

## **TRIBULATION - Can you escape it?**

By

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Along with popular books about a “coming” kingdom, a “rapture” of saints, and other sensational views of prophecy is one involving a “great tribulation”. In Kenneth Taylor’s Taylor-made Bible he sets off the idea by beginning the words, “great tribulation,” with capital letters, to indicate a special time of future trouble.

Jesus spoke of a time of great tribulation in his answer to questions concerning the fall of Jerusalem. The disciples were admiring the Temple in the tradition of the Jews who not only worshipped at the temple, but idolized the great temple itself for its majestic beauty. Jesus shot down their idol immediately by saying, “Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (Matt 24:2). Then the disciples asked two questions; one about the time of the destruction of the temple, and the other about His second coming and the end of the world.

In answering the first question Jesus predicted the fall and destruction of Jerusalem and said, “For then shall be great tribulation, such as hath not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, nor ever shall be” (Matt. 24:21).

This was marvelously fulfilled in 70 AD, and is graphically described by Flavius Josephus who was an eye-witness to the events and wrote a detailed account of them in his “*Wars of the Jews*” which was published about 75 AD while the events were still fresh in the memory of survivors.

Goaded on by the militant Zealots, forerunners of modern Zionism, the Jews began widespread rebellion against Caesar in 65 AD. Cestius Gallus marched the Roman army into Palestine, subduing a number of towns and laying siege to Jerusalem. When the Jews were already defeated and about to surrender, Gallus suddenly withdrew his troops, as Josephus says, “Without any reason in the world.” This withdrawal gave the Christians the opportunity to flee the city, according to Christ’s warning.

Christ had warned them that when they should “see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place, then let them that be in Judea flee unto the mountains.” Luke’s record reads, “When ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Luke 21:20-21). The account is also found in Mark 13:14, and it is clear that all three accounts speak of the same thing. When the Christians saw the Roman armies surround the city, they recognized them as the “abomination of desolation”, and when the chance arrived they fled the city to Pella and other places beyond the Jordan. So much for the idea of “fleeing to the mountains,” which some suggest. This advice was given to those disciples living in Judea at that time and not to any Christians today.

Nero then appointed Vespasian to take command but before he could do so other events took place and Vespasian was hailed as emperor of Rome in 70 AD and his son, Titus, took control of the armies. He immediately renewed the siege with vastly superior forces. It was then that the great tribulation began. They had never believed the warnings of prophets and Christ that their nation would be taken from them because of unbelief and disobedience. Hence they had not bothered to take advantage of the enemy's brief withdrawal. Suddenly they found themselves under a heavier siege and with supplies exhausted.

The rebellion was widespread and Jews were being slaughtered all over the country. In Caesarea alone over 20,000 were killed in one day. Josephus wrote, "Galilee was all over filled with fire and blood."

In Jerusalem the Zealots were in violent conflict with those who disagreed with them so that the city was filled with bloodshed among brethren, as Zealots "fell upon the people as upon a flock of profane animals, and cut their throats" (Josephus). More than 12,000 prominent citizens died in this way. "The terror that was upon all the people was so great, that no one had courage enough either to weep openly for the dead man that was related to him, or bury him...those that mourned for others soon underwent the same death with those whom they mourned for" (Josephus IV 5:3).

Famine was so complete that "the lanes of the city were full of the dead bodies of the aged; a kind of deadly night had seized upon the city." Food was snatched from the hands of the aged by the children and from the mouths of babies by the mothers. The disagreeing factions invented horrible unmentionable means of torture to discover where any food was hidden. One woman of prominence killed and roasted her own infant son, and there was evidence of other acts of cannibalism in the city.

The atrocities were a fulfillment of God's warnings given centuries before: "The Lord shall bring a nation against thee from far...which shall not regard the person of the old nor show favor to the young...and he shall besiege thee in all thy gates until thy high and fenced walls come down...And thou shall eat the fruit of thine own body, the flesh of thy sons and of thy daughters..." (Deut. 28:49-57).

When the Roman armies entered the city they slaughtered the starving citizens without mercy. A soldier entered the temple with an unborn baby on the tip of his spear, and the temple was burned to the ground. All the gigantic stones were thrown down in order to extract the gold that had melted and run into the cracks. There were over 1,100,000 that perished and 97,000 taken as slaves, many of them being sold in Egypt. Thus was fulfilled the prophecy of Jesus concerning the great tribulation. Paul wrote of "the Jews who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us...to fill up their sins away: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost" (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

History records no greater tribulation ever visited upon a city or nation. Even Hiroshima which sustained the Atomic bomb suffered only a fraction as much. According to Jesus, nothing in future history will equal the misery and suffering of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

But this doesn't mean that Christians can escape tribulation. The word translated "tribulation" is "thlipsis" (Greek). It is used some 45 times and in 32 of these references it refers to tribulation upon believers because of their faith in Christ. Jesus said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33). Paul wrote that "through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22), and that "we glory in tribulations also; knowing that tribulation works patience" (Rom 5:3). Jesus spoke of those who receive the word but have no root, and "when tribulation or persecution arises" they gave up (Mt. 13:21).

The same word (thlipsis) is often translated "affliction". Jesus said that some would stumble because of "affliction or persecution" (Mark 4:17). The Thessalonians "received the word in much affliction" (1 Thess. 1:6) and were exhorted "that no man be moved by these afflictions; for yourselves know that hereunto we are appointed" (1 Thess. 3:3). Paul also writes that these afflictions are light, compared with the eternal weight of glory; (2 Cor. 4:17).

Christians have been martyred for their faith from the beginning. Millions have suffered and died in recent years under the tyranny of communism. Under Hitler's regime thousands of Christians were persecuted and slain. The press, largely owned or controlled by Jews, emphasizes the plight of the Jews in Germany, making up the fantastic number of 6,000,000 Jews who were said to have been slain under Hitler. But Jewish historians themselves have since shown that this could not have been the case, since the number of Jews in the world after Hitler was about the same as before! The press continues to exploit the mythical number of 6,000,000 with no evidence for such a number, but completely ignores the thousands of Christians who were slain or incarcerated by the Nazi. Besides this, the news media publicizes the complaint of some Jews who are not allowed to leave Russia, but is silent about the millions of Christians in communist countries who are afflicted and persecuted for their faith. Imprisonment, beatings, and slave labor camps — I would call that tribulation.

What then of a future "great tribulation" and the teaching that Christians will be "raptured" or caught up out of the world before it comes? When Christ comes the saints of all ages will, indeed, be caught up out of this world, according to 1 Thess. 4:16-17. But His coming will also mean judgment and destruction of the wicked and the present world (2Pet.3:7-13; 2 Thess.1:7-10).

Suffering and trials are not strange to people of God. Peter wrote of the "fiery trials" which Christians undergo (I Pet. 4:12) and John wrote of the "tribulation" which he shared with others (Rev. 1:9). Paul writes that we are "appointed" to such because of our faith (1 Thess. 3:3).

Scripture indicates that idolatry, false doctrine and sin will continue to wax worse and worse, right up to the very end. This means that it will not get any easier for Christians. The more Satan oppresses, the more we must uphold the truth. The doctrine advances, the more we must uphold the truth. The more the world deteriorates in sin, the more we are to labor to uphold righteousness. The more we seek to live according to God's laws, the more the world is at enmity against us and the more we will understand Christ's statement that "in the world ye shall have tribulation."

It is tragic for a person to be taught that tribulation is something he will escape, then suddenly for him to be faced with it. Christ promised not world peace, but a sword. The Christian walk is also a warfare, and each Christian is ordered to be properly armed for the conflict (Eph. 6:12).

Millions of Christians have been taught to look for some significant "sign" in every social and political event of the day. The result is a pessimistic depression, anxiety and confusion and failure to progress in the faith. Jesus said that there would be upheavals throughout history, but that His coming would not be announced by any particular event, but will be as when the flood came in Noah's day, with people marrying and going on about their business (Matt. 24:37-44).

The "great tribulation" of Daniel and Jerusalem is past. But there is still plenty of opposition to Christ and tribulation for those who boldly oppose the anti-Christ and courageously hold forth the truth as "blameless and harmless children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye are seen as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life" (Phil. 2:15-16).

The servant that Christ commends is not the one seeking signs and hoping to escape tribulation, but the one whom he finds working, enduring tribulation and fighting faithfully for the faith.

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