

Part 5

The Gathering Storm

Our travelers continue down the various trails they have chosen that reflect their understanding of the Millennium. Some believe we are in it now and that it's a spiritual reality (Amillennial). Others believe it something that will happen on earth, and it's our job to make it happen (Postmillennial), or that it happens in the natural course of redemptive history (Historic Premillennial), or that it's entirely in the future and has nothing to do with us right now (Dispensational Premillennial).

As everyone walks along, the sunny sky gives way to a gathering storm up ahead. You can smell a change in the air and hear faint rumblings of thunder somewhere in the distance.

Let's join each group and see how they are responding.

The Rapture and Tribulation from an Amillennial perspective:

Our friends on this trail see the clouds ahead and put on their raincoats. This is not uncommon, and so they carry on encouraged that a sovereign and good God controls the weather.

This is nothing new. There have always been scattered showers and even powerful storms along the way. It's been far worse in the past and they are ready for whatever comes in the future. The Lord will provide for us as he always has, and this is a great comfort. Both Jesus and the Apostle John warned about the events, and they have been occurring on a regular basis ever since. The events described are a symbolic representation of the cycle of suffering that Christians have endured since Pentecost.

Explanation:

The next event will be the Rapture as part of the Second Coming (one event), when Christ gives a trumpet blast of victory and invites his children to meet him in the air so they can return together in glorious triumph.

It's like when ancient kings would be greeted by adoring citizens on their way back into the city. The people would rush outside the city gates and join him a few miles out so they could all come back in together, singing, dancing, and jeering at the captured enemies dragged along behind in disgrace. What a party!

Summary:

The final verdict on the storm clouds from the group on the Amillennial trail is that Christ is now, and still on the throne, and he will one day return, calling us up to meet him in the air so we can immediately return with him to the earth in triumph, and he can establish the Eternal State, or the New Heavens and New Earth.

The Rapture and Tribulation from a Postmillennial perspective:

Our brothers on this trail love the rain. The more the better. They prepare themselves to walk on no matter what, like divine postal carriers who will never stop delivering the mail. This is actually a good sign because it means they are being effective in their fight against the darkness. Bring it on!

Christians need to fight!

Little patience is shown for the politically ambivalent. We need more Christians in government! They will turn us back around. Bring back the Moral Majority! This is all to be expected as we fight the good fight to make the world Christian.

There is no reason to fear because God is on our side and he will make sure we win in the end. Others have gone before us and given us a foundation to build on, and as we learn better strategies for fighting the wicked sinners, we will overcome.

Christ is waiting for us to do our part, and has warned us that the battle will be fierce, and many will die in the struggle, but that's the life of a soldier of the cross, and once we turn the nations back to God, all sacrifice will seem miniscule. The victorious ones will witness the Second Coming, having faithfully prepared the way for the King.

Explanation:

The next event will be the Rapture as part of the Second Coming (one event), unfolding, more or less in the same way the believers on the Amillennial trail see it.

Summary:

The final verdict on the storm clouds from the group on the Postmillennial trail is that Christ is on the throne, but waiting for his soldiers to crush the remaining insurgents. At that point he will return, calling us up to meet him in the air so we can immediately return with him to the earth and share in his triumph, and he can establish the Eternal State, or the New Heavens and New Earth.

The Rapture and Tribulation from a Historic Premillennial perspective:

Over on the trails that understand the Millennium to be a future event, we find our brothers from the Historic Premillennial group reaching into their backpacks and pulling out their ponchos. Though no one is necessarily afraid of getting struck by lightning, it's still proof that we're moving closer to the day of salvation. God has used storms in the past to bring people to him, and they are sure this one will be no different.

Suffering on some level is to be expected because we are not of this world. We are called to be salt and light, but also to put no ultimate hope in this world. Things will likely get harder for believers as history and Scripture has clearly taught. We should expect to suffer as our Lord did and remain faithful till the end. Our focus is on living out the gospel of Jesus Christ in spite of the cost.

Overall there will be more good days than bad, and in the end the sun will come out again. Then the Son will return, calling us up to meet him in the air so we can return with him to the earth in triumph, and he can fulfill the purpose of the Millennial Kingdom.

Explanation:

The next event will be the Rapture as part of the Second Coming (one event), unfolding, more or less, in the same way the believers on the Amillennial and Postmillennial trail see it.

Summary:

The final verdict on the storm clouds from the group on the Historic Premillennial trail is that Christ is on the throne but waiting until his purposes on earth for both Israel and the church have been fulfilled. This includes a time of severe testing that will precede the Rapture and Second Coming. At that point he will return, calling us up to meet him in the air so we can immediately return with him to the earth and share in his triumph, and he can establish the Eternal State, or the New Heavens and New Earth.

The Rapture and Tribulation from a Dispensational Premillennial perspective:

As we approach our brothers on this trail, we witness a heated debate. There appears to be no clear consensus on how serious the storm should be taken. Some believe it will ever rain on them, others put on a light jacket because they will certainly go through at least half the storm, and the rest put on full survival suits because they know it's going to be really bad, and they will go through it all. The group is quite divided over this.

At least they all agree that the previous storms (persecution of the church) was just a foreshadowing of what is to come. It will get much worse in the future. Jesus and the Apostle John warned in detail what will happen in the future. There is a clear map and chronological sequence of events. That terrible storm is far off, and the majority doubt it will affect them at all because they believe that storm is not for believers, but for unbelievers.

Explanation:

Therefore, the next event is for Christ to come back for a secret rescue mission called the Rapture (distinct from the Second Coming), when he calls us up to heaven, and we'll spend the last part of the Great Tribulation waiting for the final judgment to consume the wicked.

To be fair, only some on the trail think this rescue will happen before the storm comes, others some think it will happen in the middle, some right before it gets really bad, and still others think we'll go through all of it.

What they all agree on however, is after that, Christ comes back a second time, with us, to fulfill the purposes of the Millennial Kingdom during a literal thousand year reign.

Summary:

The next event will be the Tribulation, but it's unclear if the church will be here for that. The only thing the group will say for sure is that Christ is on the throne already, but waiting to return for his church sometime in the future. When he does this will be the Rapture, and believers will either bypass the Tribulation (Pre-Tribulation), experience the first half of it (Mid-Tribulation), avoid the worst of it (Pre-wrath Rapture), or be forced to through all of it (Post-Tribulation).

The group also agrees that after the Tribulation, the Lord will return, and this will be the Second Coming, and he can establish his literally one-thousand-year rule on earth. After that is over, he will destroy and recreate the earth, bringing in the Eternal State, or the New Heavens and New Earth.

Questions:

1. Why do you think there is so much disagreement over the Rapture (and its timing)?
2. What is it about Dispensational Premillennialism that allows for so many different views of the Rapture, Tribulation, and Second Coming?
3. Of the four views on the Rapture advanced by Premillennialists, which one is *least* popular? How many of the four had you heard of before this class?
4. Give one passage of Scripture that would seem to imply that believers will endure persecution during the Tribulation, and one that suggests they won't.
5. If you believe that Christian will go through the Tribulation (regardless of your view on the Millennium), what Scripture verses would you memorize in order to strengthen you to endure during that time?