

## **TRIBULATION**

### **Is it past, present, or future?**

By

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In this widely distributed newsletter an evangelist recently said that he would like to settle the rapture question. He then claimed that the saints would be raptured (caught up) *before* the “tribulation period.”

This popular pre-millennial belief among fundamentalists holds that there is coming a “great tribulation” period of seven years (some reduce it to three and a half years.) for all the earth, but that Christians need not worry, as we will escape it by being raptured just before things really get rough.

Jesus spoke of great tribulation in His prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:1–28). In Luke’s account of the same discourse are added statements to show that this unquestionably refers to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, when Jerusalem was besieged by Roman armies and Christians were the only ones to escape the slaughter and captivity. John also wrote of those who “Come out of the great tribulation” (Rev. 7:14), but he indicates no particular time-period or event. Paul warned that “through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

The tribulation suffered by Jerusalem in the first century was to be the worst ever felt by man. It was not world-wide and numerically does not compare with the persecution of the church in the twentieth century, but it has never been surpassed in terms of intense torture inflicted on the victims. The torture was made harder to bear because, to a great extent, it was initiated by fellow citizens and even family members who betrayed one another to horrible systems of torture in order to learn where gold or food might be hidden. According to the historian Josephus, who was an eye-witness, citizens burned and mutilated one another, children snatched food from the mouths of starving parents, and women cooked and ate their own children. Nothing like it has ever happened in any other nation.

To this tribulation of 70 AD can be added the great tribulation that befell Christians in Russia in 1917 when the Communists, led by Talmudist Jews, took over the revolution in that nation. Millions of Christians were slain or sentenced to slow, torturous death in the inhumane Siberian labor camps. To this day there are millions of believers in Soviet Russia undergoing great tribulation because of their faith. Torture inflicted on Christians in China is well known, and even the most conservative estimate of the number put to death there in the attempt to wipe out the Christian faith is well over twenty million. One wonders where the prophets of a pre-tribulation rapture have been for the past sixty years.

The apostles suffered tribulation and persecution. The early Christians suffered intense tribulation under Nero and other Roman emperors. The Anabaptists endured bitter tribulation at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church and later at the hands of other reformers. None escaped suffering by being raptured, nor did they expect it.

The pre-tribulation rapture error is readily acceptable to so many because of two basic perversions of Christian doctrine.

First, scripture is interpreted by many as if God were concerned *only* with Christians in the United States of America. The extreme suffering of Christians in Russia, China and other Communist nations doesn't qualify for biblical tribulation as long as we are enjoying freedom and luxury here in America. Even here, if individual Christians are fired from their jobs and discriminated against because of their firm stand upon Christ's commandments, this is not seen as tribulation because it isn't happening to everyone — obviously not to the evangelists who insist that the real test is future. The pre-trib preachers have a time and a place for “great tribulation” and no amount of suffering and persecution before that time and in other place counts.

Second, modern evangelism, for the most part, has been molded to fit into the generally accepted view which holds that life should be painless. Pain in any form, physical or mental, is to be avoided at all costs. People turn to drugs, alcohol and all kind of diversions, good or evil, to avoid pain. The least suffering that falls upon us commences a reaction that drives us to engage all energy, time and money to find a way to unload it, to escape it or to insulate ourselves from it. We want to blame someone else for it and perhaps sue them.

One of the evils which characterizes our day is described by Paul. “For men shall be lovers of their own selves” (II Tim. 3:2). So-called evangelism thrives on this fault, as its champions promise that Christ is the key to health, success, wealth, and approval of all the world. In order to fit this appeal into a biblical framework, the thought of tribulation must be pushed off into a corner of its own, as a condition for a different time and a different people.

This effort to convince Christians that they can escape tribulation is a gross perversion of the call to discipleship given by Jesus, who said that His followers must “deny self” and take up the cross daily. He promised no worldly wealth but only that necessities would be provided for those who “seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness” (Matt. 6:33).

When one becomes a Christian, he is to consider himself “dead” to sin and to former desires. He is to crucify the flesh and its lusts and live for God's purpose. No longer does he live to gain the world, to accumulate houses, lands, luxuries, and wheat wealth he earns he considers a trust from God. His chief end is not to satisfy himself but to please the Lord and to grow into His likeness. Tribulation cannot defeat that purpose but may even be part of the process of shaping one to the right pattern. To the one committed to God's purpose — to have man in His own image — suffering does not destroy but builds. From times of great tribulation, the church has emerged purer and stronger. Peter said that we are not to be surprised at fiery trials but to rejoice when we partake of Christ's suffering. The manifold trials serve as “roof” of your faith, “being more precious than gold that perishes though it is proved by fire,” and such proven faith will “be found unto praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” ( I Peter 4:12, 1:6–7).

Does this mean that we are to resign ourselves to tribulation and suffering and look on the future with fearful expectations? No, not at all. Jesus warned, “In the world you have tribulation.” Then He added, “But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). He endured great tribulation but emerged victorious, and so can we. We are the ones, of all people in the world, who live with purpose, who have direction for our lives and an ultimate goal of indescribable joy. Daily our world grows more

complicated, mysterious and dangerous, and while we are not given a guarantee of freedom from pain, problems and persecution, we are given assurance of Christ's presence and the power to fulfill His purpose.

Indeed, Christ will return to rapture (catch away) His saints. "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3), but when He comes it will be at the end of time, signaling the end of the world. Christ says that He will resurrect us on the *last day* (John 6:39-40, 44, 54). The saints and the wicked exist together on earth until the "harvest" day and judgment of the "tares" (Matt. 13:24-30); the redeemed and the lost will not be separated from each other until the *end of the ages* (Matt. 13:47-50).

The coming of Jesus mentioned in I Thess. 4:16 is called the "day of our Lord Jesus Christ", a day that coincides with the end (I Cor. 1:7-8), a day that brings about the glorification of the saints (Rom. 8:17-23, I Cor. 15:43, Phil. 3:21, I John 3:2) and the judgment and destruction of the wicked (II Thess. 1:7-10, Matt. 25:31-34, 41, 46).

Tribulation has been suffered in the world since the original sin and is widespread at the present time. Jesus did not promise to rescue us from it but rather warned us to expect it and to trust Him for the power to endure it and use it for His own perfect and glorious purpose.

"He that endures to the end, the same shall be saved" (Matt. 10:22).

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