. We saw above that three times Daniel prophesies that the saints would receive a kingdom (vv. 18, 22, 27). Verse 21 says that Israel would suffer severe trial from the end-time opponent directly before possessing the kingdom (v. 22):

I kept looking, and that horn was waging war with the saints and overpowering them (Dan. 7:21).

Until the Ancient of Days came and judgment was passed in favor of the saints of the Highest One, and the time arrived when the saints took possession of the kingdom (Dan. 7:22).

Verses 23–27 affirm the same thing, as v. 25 highlights: “he will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One, and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they

will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time.”⁶ Likewise, vv. 17–18 imply the same pattern of the saints’ oppression followed by their reception of the kingdom. Now, if we remember that the saints of Israel are the primary interpretative identification that vv. 15–28 give of the “son of man” in vv. 13–14, then vv. 15–28 are portraying that Israel as the “son of man” must go through the end-time trial before receiving the kingdom. Furthermore, if we have been correct in saying that Daniel 7 also, though subtly, identifies the “son of man” to be an individual end-time king who represents Israel, then it would appear likely that he also must go through the final distress imposed by the eschatological enemy before he receives the kingdom.⁷

The “Son of Man’s” Trial and Kingdom in the Gospels

A fuller study of the “son of man” in the gospels, as well as in early Judaism must await the publication of my forthcoming *NT Biblical Theology*. There I discuss, though still in briefer form, those references in the gospels that refer to the “son of man’s” suffering or apparently ignoble life. There are two types of these sayings: those that pertain to Jesus’ (1) pre-crucifixion ministry and (2) death on the cross. A number of these sayings contain allusions to Daniel 7 in combination with reference to the “son of man,” which shows that Jesus has in mind the Daniel 7 “son of man.” These sayings show that Jesus begins to fulfill the end-time prophecy of the “son of man” who would suffer eschatological tribulation. Since I do not have time to cover this, I refer the reader, not only to my forthcoming book, but also to the following scholars who have shown that Jesus himself first began to fulfill the end-time prophecies of Israel’s prophesied tribulation: Dale C. Allison, *The End of the Ages Has Come* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985, e.g., pp. 128–141; and Brant Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005).

⁶Recall that several LXX mss. and versions, as well as fathers, replace “wear down” (= *katatribō* [LXX] / *palaioō* [Theod.] = Aram. *y^eballē*) with *planaō* (“deceive”), so that the end-time opponent is portrayed as “deceiving” the saints here. See the textual apparatus of *Septuaginta XVI/2: Susanna, Daniel, Bel et Draco* (ed. J. Ziegler; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

⁷I first came across this interpretation of the son of man in relation to the saints’ ordeal in R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 128–130, though at the time of writing France himself did not hold the view.

For example, Jesus' eschatological tribulation that he began to experience during his ministry was consummated for him by his death on the cross. And this is what the second set of suffering "son of man" passages focus upon:

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matt 12:40).

As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead" (Matt 17:9 = Mark 9:9).

But I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands (Matt 17:12; cf. Mark 9:12–13).

And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men" (Matt 17:22).

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death... (Matt 20:18).

Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matt 20:28).

You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is *to be* handed over for crucifixion (Matt 26:2).

The Son of Man *is to* go, just as it is written of him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born (Matt 26:24 = Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22).

Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners (Matt 26:45 = Mark 14:41).

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again (Mark 8:31).

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day” (Luke 9:22).

Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men (Luke 9:44).

But Jesus said to him, “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Luke 22:48).

“The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again” (Luke 22:48).⁸

2 Thessalonians 2 and the Great Tribulation⁹

Apparently in Thessalonica, as elsewhere, false teachers were claiming that Jesus’ future advent had already happened in some spiritual manner: either by his coming in the person of his Spirit (perhaps at Pentecost) or in conjunction with the final (spiritual!) resurrection of the saints. In response, Paul exhorts the church not to be disturbed by such false teaching (so 2 Thess 2:1–2). Paul summarizes in verse 3 what he has just said in verses 1–2: “Let no one in any way deceive you” (v. 3a). The first reason why they should not be deceived is that Christ will not come back finally until there has “first” come a “falling-away” (*apostasia*) from the faith, primarily within the worldwide community of the church, though the unbelieving world will, no doubt, also be affected

⁸Also included in this list of references could be reference to the “son of man” being “lifted up,” which is likely a double entendre, alluding to lifting up on the cross followed by the lifting up of resurrection and ascension (John 3:14; 12:32, 34).

⁹For fuller discussion of the following section, see G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 199–221.

(v. 3c). In addition to the sign of “apostasy,” a second reason why the readers should not be misled in believing that Christ has already come is because the eschatological appearance of the Antichrist must also precede the Messiah’s last advent: “the man of lawlessness” must be “revealed” first (v. 3c). Therefore, Christ cannot have come back yet, since these two signs have not yet come about in their full form.

In verse 4, Paul develops the prophecy about the Antichrist from Daniel 11.¹⁰

Dan 11:31, 36	2 Thess 2:3–4
“forces from him will arise, desecrate the sanctuary fortress, and do away with the regular sacrifice. And they will set up the abomination of desolation” (v. 31; so also see Dan 9:27; 12:11). “he will exalt and magnify himself above every god, and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods . . .” (v. 36).	“the man of lawlessness . . . who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he sits in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.”¹¹ (my translation)

In addition, the expression “man of lawlessness” (*anthrōpos tēs anomias*) echoes Dan 12:10–11 (Theod.), which is strikingly similar to Dan 11:29–34, and refers to the end-time trial as a period when “the lawless ones [*anomoī*] will do lawlessness, [*anomeō*] and all the lawless ones [*anomoī*] will not understand” (i.e., they will mislead or be misled, or both). This doing of lawlessness in Daniel is directly linked to, if not partly explained by, “the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished and

¹⁰Among those who discern some degree of Danielic influence in verse 4, see O. Betz, “Der Katechon,” *NTS* 9 (1963), 282–284; F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (WBC 45; Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 168; I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 190–191; C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 246–247; Lars Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted: The Formation of Some Jewish Apocalyptic Texts and of the Eschatological Discourse Mark 13 Par.* (CBNTS 1; Lund: Gleerup 1966.), 198–205.

¹¹See J. E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (ICC 36; New York, NY: Scribner, 1912), 255, for verbal parallels.

the abomination of desolation is set up” (Dan 12:11; cf. 11:31) by the end-time enemy *in the temple*.¹²

As we have already seen, according to the prophecy of Dan 11:30–45, a final enemy of God will attack the covenant community. In addition to persecution, the attack will be in the form of deception: the end-time opponent will execute a subtle attack of deception by influencing with “smooth words” some within the community “who forsake the holy covenant” (v. 30) and “who act wickedly toward the covenant” (v. 32), all of which stands behind Paul’s reference to “the apostasy” in verse 3.¹³ The fiendish adversary will influence these people to become “godless” themselves (v. 32), to compromise, and to foster deception and further compromise among others. Daniel says that “many will join with them [the faithful] in hypocrisy,” claiming to be faithful but in fact are not (v. 34). This end-time antagonist will appear openly before the community, “exalt and magnify himself above every god” (v. 36), and then meet his final end under God’s judicial hand (v. 45). Hence, Paul is developing the Daniel 11–12 prophecy in verses 3–4 and following.¹⁴

Paul has said in vv. 3–4 that the readers should not be led astray in thinking that Christ’s coming has already happened because the two signs of the final apostasy in the Church and the final appearance of Antichrist have not yet occurred.¹⁵ He states emphatically in verse 5 that a third reason they should not be deceived about this is because what Paul has just told them is not new information. Already Paul had

¹²So also Dan 7:25 speaks of Israel’s persecutor as opposing God’s “law” (so W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of I and II Thessalonians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979], 176).

¹³G. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1930; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 111.

¹⁴This is not the place to attempt to answer the question about whether or not the satanic figure “takes his seat” in a literal temple of God or whether or not his deceiving and desecrating activities occur within a physical temple that will be rebuilt at some future point from the time of Paul. This topic will be addressed in a chapter of my forthcoming volume on the subject, dealing with the temple in the New Testament, where the conclusion will be reached that the church community of Paul’s time and at the end of history composes the true temple of God.

¹⁵There is a theological problem of relating 2 Thess 2:1–4 to 1 Thess. 5:1 ff., the former affirming that there are signs presaging Christ’s coming and the latter saying there are no signs but that Christ’s coming will occur unexpectedly for all. Though the scope of the present discussion does not allow further elaboration, see Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 143–157, 199–211, for possible resolution of the problem.

repeatedly told them about the coming apostasy and Antichrist: “Do you not remember that when I was still with you I was telling you these things?” Verses 3–4 were a reminder of what they already knew. The implication of the reminder is that Paul has perceived that the readers were becoming vulnerable to false teaching because they were in process of forgetting the truth he had already taught them.

Though Paul has underscored that the final manifestation of the Antichrist is yet future, in verses 6–7 he warns them that they cannot relax and let down their guard against his deceptive powers in the present. In fact, Paul makes the radical statement that they are not any safer from deception now than when Antichrist will actually come! Consequently, saints must not suppose that because the Antichrist has not yet come in physical form that he cannot mislead them now.

We saw in vv. 3–4 that Dan 11:30–45 prophesied that a final foe of God would attack the covenant community in the latter days. The attack was to take three forms: persecution, desecration of the temple, and deception through the subversion of divine truth. Paul first says in verse 6 that this antagonist has not yet come in full consummate form because something “is restraining him now, so that in his time he may be revealed.” The purpose of the restraining force is to hold back the manifestation of the lawless one until it is the right time for his appearance. This also they should know because it is part of the instruction he had given them during previous visits (so v. 5). There are, at least, seven different identifications of the “restrainer,”¹⁶ though it is likely a good and not an evil force.¹⁷

Though Paul says the prophesied “man of lawlessness” has not yet come in full incarnate form, he nevertheless claims there is a sense in which he has come: “the mystery [*mysterion*] of lawlessness is already at work” (v. 7). What does Paul mean by this? As with the majority of New Testament uses of “mystery” (*mysterion*), this one also is placed in close connection with an Old Testament reference, this time to Daniel 11 in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. The word elsewhere, when so linked to Old Testament allusions, is used to indicate that prophecy is beginning

¹⁶See the excellent summary and evaluation of Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 196–200.

¹⁷See Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 213–221, for the view that the “restrainer” is the angel Michael.

fulfillment but in an unexpected manner in comparison to the way Old Testament readers might have expected these prophecies to be fulfilled.¹⁸

The reason Paul uses the word “mystery” in verse 7 is that he understands the Antichrist prophecy from Daniel as beginning to be fulfilled in the Thessalonian church in an enigmatic manner not clearly foreseen by Daniel. In fact, the word “mystery” (*mysterion*) occurs with an eschatological meaning only in Daniel 2 (see 2:18–19, 27–30, 47), which points here to further allusion to Daniel, in addition to Dan 11:31, 36 noted above. Daniel says that the final Antichrist would appear in full force and openly to all eyes (“to exalt and magnify himself”), when he would attempt to deceive and persecute. Paul sees that, though this fiend has not yet come so visibly as he will at the final end of history, he is *nevertheless* “already at work” in the covenant community through his deceivers, the false teachers. We would expect from Daniel’s prophecy that when this fiend’s deceivers are visibly on the scene, he would be visibly present as well. The revealed “mystery” in the church at Thessalonica is that the prophecy of Daniel 11 is starting to be fulfilled unexpectedly, since the devilish foe has not come in bodily form, but he is already inspiring his “lawless” works of deception by his spirit through false teachers (on which see also 1 John 4:1–3)!

Paul is saying that even now the false teachers that have been prophesied by Daniel and Jesus (cf. Matt 24:4–5, 23–24, etc.) are with his readers. This means that the end-time “Great Tribulation” prophesied by Daniel 11 has begun in part! The prophecy of the “apostasy” and coming of “the man of lawlessness” (into the temple, as we will argue later)¹⁹ of the new covenant Church has started fulfillment!

Indeed, the sign of Jesus’ death together with what 1 John 2:18 and 2 Thess 2:6–7 have said makes it clear that the Great Tribulation, when Antichrist would come, has already begun to take place. The prophesied Antichrist has already begun to enter the covenant community and to defile it. Daniel predicted that there would be three telltale marks of the Great Tribulation: persecution, desecration of the temple, and deception through false teachers within the temple and in the covenant community. It is clear that persecution and deception in the ecclesiological community started in the first century and has continued ever since. The

¹⁸So see Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 215–272, where a survey and discussion of all the uses of *mysterion* in the New Testament occurs.

¹⁹For full argument of this point, see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, (NSBT 17; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 269–292.

desecration of the covenant community is the entry of the unclean and deceptive spirit of the Antichrist into the sacred community of faith, which attempts to alter God's laws. Therefore, the end-time tribulation has been going on throughout the age of the Church (for persecutions in Thessalonica see Acts 17:5–8; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 3:3–4).

To be sure, this tribulation has not yet reached its climax. There will be an escalation of the present tribulation when *the* incarnate Antichrist appears at the end of history (Apoc. Elijah 4:20–23 says that the “son of lawlessness” will severely persecute the saints during this time of trial²⁰). At that time, persecution and deception, which have formerly affected only part of the Church throughout history, will be present throughout the worldwide Church, at which point Christ will return a final time (see Rev 11:1–13; 20:1–10).

1 John and the Great Tribulation

Earlier we saw that the use of “hour” in the Old Greek version of Daniel 8–12 was a translation of “end-time” language from the Hebrew. We concluded that this repeated reference to the end-time “hour” of trial and deception inspired by the end-time adversary²¹ stands behind 1 John 2:18: “Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour.” Thus, though the Antichrist has not yet come in his incarnate form at the very end of the age, his “spirit” is here inspiring his false teachers. Consequently, the prophecy of the Antichrist has begun fulfillment in that his “spirit” has begun to come and inspire his false teachers to do their deceiving work. The prophecy has begun literally also in the sense that the prophesied deceptive teachers are working in the covenant community, as they were literally prophesied so to do by Daniel.

This means that the eschatological tribulation began in the first century church and is not something that will happen only at some climactic point in the future.

This sheds light on a significant passage later in the epistle. 1 John 3:4 says, “Every one who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.” Some systematic theologians adduce this passage as a

²⁰See also Apoc. Elijah 1:10; see as well 2:41, which reaffirms the idea of 2 Thess 2:3–4: “the lawless one will appear in the holy places” (so also 3:5; 4:1–2).

²¹Sometimes even the reference “hour of the end” (*hōran synteileias*) is used (Dan 11:40).

nice summary of what “sin” is—it is transgressing God’s law. While this is true, the background of this passage enriches our understanding of it, especially in relation to the beginning of the antichrist prophecies by Jesus and Daniel. It should be observed that Dan 11:32 and 12:10 (Old Greek) equate eschatological “sin” (the *hamartia* word group) with eschatological “lawlessness” (the *anomia* word group) and that 1 John 3:4 likely reflects this equation. Thus, there is more to John’s use of “lawlessness” (*anomia*) than merely it being a definition of “sin.” Rather, “sin” is being identified as “the iniquity” which is the prophesied and expected state of hostility in the latter days. In addition to the highly charged notion of the already and not yet coming of the Antichrist in 2:18 and 2:22, 2:28 and 3:2–3 continue to focus on latter day themes, particularly the yet future final coming of Christ. Therefore, the equation of “sin” and “lawlessness” in 3:4 continues to ring with end-time associations.

In this regard, Matt 24:11–12 speaks of the latter days as a time when “lawlessness” (*anomia*) will be multiplied: “love will grow cold”²² (Matt 7:22–23 and 13:41 may also speak of the same thing). Jewish tradition speaks of the latter days as “the time of the iniquity of Israel” in which there will be a struggle between the angel of peace and Satan (Test. Dan. 6). So, more clearly, Didache 16:3–4:

For in the last days the false prophets and corrupters will abound, and the sheep will be turned into wolves, and love will be turned into hate. For as lawlessness [*anomia*] increases, they will hate and persecute and betray one another. And then the deceiver of the world will appear as a son of God and “will perform signs and wonders,” and the earth will be delivered into his hands, and he will commit abominations the likes of which have never happened before.

The Epistle of Barnabas 4:1–6a associates the works of “lawlessness” (*anomia*) with the “deception of the present age” as constituting the fourth kingdom foretold by Daniel:

²²See Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted*, who argues that Mark 13 (and parallels) are based on a coherent exposition or mediation on Daniel 7–9, 11–12 (e.g., 158, 207; see the full discussion on 145–252); Hartman also proposed that this Danielic “midrash” was developed by Paul in parts of 1 and 2 Thessalonians (178–205) and in 1 John (237–238).

We must, therefore, investigate the present circumstances very carefully and seek out the things that are able to save us. Let us, therefore, avoid absolutely all the works of lawlessness lest the works of lawlessness overpower us, and let us hate the deception of the present age, so that we may be loved in the age to come. Let us give no rest to our soul that results in its being able to associate with sinners and evil men, lest we become like them. The last stumbling block is at hand, concerning which the Scriptures speak, as Enoch says. For the Master has cut short the times and the days for this reason, that his beloved might make haste and come into his inheritance. And so also speaks the prophet: "Ten kingdoms will reign over the earth, and after them a little king will arise, who will subdue three of the kings with a single blow." Similarly Daniel says, concerning the same one: "And I saw the fourth beast, wicked and powerful and more dangerous than all the beasts of the earth, and how ten horns sprang up from it, and from these a little offshoot of a horn, and how it subdued three of the large horns with a single blow." You ought, therefore, to understand.

According to Daniel 11–12 and Jesus' view of it, the "latter days" were to be characterized by rebellion against God in the form of covenant apostasy in terms of denying the true God and in terms of unrighteousness. Jesus repeatedly emphasizes this in Matthew 24:

And Jesus answered and said to them, "See to it that no one misleads you" (Matt 24:4).

For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Christ," and will mislead many (Matt 24:5).

At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another (Matt 24:10).

Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many (Matt 24:11).

Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold (Matt 24:12).

But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved (Matt 24:13).

Then if anyone says to you, “Behold, here is the Christ,” or “There *he is*,” do not believe *him* (Matt 24:23).

For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect (Matt 24:24).

Behold, I have told you in advance (Matt 24:25).

So if they say to you, “Behold, he is in the wilderness,” do not go out, *or*, “Behold, he is in the inner rooms,” do not believe *them* (Matt 24:26).

Jesus’ forecast itself is based on Daniel 7–12, and, in particular, the following:

A king will arise, Insolent and skilled in intrigue (Dan 8:23b).

And through his shrewdness he will cause deceit to succeed by his influence; And he will magnify *himself* in his heart . . . (Dan 8:25).

He will return and become enraged at the holy covenant and take action; so he will come back and show regard for those who forsake the holy covenant (Dan 11:30b).

By smooth *words* he will turn to godlessness those who act wickedly toward the covenant, but the people who know their God will display strength and take action (Dan 11:32).

Now when they fall they will be granted a little help, and many will join with them in hypocrisy (Dan 11:34).

But the wicked [in the covenant community] will act wickedly; and none of the wicked will understand, but those who have insight will understand (Dan 12:10b).

Even Jesus' notion of "lawlessness" (Matt. 24:12) appears to derive from Daniel 11 and 12.

In light of the above parallels and in view of 1 John 2:18 and 22, 1 John 3:4 speaks of the "lawlessness" that was to occur in the latter days, which was to be inspired by the latter-day opponent and spread especially by his false teachers. John identifies the false teachers whom he is combating and particularly their false teaching about Christ as part of the beginning fulfillment of the prophesied "lawlessness" that was to occur in the community of the saints in the eschaton.

III. THE OFFICE OF ELDER AND THE INAUGURATED ESCHATOLOGICAL TRIBULATION

The origin of ecclesiology, particularly with respect to the hierarchical structure of the church, can be viewed partly within this context of the latter-day tribulation of false teaching.²³ "Elders" or "bishops" are needed in order to maintain the doctrinal purity of the covenant community, which is always either being influenced by or threatened from the infiltration of fifth columnist movements. Titus 1:5–16 gives this as the formal reason for the establishment of elders throughout the churches of Crete, and the same rationale is apparent in 1 and 2 Timothy (cf. 1 Tim 1:3–7, 19–20 and 4:1–7 with 3:1–15, 5:11–17 and 6:20–21; cf. 2 Tim 2:14–18, 23–26; 3:1–13).

The presence of tribulation in the form of false, deceptive teaching at the church of Ephesus is one of the signs that the long-awaited latter days had finally come (1 Tim 4:1 ff.; 2 Tim 3:1 ff.). The wording in 2 Tim. 3:1 (*en eschatais hēmerais*) is a general echo of the repeated corresponding phrases "in the latter days" of the Greek Old Testament.²⁴ That this idea in 1 and 2 Timothy is not a reference only to a distant, future time is evident from recognizing that the Ephesian church is already experiencing the latter-day tribulation of deceptive teaching and apostasy (see 1 Tim 1:3–4, 6, 7, 19–20; 4:7; 5:13–15; 6:20–21; 2 Tim 1:15; 2:16–19; 2:25–26; 3:2–9). That these latter-day expressions are not exclusively future but indicate the beginning of the end-time tribulation of false teaching and deception is apparent from noticing that the directly following descriptions of false teaching in both passages portray the false

²³In this respect, note the overt references in 1 Tim 4:1–3 and 2 Tim 3:1 (cf. 3:2–9) to the end-time trial of deception within the church community.

²⁴Though they all, except Isa 2:2 [*en tais eschatais hēmerais*], begin with the Greek preposition *ep'* instead of *en* and are in the genitive, so that the 2 Timothy phrase is closest to the Isaiah passage.

teaching as presently happening with present tense verbs (see 1 Tim 4:4–7 and 2 Tim 3:6–9). These trials will continue on into the future (e.g., see 2 Tim 3:13, 4:3–4). This understanding of a latter-day tribulation characterized by false teaching and unbelief is in line with the expectation in Daniel 7–12 and in early Judaism (especially DSS and Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs), which I elaborate on in another chapter of my forthcoming book.

On the other hand, such an ecclesiastical authority structure ensured the Christian community that it was continuing in the truth and life of the kingdom, which would enable it to be strong in accomplishing its mission of witness to the world, which is likely as significant a theme in the Pastorals as is the concern about false teaching.²⁵ This positive element of “mission” is part of the larger positive role of the church in its responsibility of carrying out the original Adamic commission to subdue the ends of the earth and Israel’s similar commission to be priests for and a light of witness to the world.²⁶ Of course, Acts highlights this eschatological light-bearing mission of the new creation more than any other New Testament book.²⁷ In fact, the mention of deacons in Acts 6 and elders in Acts 20, at least in part, is to indicate their role in speeding on the spread of the kingdom, and in the latter case also to encourage the elders to guard against false teaching.

This notion that the interadvent age is one during which the eschatological tribulation and the new creation continue throughout and not just at particular moments has some interesting implications. For example, one scholar has argued that the prohibitions in 1 Tim 2:11–15 for women to teach authoritatively in the church at Ephesus were a response to women who had become influenced by the rampant false teaching there. However, it is often argued that since this situation of false teaching was a local and unique problem and was the occasion causing Paul to issue the prohibition, then his prohibition does not apply to other churches in places and times throughout the age where false

²⁵Indeed, R. G. Gruenler, “The Mission-Lifestyle Setting of 1 Tim 2:8-15,” *JETS* 41 (1998), 215–238, has plausibly contended that “mission” is the dominant theme and concern of the Pastorals, especially highlighting the significance of 1 Tim 1:10–16 and 2:1–4, among other passages.

²⁶ See F. Hawkins, “Orders and Ordination in the New Testament,” in *The Study of Liturgy* (ed. C. Jones et al.; rev. ed.; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 344–345, which has helped crystallize my own thoughts on these negative and positive factors leading to the establishment of church offices in the New Testament.

²⁷E.g., see Acts 1:6–8 and 2:17–3:26; 13:47; 26:16–18.

teaching is absent.²⁸ But, if false teaching is a part of the inaugurated end-time tribulation that continues throughout the whole pre-parousia epoch, then Paul's prohibitions are not just a response only to a local situation but to that situation as it is an expression of the broader end-time trial. Since the inaugurated latter-day trial means that the churches will be either affected or, at least, threatened by false teaching and deception, Paul's prohibitions are always valid. Therefore, Paul's prohibitions are a part of eschatological ethics pertinent to the entire church age, during which the end-time tribulation of false teaching is either actually affecting churches or is always a potential threat to corrupt them.

For the same reason the office of elder is not due to occasional or temporarily unique conditions²⁹ but is one that owes its existence to the ongoing, uninterrupted eschatological tribulation of false teaching and deception. In addition, we saw that the office was also created to protect the church's doctrine in order that it remain healthy as it goes out on its mission into the world to expand the invisible boundaries of the new creation. Such an office is needed until the time when the new creation is consummated.

In general, it appears that the elder office in the church is the continuation of the position of elder in Israel. Whereas the elders in Israel had both civil and religious authority, the elders in the new covenant have full religious authority over the sphere of the new Israel, the church. Several observations point to this equivalence. Besides the use of the same word "elders" (*presbyteroi*), the Book of Acts repeatedly juxtaposes the phrase "rulers and elders" of Israel (Acts 4:5, 8) or "chief priests and elders" (4:23; 23:14; 25:15) or "elders and scribes" (6:12) with "apostles and elders" of the church (15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4). Just as the Jewish "rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in

²⁸See, e.g., Gordon Fee, "Issues in Evangelical Hermeneutics, Part III: The Great Watershed – Intentionality and Particularity/Eternality: 1 Timothy 2:8–15 as a Test Case," *Crux* 26 (1990), 31–37, who shows that 1 Timothy is shot through with false teaching, which is an occasion that must control the interpretation of the epistle. Unfortunately, Fee assumes that such false teaching is evidence of a unique, local situation to which Paul's prohibitions to women teaching in 1 Tim 2:11–12 is partly a response. Accordingly, for Fee, this prohibition cannot be universalized for all times and places, since it is an ad hoc response to such a local and limited occasion.

²⁹Against the argument by Gordon Fee, "Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of Ad Hoc Documents," *JETS* 28 (1985), 141–151.

Jerusalem” to judge about the validity of the emerging Christian movement (Acts 4:5–23), so in “Jerusalem . . . the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter” about the Jewish-Christian teaching that new Gentile converts had to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:1–6). The function of the Jewish elders in Acts 4 and the Christian elders in Acts 15 appears virtually identical. Both are in an official position in their respective covenant communities to adjudicate whether or not a new theological teaching is valid.

Acts 15 may have light shed on it by the earlier discussion that the position of elder was created, at least partly, to help protect the church’s theological health in the midst of an inaugurated end-time tribulation of deceptive teaching. Accordingly, it would appear not to be coincidental that directly before the Acts 15 Council of Jerusalem account that Paul and Barnabas exhorted the believers “to continue in the faith” by saying, “Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). And the very next verse asserts that “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (14:23). This is significant, since it is the first reference to appointing elders outside of Jerusalem, and it leads directly into the dispute needing judgment by the Jerusalem elders in Acts 15. This dispute was none other than a false teaching that, if allowed to continue, would destroy the emerging Christian movement. So the connection of the elders in Acts 14 to “tribulations” and false teaching is reflective of their eschatological role to guide the church theologically through the end-time theological threats. Likewise Acts 20:27–32 develops this inextricable link of false teaching with elders:

For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

In laying the foundation for the church in Ephesus, Paul explained to them “the whole counsel of God” (v. 27; see also v. 20). A part of this “counsel” was to remind them that “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God,” especially to “be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock” (v. 28). They are to “guard” against false teachers who arise “from among your own selves” (vv. 29–30). This “guarding” is to be done by being faithful to God’s “word” (the gospel and the Scriptures testifying to that gospel; vv. 31–32). While it is true that the imminent false teaching was to be a local problem, it is also implicit that the function of the “overseers” to “guard” the Ephesian church from error is a function also for elders in every church, since the reference to the Ephesian church is generalized by “the church of God which he purchased with his own blood” (v. 28).³⁰ Such a description is likely intended to go beyond merely the local situation of the Ephesian church, which is pointed to further by our above observation about the purpose of “appointing elders for . . . every church” in Acts 14:23.

Thus, once again we find a major New Testament notion, the office of elder, to be an important feature of inaugurated eschatology. The origin of this office is best understood in the light of the beginning end-time tribulation, as well as of the new creation (though the former has been the focus here).

IV. WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING THAT THE LATTER-DAY TRIBULATION THAT THE TRIBULATION HAS BEGUN?

Jesus temptation by the Devil in the wilderness reflected those that Adam endured, which is apparent from recalling Luke’s ending his genealogy with “the *son* of Adam, the *son* of God” (Luke 3:38), which is followed directly by the temptation narrative (beginning with “and Jesus”), thus portraying Jesus as an Adam figure undergoing temptation. Likewise the temptations are comparable to those in Eden, involving, for example, the temptation of food (Gen 3:6; Luke 4:3) and temptation of the eyes (Gen 3:6; Luke 4:5–7). Christ succeeded in just those temptations where Adam and Israel failed because he remembered God’s word and obeyed it. Jesus is also seen as true Israel by succeeding in the very temptations in which Israel failed to resist (note the Deuteronomy background of several of the citations in Matthew 4 and Luke 4).

³⁰This universal scope is pointed to further by the conclusion of v. 32 that if the elders are faithful to Paul’s admonition, then they will receive “the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

If it is true that Jesus and then his followers underwent a recapitulation of the deceptive trial launched by Satan against Adam and Eve, then the patterns of sinful behavior in that primal tribulation should be helpful as warnings not to repeat the same thing again. What was the sinful conduct in Eden that is beneficial for the church today to contemplate? How should this affect the way Christians conduct themselves today? To observe Satan's first deception and the response to it can contribute understanding about the nature of the present and future eschatological deception.

(1) First, Satan deceived Adam and Eve into breaking their covenant relationship with God.

(2) Second, part of Satan's deceptive method was to tell Eve that if she did what he said, she could "know" in a much deeper way than before and be much more enlightened (cf. Gen 3:5).

(3) Satan deceived them about their own marriage relationship, so that they did not function as "helpmeets" to help meet one another's need to defend against the Devil's attack. One way this occurred was that they did not help one another remember God's word that Satan was opposing, as we will see directly below.

(4) Satan deceives them about the lethal danger he posed. He is able to bring them into dialogue with himself without them realizing how dangerous such an apparently casual conversation like this could be.

(5) Satan contradicts God's word in Gen 2:17, denying the reality of God's coming judgment and saying, "you surely shall not die" (Gen 3:4).

(6) Satan made evil seem good, which is a mark of the latter-day Antichrist. In particular, he passes himself off as a being who posed no danger and he made sinful disobedience to God's word appear as a good course of action. He also made God to appear to have jealous motives in commanding them not to eat of the tree (Gen 3:5).

(7) Eve was deceived because she did not know God's word sufficiently or did not esteem it highly enough.

Remember that after God put Adam into the Garden in Gen 2:15 “for serving [cultivating] and guarding,” he gave Adam a threefold statement to remember by which he would be helped to “serve and guard” the Garden-temple: in Gen 2:16–17, God says, “From any tree of the garden (1) you may eat freely; but (2) from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, (3) for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.” When confronted by the satanic serpent, Eve either failed to remember God’s word accurately or intentionally changed it for her own purposes. First, she minimized their privileges by saying merely “we may eat,” whereas God had said “you may eat *freely*.” Second, Eve minimized the judgment by saying, “lest you die,” whereas God said, “you shall surely die.” Third, she maximized the prohibition by affirming, “you shall not . . . touch it,” becoming the first legalist in history (for God had originally said only that they “shall not eat . . . it”).³¹ If Adam did remember God’s word, then he did not trust in it, since he did not come to Eve’s aid when she did not recollect the word rightly in the face of the Serpent’s accusations. Adam and Eve did not remember God’s word adequately, and they “fell.” When the defense of God’s word is taken away, then all kinds of satanic lies come to fill the void, the desire to resist temptation breaks down, and sin inevitably occurs.

Jesus Christ, the Last Adam and true Israel, however, knew the word and obeyed it. Remember when the Devil tried to tempt Christ in Matthew 4? With each temptation Jesus responded to Satan by quoting from the Old Testament, from passages in Deuteronomy where Moses rebuked Israel for failing in their task. In contrast to Adam and Eve, Jesus overcame the temptations by knowing and trusting in God’s word.

Likewise, Christ’s followers “follow him wherever he goes” (Rev 14:4), including down the path of satanic temptations. The same onslaught of devilish deceptions is directed against the church as was directed against Adam and Eve and Jesus: e.g., see 2 Cor 11:2–4 and 1 Tim 2:11–14). The same kind of deceptions that entered the Garden (note again the deceptions in Eden discussed above) also enter into the church today. Like Jesus, his “body of believers” goes through the eschatological trial of deception about various aspects of God’s truth, both in the family, the covenant community, and in other areas of life. Through all manner of deception, the evil one attempts to tear us away from our faith in and loyalty to Christ. But we are to identify with

³¹See Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 134–135, who has noticed these three changes in the original wording of Gen 2:16–17.

Messiah Jesus in his “faithful witness” (Rev 1:5) through tribulation, even unto death.

The upshot is: do Christians know God’s word, do they believe it, and do they do it? If not, then the lies of the evil one will slip into our lives and churches ever so subtly. When this happens and the process is not checked and corrected, then the deceptions begin to pour in like an overflowing river (cf. Rev 12:15: “and the Serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman [the church], so that he might cause her to be swept away with the flood”). Do Christian families make God’s word the center of their homes? Do pastors set aside sufficient time to study God’s word in preparation for Sunday sermons in order to “be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15)? If not, the false teaching of those “who have gone astray from the truth” will make inroads into the church (2 Tim 2:18).

I remember some years ago that I made an appointment with an oral hygienist to check and clean my teeth, since I had not been for a checkup in a long time. While sitting in the dental chair during a two-minute break in the procedure, I glanced at some pictures on the wall directly opposite me. They pictured the progressive stages of gum disease, from healthy gums all the way to gums that appeared to be rotted. When the hygienist came back in to continue, I asked her where I was located in the series of pictures. She said that my gums were on the road heading toward the set of pictures that depicted the rotted gums. I said, “But my gums feel fine; how can they be diseased, since they do not hurt?” She responded, “That is the genius of gum disease—it does not hurt badly until it is too late.” The pictures of the stages of gum disease together with her interpretative commentary shocked me into the reality of my condition. Since then I have brushed my teeth typically two times a day and flossed every day. By so doing, I was able to halt the onset of imminent gum disease and have been able to maintain healthy gums. Sometimes deception and sin leading from it is like gum disease: we may not feel the spiritual hurt until significant harm has happened. We need God’s word to shock us into perceiving the reality of our deception and sin and spark us back into a healthy relationship with God. God’s word can shock us into the reality that there is an inaugurated end-time tribulation and that its deceptive character in our midst can cause us to be deceived.

Therefore, God’s word can jolt us back into the reality of our relation with God, when we are being lulled to spiritual sleep and into deception. The defense of God’s word will keep out the flood of the evil one’s lies

that spiritually anesthetize people and keeps them in a dazed state, which causes them to be insensitive to the destructiveness of sin.

It is at this precise point that believing that the “great tribulation” has partially begun should inspire believers to be even more on guard against sin and satanic deception. If danger from the Antichrist is believed to be a reality only for some future generation of saints, then such people now will be more susceptible to the dangerous influence of the Antichrist that is *already* at work in the present age (e.g., 2 Thess 2:7; 1 John 2:18). If you do not believe that an enemy is present, but he really is, then you will not worry about protecting yourself from that enemy. Belief in the inaugurated end-time tribulation and Antichrist should cause the church to be more vigilant about making sure she is not torn from her trust in Christ and his word. Thus, though it may not always appear that the church is presently suffering “the great tribulation,” at any given time there are always sectors of it that are suffering it and the other sectors are always under the threat.