

About Tribulation and Persecution

Tribulation and persecution is certainly not the most popular topic and, as a result, the subject is largely ignored. It can be easy to “cherry pick” as we study the Bible and avoid those difficult passages that we don’t want to deal with. But Psalms 119:160 (NASB) says, “The sum of Your word is truth...” As a friend of mine once said, “The sum of God’s word is truth, not some of it.” But honest students of the Word of God cannot be selective. The Word is truth (John 17:17) and the truth makes us free (John 8:32).

Faith Not Fear

The previous chapter called in to question the escape rapture doctrine. When making this case, I have often been amused at how difficult it is for many people to even consider the possibility that Christians might not be leaving earth before the Kingdom appears. What I see in many faces is unmistakable — fear! Why? Because, to say that the Church will not leave earth at the rapture automatically translates to being on the earth during *The Great Tribulation*, which in turn, conjures mental images of absolute horror and unthinkable world-wide suffering. [1]

I don’t want to downplay the seriousness of persecution and tribulation, but the sensationalism that has been associated with the Great Tribulation and its use to promote the escape doctrine is truly unfortunate. This issue has become so emotionally charged that it is difficult for many to hear the truth. Too much of our evangelism has been based on an apocalyptic get-to-heaven message, that uses fear as a major motivator, instead of a strategic get-heaven-here message that uses vision as motivation. [2] Our doctrines, including our message of salvation, should be faith-based, not fear-based.

This, once again, raises the issue of preaching the gospel of the Kingdom versus the gospel. In *Chapter 2: Politics of the Kingdom* the point was made that Jesus and the apostles preached the gospel *of the Kingdom*, that is the coming government of God to the earth, while much of modern Christianity has simply preached the gospel of salvation. While salvation is certainly a good thing to preach, a salvation message that fails to give proper emphasis to or leaves out the hope and expectation of the kingdom of God and peace on earth can easily move from faith, responsibility and victory to fear, irresponsibility, and retreat. [3]

Therefore, let’s lay down fear and see what the Bible says about the great tribulation, persecution, and of course, protection. Hearing the Word produces faith and faith is the victory that overcomes the world.

“The” Great Tribulation

The phrase “*The* Great Tribulation” has been used so much that one would think that there is surely an entire book of the Bible by that title. But the fact is, the phrase “*the* great tribulation” (with the article *the*) is never used in the King James and New American Standard versions and used only one time in the New King James and New International Versions.

Revelation 7:14 (KJV)

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

Revelation 7:14 (NKJV-emphasis added)

14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

This one little word has big implications in this discussion. In English grammar, there are two articles, "the" and "a" which are used before nouns. The former is definite (indicating something specific or that there is only one) and the latter is indefinite (indicating that there are more than one). It is not so simple in Greek where there is only one article with many forms. Apparently the translators of different versions disagree on whether the tribulation in Revelation 7:14 is referring to one period of tribulation or to tribulation in general. [4]

The point of all this is that those of whom Revelation 7:14 speaks of may refer to all those through history who have endured terrible suffering, not just those who went through a specific period of tribulation at the end of the age. Persecution against the people of God has been going on ever since the days of Noah before the flood. Most of the world knows this, but only where people have not experienced it, like America where we have been blessed with extraordinary peace, does the mention of persecution and tribulation seem distant, removed or unbiblical.

When is the Great Tribulation that Jesus Spoke of?

Jesus did, however, speak of a tribulation prior to His return which would be different than any other.

Matthew 24:21 (KJV)

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.

What makes this tribulation spoken of in Matthew 24 unique is not clear. For those people who have suffered torture and cruel deaths throughout history, the term "great tribulation" would be an accurate description. Therefore, broadness in scope seems to be most logical understanding. When Jesus said, "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be." He was undoubtedly referring to the prophecy of Daniel.

Daniel 12:1-2 (KJV)

1 And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book.

2 And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Though some associate the tribulation period of Matthew 24:21 with the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., others understand it to be talking about a period of time near the end of the age because of the phrase in Daniel 12, "those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,

some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt”, which seems to be a reference to the resurrection at the end of the age.

The Whole World?

Connecting this discussion to passages such as Revelation 3:10 which speaks of “... the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world...”, it is easy to assume that this tribulation will be all encompassing and there will be no location on the planet that is not consumed by it.

But what is meant by the term “whole earth” or “whole world?” We automatically assume that it means the entire planet. But when we look at the context we can see that references to the whole earth in the Bible are often a form of hyperbole used as emphasis. In Exodus we read how locusts covered the face of the whole earth. But does that mean that locusts covered all of Africa, Europe, Asia, etc? No. In fact, the context shows that locusts only covered the land of Egypt. Therefore, the phrase, “covered the face” of the earth was hyperbole used to emphasize the severity of the locusts over the land of Egypt.

Exodus 10:13-15 (KJV)

13 And Moses stretched forth his rod over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day, and all that night; and when it was morning, the east wind brought the locusts.

14 And the locusts went up over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the coasts of Egypt: very grievous were they; before them there were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall be such.

15 For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt.

We also read in Colossians, which was written about 64 AD, that the gospel had been preached to every creature under heaven. The same is true of Romans 1:8.

Colossians 1:23 (KJV)

23 ... the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister;

Romans 1:8 (KJV)

8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. ;

But what about the Far East or the continents of Australia and the Americas? There were entire civilizations in the western hemisphere at that time. Are we to assume that the gospel had spread there by 64 AD? No, of course not. We are still finding people groups that have never heard the gospel. It was simply a way of saying that the gospel had spread to every part of the world that they were connected to.

Jeremiah prophesied how Babylon had become a desolation and referred to it as the “hammer of the whole earth” (See Jer 50:23). But the geographical area that Babylon ruled is historically known and it was not the whole earth. It was the general area we know as the Middle East, including Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, parts of Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

Again, depending upon the context, “whole earth” refers to the geographical area surrounding Jerusalem and the Mideast.

Returning to Dan 12:1-2 (see above), it says “...there will be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation.” There are two things in this passage that seem to indicate that this “time of trouble” is specific to Israel and the surrounding area instead of the whole planet. First is the reference to Michael, the prince who watches over Daniel’s people (Israel). Second is the phrase, “since there was a nation.” Both of these indicate that what is being said is specific to Israel.[5]

The Scope of Antichrist’s Power

Daniel’s vision of the little horn rising to power is understood by many to be the Antichrist rising to power at the end of the age. The idea of the Antichrist, as a ruler gaining control of the entire world is another case of sensationalism, much like the sensationalism and fear associated with the Great Tribulation. Contrary to some teachings, this man at the end time, represented by the little horn in Daniel’s vision, will not gain total power. Daniel Chapter 11 describes some of the warfare that will take place:

Daniel 11:40-45 (KJV)

40 And at the time of the end shall the king of the south push at him: and the king of the north shall come against him like a whirlwind, with chariots, and with horsemen, and with many ships; and he shall enter into the countries, and shall overflow and pass over.

41 He shall enter also into the glorious land, and many countries shall be overthrown: but these shall escape out of his hand, even Edom, and Moab, and the chief of the children of Ammon.

42 He shall stretch forth his hand also upon the countries: and the land of Egypt shall not escape.

43 But he shall have power over the treasures of gold and of silver, and over all the precious things of Egypt: and the Libyans and the Ethiopians shall be at his steps.

44 But tidings out of the east and out of the north shall trouble him: therefore he shall go forth with great fury to destroy, and utterly to make away many.

45 And he shall plant the tabernacles of his palace between the seas in the glorious holy mountain; yet he shall come to his end, and none shall help him.

First he is attacked by kings from the South and the North, and he overthrows many, but it does not say all. Then we see that news from the east and the north trouble him, which is apparently news of armies coming against him, and he goes out to war against them. Again he destroys many, but not all. The identity of all those who fight against him is not clear, but we can see from this passage that this “Antichrist” is involved in war from start to finish. Though he is formidable, this indicates that some nations never come under his power and will align themselves against him militarily.[6]

Persecution In General

Even if the references to the whole world and the Great Tribulation are speaking of Israel and the Mideast, that does not mean that persecution and tribulation will never come to other parts of the earth. It already has. Christians have been persecuted and killed in many places outside the Mideast. Jesus said: "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. (John 15:20 NKJV).

Persecution and tribulation will always be present to some extent when we speak the truth of God's Word. In Jesus' Parable of the Sower, we read about the Word that was sown on rocky soil. It sprang up immediately but had no depth of root and endured only a while. Why? Because tribulation and persecution came because of the Word. (Matt 13:21). [7]

Right here in America, we are seeing an increase of persecution against Christians. There are so many examples that I am almost past being shocked. There is a growing demonically inspired hatred for Christians in our culture. Exactly what the future will look like is not clear, but the fact is, persecution against Christians is not coming to our nation, it is already here. Some of the questions that we should be asking are:

- How intense will it get?
- Will it affect me personally?
- How can I prepare for it?
- What can I do to reverse it?

I can personally testify that I would like to just ignore these things and live in denial. I know that we all have personal lives and dealing with our own issues can be plenty to bear at times. But we must also be people who understand the times and not simply react to circumstances after the fact, but be prepared in advance to provide answers for those who are not prepared. Paul prepared the church regarding the affliction to come, so that they would not be shaken or moved: [8]

1 Thessalonians 3:3-4 (KJV)

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

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.

2 Timothy 3:12 (KJV)

12 Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

Philippians 1:29 (KJV)

29 For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake;

Protection From Tribulation

There is an abundance of scriptures regarding the persecution of Christians. Yet we know that many people have been born, lived out their lives as Christians, and never had to endure serious persecution or tribulation. This has been particularly true of America. But if we will be on the planet when the great tribulation of which Jesus spoke arrives, whatever it looks like, will we be protected? That is a good question, one for which I do not have an absolute answer. But even Jesus, just before His crucifixion, prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Mat 26:39). We can pray in the same way.

The Bible gives us many words of comfort on this issue; several were cited in the previous chapter, one of which promises that those who persevere (persevering in itself can be

difficult) will be kept from the hour of trial (Rev 3:10). This is similar to Jesus praying for us saying, "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one (John 17:15). I am also reminded of how the plague of flies and of hail that came upon Egypt did not come to Goshen, where God's people lived (Ex 8:22; 9:26), and of Luke 19:10 which says, "Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you." Paul also encouraged Timothy regarding deliverance in the midst of tribulation: [9]

2 Timothy 4:17-18 (KJV)

17 Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.

18 And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Keep the Kingdom in Focus

The most important thing is to remember the goal and avoid getting focused on tribulation. Our focus is the King and the Kingdom of God, even though that is exactly the reason we encounter opposition. [10]

2 Thessalonians 1:4-5 (KJV)

4 So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure:

5 Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer:

When Jesus endured the unspeakable suffering of the cross, He did not look at the momentary suffering, but the eternal joy that was set before Him. Therefore, we too should look to Him knowing that if we are called to suffer with Him, we shall also be glorified with Him. Consider these verses:

Hebrews 12:1-2 (KJV)

1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (KJV)

17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;

18 While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Romans 8:17 (KJV)

17 And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

A Dream about Protection

In closing this chapter on Tribulation and Persecution, I would like to share a dream that I once had which brought me comfort. I wrote the dream down and began to search the scriptures for the symbolism that I had seen.

I was standing on a flat place on the side of a mountain on the edge of a precipice. From below, the paw of a bear made of stone and ten times larger than I, rose up until it towered over me. Then it fell toward me as if to crush me, but as it was about to hit me, it shattered and fell away without touching me. Then a bear came up from the same cliff and tried to attack but I struck it with my sword and it fell backward off the cliff.

The scriptures I found brought me great encouragement. I will leave the interpretation up to you.

1 Samuel 17:37 (KJV)

37 David said moreover, The Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine. And Saul said unto David, Go, and the Lord be with thee.

Jeremiah 51:25 (KJV)

25 Behold, I am against thee, O destroying mountain, saith the Lord, which destroyest all the earth: and I will stretch out mine hand upon thee, and roll thee down from the rocks, and will make thee a burnt mountain.

Nahum 1:5-7 (KJV)

5 The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence, yea, the world, and all that dwell therein.

6 Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him.

7 The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him.

Closing Thoughts

This chapter was not intended to provide specific answers regarding persecution and tribulation and how things will develop. It has simply established the scriptural basis for multiple possibilities. Just knowing that there are multiple possibilities can have a significant impact on our paradigm and encourages us that by engaging the culture, we can have a positive impact. More knowledge is usually a good thing, even if it doesn't provide absolute conclusions.

This chapter has also established the fact that persecution and tribulation are a real possibility, even though we should also pray for protection and deliverance. Though it does not produce an exact picture of what kind of trouble may lie ahead, this knowledge produces a certain sobriety and a desire to seek God, His will and His direction. Christianity is not a game or a religious add on to our lives; this IS our life. We cannot navigate dangerous days by ourselves. We need God's guidance and protection.

The possibility of persecution also produces a certain responsibility to engage politically

and otherwise. We must seek to make a positive impact on the culture because whether our nation, state, city or community will be a “Goshen” insulated to some degree from tribulation may depend on our influence upon civil government through faith and obedience to God. [11]

Paradigm Builder

The tribulation that precedes the coming of Jesus and His Kingdom may be primarily focused on the middle East and other parts of the world may not be equally affected. Whether or not our nation, state, city or community will be a “Goshen”, insulated to some degree from tribulation, may depend on our influence through faith and obedience to God.

Before reading this chapter, how would you describe your position regarding this concept?

1 Strongly Disagree - 2 Disagree - 3 Neutral/Unsure - 4 Agree - 5 Strongly Agree

How would you describe your position regarding this concept after reading this chapter?

1 Strongly Disagree - 2 Disagree - 3 Neutral/Unsure - 4 Agree - 5 Strongly Agree