

The Great Tribulation

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Holy Scripture forewarns the church of Jesus Christ that she will suffer great tribulation in the days that lie ahead. Tribulation is suffering that a man endures because he confesses Jesus Christ by word and by life. It is suffering inflicted on the members of Jesus' Church by the ungodly, unbelieving men who persecute them.

In the future, there will arise a great kingdom headed by a mighty leader which the Scriptures name Antichrist (Rev.13; II Thess.2:3-12; I John 2:18). This man and his kingdom will gain the allegiance, for a time, of all the nations of the world. Because this world power is motivated by hatred for God and God's Christ, it will persecute the church of God. This coming persecution will be the worst that the people of God have ever experienced in all the history of the world. This persecution will be the "Great Tribulation."

Jesus Himself foretold all of this in Matthew 24, as He answered the disciples question, "... when shall all these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world" (vs.3)? In verse 21, He said, "For then shall be great tribulation such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be." As is true generally of what Jesus says in this chapter, He refers, first, to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the Romans and to the suffering that it brought on the inhabitants of Jerusalem. But at the same time, Jesus refers to the event of which the destruction of Jerusalem was a type, namely, the affliction of the church in the days that immediately precede the return of Jesus from heaven and the end of the world at His coming. It is a characteristic of prophecy that the prophet foretells one great event, which is nevertheless made up of a type and a reality, a typical fulfillment of the prophecy and a final "real" fulfillment. That Jesus, in Matthew 24, prophesies a great tribulation at the very end of world history is evident from the fact that He is answering the disciples' question, "what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" This is also evident from the fact that in verse 29, 30 Jesus states that the tribulation will be followed immediately by astounding catastrophes in the heavens and by the literal, personal return of Jesus Christ in the clouds of heaven.

One of the signs, therefore, of the imminent coming of Jesus Christ and of the end of the world will be a future "Great Tribulation."

The people who will endure suffering in the great tribulation will be the believers, the true and faithful members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus calls them "the elect" in Matthew 24:22: "for the elect's sake those days will be shortened." The elect are those persons whom God has eternally chosen in Jesus Christ out of all nations, Jews and Gentiles, to be members of Jesus' Church and to enjoy God's gracious gift of salvation. They show themselves in the world as those who testify of Jesus Christ and keep the commandments of God (Rev.12:17). Scripture does not comfort the true Church of the elect child of God by promising us that we will not have to go through the distress of the last days. What the Lord said to the early Christian Church of Smyrna holds for the Church also at the end of the ages. Christ told the church that persecution was impending. The persecution, instigated by the Devil himself, would be severe, for the believers would be imprisoned and some would die. "Ye shall have tribulation," Christ told the Church. Their consolation was not that they would escape tribulation, but that the sovereign Christ is Lord also of persecution and that He rewards His people with heaven's life and glory, when they faithfully endure tribulation. The Word of Christ to the Church in the world, then and now, is the announcement that she will have tribulation, and the solemn call to her to be faithful in that tribulation, even unto death (see Rev.2:8-11).

It is not at all strange that the Church will pass through great tribulation at the end of the ages. The people of God have suffered persecution for Christ's sake in all ages. Hebrews 11:23-26 says of Moses that his choice to ally himself with the people of God was, by virtue of that fact, a choice "to suffer affliction." It was true already in the Old Testament that to show oneself as a child of God meant bearing "the reproach of Christ." Hebrews 11 continues with a description of the tribulation of Old Testament believers: "mockings and scourgings... bonds and imprisonment... destitute, afflicted, tormented..." (vs.36-38). It is the same regarding the church of the New Testament. Jesus describes the lot of the Church in the world always in John 16:33: "In the world ye shall have tribulation." Paul preached to the newly established churches that "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). To Timothy, Paul wrote, "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer

persecution” (II Timothy 3:12). The great tribulation of the Church at the end will not be a new thing. Its only exceptional characteristic will be its severity, its greatness.

Some might suppose that the church does not have tribulation in our time, at least, not the Church in the United States. But this is a mistaken notion. If the Church purely preaches the gospel of God’s gracious salvation in Jesus Christ alone and condemns every form of man’s attempt to save himself, whether by his own saviors or by his own good works or by his alleged free will, the Church will be hated today. If the Church insistently calls men to a holy life and condemns all unholiness as God does in the Bible, the Church will be reproached today. For example, if the Church condemns as sin all divorce, except that due to adultery of one’s mate (Matthew 5:31,32); all remarriage while an original partner lives (Mark 10:11,12; Luke 16:18; I Cor.7:39); all revolution against the civil government (Rom.13:1-7); all abuse of the worker by the employer (I Peter 2:18-25), the Church will experience great tribulation in A.D. 2000, as she did in A.D. 70.

Why must the people of God, the church, endure the great tribulation at the end of the world? One can just as well put the question this way: Why must the believing church always enter the kingdom through much tribulation (Acts 14:22)? She must! But why? Suffering tribulation is a necessity, first, because the Devil’s hatred for God is always directed against those who love and worship God. The Devil, with those men whom he has blinded (II Cor.4:3, 4), makes war on the true Church. This warfare will climax at the end of the world in the Great Tribulation (see Rev. 12). In all times, and also at the end, the only way in which the Church can escape the persecution is the way of denying Christ and worshipping the Devil (see Rev.13:4, 15). Suffering tribulation is a necessity, secondly, because of the sovereign will of God. God leads the church through tribulation. He does so for the church’s good. By tribulation, God chastises His beloved children (Heb.12:1-14). He tries the Church, so that she may be purified and made ready for her eternal home with Him (I Peter 1:7). Thus, the tribulation of the church serves the glorifying of God. The church is faithful in tribulation, sealing her confession of God’s glory and grace with blood. Therefore, the church must not desperately long to evade tribulation. She ought to consider it a privilege and a gift from God to suffer for Christ’s sake (Philippians 1:29).

Although we know that we will suffer in the approaching tribulation, we are not terrified. The little flock of Christ is comforted by the assurance that the Great Shepherd will be with her in the deepest depths of the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). She trusts the sovereign grace of God in Christ to keep her faithful in the hour of trial. And all the while she has her hope securely fastened on Christ’s return and the life and glory which she will then enjoy forever. In addition, the Lord has promised to shorten the days of the tribulation for our sakes (Matt. 24:22). He, and not the Devil, will rule at that time, and He will cut short the oppression of His people by His personal, bodily coming in the clouds of heaven (see Matt. 24:29,30; II Thess. 1). When the Great Tribulation comes upon the Church, she will know that her redemption is at hand.

It is important that the Church now live in the awareness of the coming tribulation and its severity. It must not fall upon her unexpectedly. The Church must be prepared. The practical purpose of the Holy Spirit revealing the great tribulation to the Church in Scripture is that we may prepare ourselves. We do this by taking heed, more and more, to the Word of God, the Scriptures; by being diligent and fervent in prayer to God for His Holy Spirit and grace; and by removing our hope from all things earthly and setting it on our Lord Jesus Christ and His coming.