

# What is the Great Tribulation?

*By Rev. D. Earl Cripe, Ph.D.*

## *The Great Tribulation*

If this is the last dispensation — if that is what the Bible means to tell us — then what about the tribulation? When does it come in my doctrine? Many Bible students are very sure that it comes during a certain period of time on this earth, after the Church is taken out. Having shared that view for many years I am aware of the interpretive steps that lead to such a conclusion. But with deference to you and others who believe and teach that way, I feel obliged to point out that the Bible doesn't make that statement in so many words. I would like to share with you some passages of the Scripture, and interpretations of them, that lead me to a different conclusion.

**Matt 24:21 For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.**

**Matt 24:22 And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.**

**Matt 24:24 For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.**

This is the famous passage in which Jesus was telling the disciples what the sign of His coming and of the end of the world would be. Jesus described many things for them, and He called this coming period a time of great tribulation. In fact He said that it would be greater tribulation than had ever been known before. He did go on, in this passage, to describe some things that would happen after the tribulation of these days, but He put the tribulation itself in a time period which He said would begin during their lifetimes.

It could be that some of this had to do with the nation of Israel and how they would be treated by the other nations of the world after the Kingdom was taken from them and they were cut off from being God's people because of their abominations. Perhaps He was telling them they would then come in for a vengeance, at the hands of those against whom God had protected them for so long, that would be so severe that were it not for the elect among them they would be completely eliminated from the face of the earth. They were still God's people by national covenant then, and such a discussion would have been in order. Certainly something similar to that has happened to the Jews down through the centuries since Jesus took the Kingdom from them and gave it to other people through the changing of the covenant.

One would not be able, however, to read out of this a message to all of God's faithful to beware of what would happen to them for their faith and their identity with Him. He spoke of this time as one in which the love of many would become cold because of rampant iniquity around them. This has a familiar ring when we look at what has happened to the first love and the first works in the Church today,

and why. He also talked of this time as one in which the Gospel would be preached in all the world. In other words Jesus said the great tribulation would start in their life times and continue until the time of the end, as described in verses 29 through 31.

**Acts 14:21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch,**

**Acts 14:22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God.**

In this passage St. Paul and Barnabas went to the churches comforting and encouraging them concerning the trials and troubles that they were having and exhorting them to hang in there and keep the faith. They identified the Kingdom as obedience to God, and told them that the Kingdom of God could only be entered by undergoing much tribulation. Here the undergoing of tribulation is identified as being a *present experience*.

**Rom 5:3 And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;**

**Rom 5:4 And patience, experience; and experience, hope:**

**Rom 5:5 And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.**

The Christian is not only to understand that he is to undergo tribulation in his life of service, but he is to rejoice in it. That is because tribulation is good for him. It purges away the fleshly things of impatience, immaturity, and fearfulness, and it brings him closer to Christ. This is tribulation, as Jesus said, that is more difficult than anything God's servants have undergone in other dispensations. Indeed we would not be able to endure it if it were not for the comfort and strength of the Holy Spirit. But we do not lose anything of enduring value by it, and what we do lose we are better off without.

**Rom 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?**

**Rom 8:36 As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.**

**Rom 8:37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.**

Not only is it allowed by God that we undergo tribulation in this present life, but it is specifically designed by Him for us. We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Self-denial and dying-to-self invades not only the physical realm, but the emotional and intellectual as well. All of these mortal treasures are sacrificeable in the quest for the eternal and immortal. None of the tribulations, no matter how severe, can separate us from God's love. They may, however, separate us from our friends, our esteem in the eyes of our peers, and even our

heads. We will, and we do, experience these things as the result of serving God.

**Rom 12:12 Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer;**

This passage, too, acknowledges that the Christian has tribulation in this dispensation. As a matter of the transformed, renewed mind, he is to accept this condition with patience.

**I Cor 4:9 For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men.**

**I Cor 4:12 And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it:**

**I Cor 4:13 Being defamed, we entreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day.**

**I Cor 4:16 Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me.**

Through the apostles God gave a picture of what His faithful servants are to encounter in this world. This was not something that happened to them as a result of circumstances alone; God ordained it this way for His, and for our, glory. We are not only to expect and endure, but to press for the kind of ministry that leads to those experiences.

**II Cor 1:3 Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort;**

**II Cor 1:4 Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.**

**II Cor 1:5 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.**

**II Cor 1:8 For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life:**

**II Cor 1:9 But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead:**

St. Paul not only confirms the fact of the tribulation of the saints, and the purpose and benefit of it, but he also shows the severity of it. It is too great for the Christian in his natural capacities; in fact it is death to him. It is only through the power of the indwelling God that we are able to endure. In these experiences the redemptive principle of death and resurrection is enacted. They had the sentence of death in themselves, but God delivered. How did He deliver? Did He spare them this death to self and to the outward man? No, He allowed them to die, and resurrected them: "...that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead..." Tribulation did not mean, in this instance, a physical death, though it has for many saints; but it did mean a real kind of death that tries the servant of God to his full capacities, and more. Satanic pressures and

attacks in the moral, emotional, mental realm are no less real and difficult than in the physical; in fact perhaps they are more so. Before Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Ghost God's people were not able to endure this kind of trouble and they were not asked to do so. There had never been tribulation like this before and, fortunately for God's people, when this time of our travail is over there will never be anything like it again.

**II Cor 7:4 Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my glorying of you: I am filled with comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation.**

St. Paul again acknowledged the tribulation that he underwent on behalf of the saints, and said that he rejoiced in it since by it so much was accomplished for them.

**I Thess 3:1 Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone;**

**I Thess 3:2 And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith:**

**I Thess 3:3 That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.**

**I Thess 3:4 For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.**

**I Thess 3:5 For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain.**

From this passage we see that the Church of those days was taught that they would undergo tribulation. When it happened they should not be surprised by it, or to think that it was strange or unreasonable. They were not to be discouraged or to have the zeal of their faith dampened. Even though they had been so taught the Apostle was still worried that Satan would be able to defeat them because of these things so he sent to have them exhorted and encouraged again. One is caused to wonder how many Christian people, down through the centuries, have been tripped by Satan because they have not been thoroughly taught that the Church is to undergo, severe tribulation, and that it is the normal experience of those who are living in close harmony with God. In fact it seems that in many instances the Church has been invaded by the vain reasonings of modern day "Job's comforters" who have set forth a self-styled doctrine that does not conform to the Scriptures on this point. All who live Godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution, St. Paul told Timothy (II Tim. 3:12), and if we want to reign with Him we must suffer with Him. To not suffer for His sake is to deny Him (II Tim. 2:10-12). It is appointed to us to suffer with Him (Phil. 1:29), and we are to adopt that way of thinking. Those who have begun to suffer for Christ's sake have stopped living lusty, carnal, self-centered lives, and have begun to live for Christ and His Kingdom (I Pet. 4:1, 2). It is common to hear saints praising God that they do not have to go

through the tribulation. It is a sad commentary on modern day discipleship, and one is caused to wonder what they think God has left them in this world for. To deny the truth concerning the suffering of Christ's disciples in this world is to reject the responsibility and privilege of this time of the Bride's travail, and the eternal fruitfulness that can, and must be brought about by it.

**Rev 1:9 I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.**

Here St. John makes it clear that in this Kingdom of God that he shared with all saints, there was, and was to be, tribulation. In fact it was as a matter of tribulation that St. John had been banished to the Isle. St. John was in the Kingdom and in tribulation together with the Churches to whom the letter was written. Both were present realities at the beginning of the Church age.

**Rev 2:9** I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

**Rev 2:10** Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

Jesus told the Church at Smyrna that He knew about their tribulation. He said that they were rich because of it, and of their poverty for His sake. He did not offer to relieve them from it, but told them that they would have tribulation ten days, during which Satan would be permitted to cast some of them into prison to try them. He told them to be faithful unto death, in order to earn the crown of life. When we come to the chapter on the relationship of Revelation to this subject, we will talk more about the use of numbers in Revelation so I don't want to get into that too much now. I will just say that the term "ten days" was symbolic, and represented the whole time that they would be in the world. The call was to be faithful unto death.

**Rev 7:9 After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;**

**Rev 7:10 And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.**

**Rev 7:11 And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God,**

**Rev 7:12 Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.**

**Rev 7:13 And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?**

**Rev 7:14 And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.**

**Rev 7:15 Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.**

St. John saw a great throng of people, from all of the nations, from every tribe and from every family, which no man could put a number on. This does not mean that there were too many to be numbered, but rather, that no man was to know how many there are to be. They stood before Christ. They were clothed in white robes, a figure of righteous behavior through the power and the gift of the Holy Spirit. They had palms in their hands. This symbolized their fruitfulness to God. They had one united voice, through the unity of the Spirit, with which they praised God for the great salvation which He had provided through Christ, the Lamb. The declaration of this great host invoked worship to the Father from the four beasts and from the Elders. I will go into the symbolism of the four beasts, and the Elders at this time, for we are looking at the great tribulation the great tribulation. By the lives and the voices of this united host God was blessed and glorified, He was extolled for His wisdom, He was thanked, and He was honored, and praised for His attributes of all powerfulness and almightiness.

St. John was asked, by one of the Elders, who these people were, where they came from, and what their being arrayed in white robes

meant. He said that he could not answer and that he would have to be told. The Elder told him that these had come out of great tribulation. Actually the translation should not read, "these are they which came," but rather, "these are they which come." Because they come out of great tribulation they are permitted to stand before God and serve Him day and night in His temple. In coming out of great tribulation they have purified themselves. They have clothed themselves in righteousness through dying with Christ, and living with Him. It is what St. John meant when he said: "Little children, let no man deceive you; he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother." (I John 3:7-10). It is what Jesus meant when He said: "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out..." (Rev. 3:12). God has indeed made the provision for us in our Christian lives, but it will do us no good if we don't take advantage of it. Those who will have the close, intimate fellowship with God must be overcomers. In order to do that they must endure tribulation. They must endure it in that they put themselves in the position of encountering it. They must endure it in that they are not overcome by it, but are steadfast, and unwavering in their faith. We can overcome tribulation, and Satan, who is the enemy of the soul,

through the blood of the Lamb. This is not speaking of something future, but of something that is present. That is the whole purpose of it. It is to reveal Christ to us, and how it is for those who will obey and follow Him, no matter what the cost. That is why righteous living and fruitfulness are pictured for us by the white robes, and the palm branches. This is not a select few from a private dispensation, but the faithful of Christ's Church, from its inception to the end of the world. It is a truth that is completely consistent with what we have reviewed here of the teachings of Jesus and His apostles.

One may think he has a just reason to deny that the sufferings of the apostles and the martyrs of the faith, down through the centuries, have amounted to great tribulation. This would include those who were beheaded, who were killed with the sword, who were hunted like wild animals, who were made a spectacle of by being dipped in pitch and burned as torches in Nero's gardens, who were raped, humiliated, brutalized, and murdered in the arenas for the sport of the ungodly, and who suffered every other kind of mental, emotional, and physical torture and humiliation that the devil and his hosts could devise up, believing that in exchange for this kind of tribulation they would receive the close, intimate fellowship with God in the present, and the great reward of the future that is promised to those who are willing to follow their Lord and Savior to the death. A sober note of caution needs to be sounded at this point. If God was so intent upon having His servants know what to expect, how to react to it, and what would be the reward of enduring it, that He not only ordained all of these Scriptures in the letters to the Churches, but gave the Revelation of Jesus Christ to show His servants how it would

be, should you and I not be careful about trying to deny them that comfort? How serious an error it is to take these great divine explanations away from people and leave them with the belief that their sufferings for Christ really shouldn't be at all, or if they should be then they are not very significant or purposeful; and that the real significance and blessing of suffering for Christ's sake, in great tribulation, belongs to another people in another era? I believe that if it is an error to teach such a thing, it is a cruel one, and I would like to see comprehensive Biblical justification for such teaching. Where are your Scriptures to say that the Church is not in tribulation has not had tribulation and is not to think in terms of tribulation—that the great tribulation belongs to another era. Again you are reduced, or so it seems to me, to dialectic, materialistic explanations of the great symbolic book of Revelation to try to find such a doctrine, though Revelation does not teach it at all. Revelation does not say that the “one thousand year reign” is after the second coming of Christ. Read it again and read it carefully. That may be what you think it means, but it is not what it says.

When is the great tribulation? It began at Pentecost when the dispensation of the Church became a reality, and it ends with the second coming of Christ, just like everything else in this last dispensation does.

What is the great tribulation? It is that suffering of persecution and opposition in this world for the sake of Christ, that every faithful Christian is appointed to endure.

Why is it greater tribulation than there ever was before? Because during this dispensation of the fullness of times Satan is allowed to

war against us with a fury that has never been permitted before; and because now, with the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are able to bear persecution that man has never been able to endure before.

Why will there never be tribulation like it again? Because when this dispensation is over the work will be done, this world will be destroyed, and in the new creation there will never be anything to cause such trials and troubles. Like it is with a bride in the human family, the time of our travail in bringing children into the family of God, and in raising them to maturity, will be over, and the time for enjoying what has been accomplished will stretch out before us forever.