

9. The Great Tribulation or Persecution

Second Coming of Christ

Life is a Series of Character Building Trials

Over the last six studies, we have seen some Scriptures indicating that God will allow His people to go through a time of persecution, distress or tribulation in the last days. God's goal in allowing His people to go through trials and tests is to bring forth a pure radiant bride for His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In the book of Ephesians, Paul writes about this goal for the church, the Bride of Christ, saying that Christ is at work in the church “to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27). For many of us, including myself, we are not yet at a place in our lives where the stains and wrinkles of our character have been removed. We are a work in process, being transformed into the likeness of Christ:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Unfortunately, this transformative work of the Spirit doesn't happen when life is going wonderfully, but when the blast furnaces of God's sheet metal factory start getting hot. God allows times of testing to our faith. The end goal of tribulation is character building. Paul, the apostle, writes, “Tribulation [*thlipsis*] works patience” (Romans 5:3 KJV). The NIV translates *thlipsis* as suffering, and that it produces perseverance. “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering [*thlipsis*] produces perseverance” (Romans 5:3 NIV). We don't get out of tribulation; we become changed through our right responses in the middle of character transforming difficulties.

Keeping a heavenly perspective through the trials of life can be hard, especially when challenges loom ahead of you and threaten to consume your joy and energy. When you are going through sufferings, trials, or tribulation, remember that you are always under the watchful eye of a loving heavenly Father who is allowing all of these challenges in your life to mold you and craft you into a more faithful, consistent, and stronger “you.” He is crafting your soul, your mind, your resilience, and finally, your ability to make excellent choices. When life is too easy, we do not grow. Think about that. It is easy to skate along in complacency when there is no challenge or obstacle to your faith. It is only when times are hard that we are driven to call upon greater resources from above. I have heard someone say that Christians are like elastic bands—they have to be stretched to be effective! The Church of Jesus Christ grows strong and is much more effective in what she is called to do and be when she experiences tests and trials of her faith. The testing of your faith produces character, and character is the stuff of eternity. You have heard people say, “when you die, you can't take your stuff with you.” That is true about many things, but what God produces in our character will last forever. Every bit of kindness, compassion, and faith worked into your character through the Holy Spirit will live on in eternity as part of who you are! That is something you CAN take with you.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29).

Have you ever experienced a hardship for which you were later thankful? How did the experience or difficulty prove to be beneficial?

The Warning of Great Tribulation or Persecution

Jesus warned us of an event He called the Abomination of Desolation, a desecration of the Temple by the Antichrist (Matthew 24:15, 21). When that event takes place, there will be great tribulation on earth. This time of testing God will use to deepen us in our faith and bring maturity and a heavenly perspective to all that we do in this world. I believe this persecution is targeted against those who hold to the God of the Bible, both Jews, and Christians. There will be a falling away, rebellion or apostasy (depending on your translation, 2 Thessalonians 2:3) of those who go to church but have never come into a relationship with Christ. We have looked at the possibility that this falling away might happen when many are required to take the Mark of the Beast. I believe part of taking this mark will be the acknowledgment of the Antichrist to be god. Many will compromise their faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when confronted with taking the Mark of the Beast. Let's look at the persecution of the Jews first:

Persecution of the Jewish People That is Yet Future

Two thousand years ago, the Lord Jesus spoke of a time when the Roman army would come and surround Jerusalem, and the Temple of Jerusalem destroyed:

⁴³The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, **because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you"** (Luke 19:43-44).

This destruction of Jerusalem happened in A.D. 70 under the Roman General Titus. The Lord spoke of a time of judgment and dispersion of the Jewish people from their land because of their rejection of the Messiah. This rejection was not a surprise to God. He spoke through the prophet Isaiah more than five hundred years before Christ came that the Messiah would be rejected, **"He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain"** (Isaiah 53:3). When Pilate, the Roman procurator, tried to release Jesus from the hands of His accusers they would have none of it (John 18:38-40) but brought upon themselves a curse as a nation. When given a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, they said:

All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25).

Since that terrifying curse was spoken, and the choice was made to reject the Messiah, the Jewish people have suffered as a people group. It is estimated that around one million Jews died in the Great Revolt against Rome in 70 A.D. Many Jews were taken as slaves to Rome and other cities; they were told not to return to Jerusalem under threat of death. Scattered all over Europe, the Jews became persecuted as God-killers. As they settled, they were frequently abused and

massacred. They were often murdered for no reason at all, many times to have their things stolen from them. The persecution reached its first peak during the Crusades. In the First Crusade of 1096 many communities along the Rhine and Danube rivers of Europe were wiped out. In the Second Crusade of 1147, the Jews in France were subject to frequent massacres. Again in 1251 and 1320, during the Shepherd's Crusades, the Jews were attacked and murdered, many times hundreds at a time. They were not allowed to settle for any amount of time. In 1290, for instance, all English Jews were banished. They were slaughtered, hung, or burned in retaliation due to many believing that it was the Jews who started the Bubonic plague. It was thought that they were poisoning the wells of Europe. Another myth spread was that the Jews were murdering Christian children and using their blood in their Passover celebrations.

In 1349, Landgrave Frederic of Thuringia wrote to the council of the city of Nordhausen telling them how he had burnt his Jews in honor of God and advising them to do the same. In 1396, 100,000 Jews were expelled from France, and in 1421 thousands of Jews were expelled from Austria. Often they fled to Poland and granted some rights. By 1351, 60 major and 150 smaller Jewish communities were exterminated, and more than 350 separate massacres had occurred. The killings came about because of myths and the so-called Christians owing the Jews much money in interest. Money again was what killed the Jews in Strasbourg. The Jews were baptized to Christianity and gave the so-called Christians all their money, or they were burnt alive. Many Jews agreed or were forced to convert. Often there was no reason for the persecution except that the Jews had become the most hated figures in European society.¹

The massacres and expulsions of Jews continued in Russia during the Pogroms illustrated by the movie, *Fiddler on the Roof*. In the south of Europe persecution broke out as many Jews were forced to convert to Christianity or die at the hands of murderous men motivated by religious extremism. Thousands upon thousands of Jews were slaughtered for little to no reason through the nineteen hundred years that led up to the Final Solution at the hands of the Nazis under Adolf Hitler of Germany in the 1940s when more than 6,000,000 Jews were murdered. A brief list is compiled at this web address:

<http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/HistoryJewishPersecution/>

I love the Lord for His kindness and mercy in that He never leaves His people without hope. The Lord spoke through the prophet Hosea:

⁴For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol. ⁵**Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD** their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days (Hosea 3:4-5).

The Lord was saying to Israel through her prophets, that there would come a time when God would bring the Jewish people back to their land. This return to the land began to happen in the early 1900s when God used a Jewish man by the name of Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism. Until the Jewish people began to come back to the land, the land itself was barren and could not be farmed. Mark Twain, the famous writer, gave evidence of this in his

¹ Taken from: <http://bpjews.tripod.com/>

travels to the Holy Land in 1867. He wrote about the lack of ability for the land to provide for people:

“Stirring scenes...occur in the valley of Jezreel no more, (now one of the most fertile places in the Middle East). There is not a solitary village throughout its whole extent—not for 30 miles in either direction. There are two or three small clusters of Bedouin tents, but not a single permanent habitation. One may ride 10 miles hereabouts and not see ten human beings.”²

There have been two dispersions of the Jewish people from their homeland. The first occurred in 587 B.C. under Nebuchadnezzar, when he destroyed the temple and forcibly took the population to Babylon. This dispersion was for 70 years (Jeremiah 29:10). A second dispersion happened after Israel revolted against Rome and the temple destroyed in 70 A.D., funnily enough, the same day of the year that the first temple was destroyed, the 9th of Av. This second dispersion, the Diaspora, was to all over the world. God again promised that He would restore them back to their land:

⁵Do not be afraid, for I am with you; **I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west.** ⁶I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth (Isaiah 43:5-6).

The trickle of people in the early 1900s became a flood after the murder of six million Jews in the Second World War. Jeremiah the prophet spoke of a time when God would send fishermen and catch them, and if they resisted, He would send hunters and bring them back to the land:

¹⁴"However, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when men will no longer say, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,' ¹⁵but they will say, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up **out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.**' For I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers. ¹⁶"But now **I will send for many fishermen,**" declares the LORD, "and they will catch them. **After that,** I will send for many hunters, and **they will hunt them** down on every mountain and hill and from the crevices of the rocks" (Jeremiah 16:14-16).

This gathering of the Jewish people to their land is happening in the days we are living. The prophecy clearly states that there will come a time when an Exodus from all nations will be more significant in scope than the Exodus from Egypt. The fishermen catching them come first before the hunting. This happened in Germany when Adolf Hitler took power. Because the Jews occupied a high percentage of the top posts in banking, media, and industry in Germany, he spoke out against the Jews. The international Jewish response was a boycott of German goods which was a threat to Hitler's power. He made a secret agreement to try to get them to leave by offering them an easy way to transfer their financial means to Palestine in what is known as the Transfer Agreement, also known as the Haavara Agreement.³ Edwin Black wrote an award-

² Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (London: 1881) p. 349.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haavara_Agreement

winning story of the negotiated arrangement in 1933 between Zionist organizations and the Nazis to transfer some 50,000 Jews, and \$100 millions of their assets, to Jewish Palestine in exchange for stopping the worldwide Jewish-led boycott threatening to topple the Hitler regime in its first year.⁴ I wonder if this was God's way of fishing for them to come home to their land before the hunters were sent.

I interpret that passage to mean that if the Jewish people will not return to their land by those fishing for them, that He will send for hunters. My thought is that the hunters speak of a harsher course of action with Jewish people hunted, and I am sure that Bible-believing Christians will undergo the same situation at the same time. I like to think that maybe the words that I am writing today might find their way to the hearts of Jewish people. Maybe God would use me (I used to be a commercial fisherman for many years) to speak words of hope and vision to call those He loves home to the safety and security of their land.

In the Book of Ezekiel, chapter 39, in a long prophecy covering chapters 36-39, written more than 550 years before Christ, the prophet prophesied of a time when the Jewish people would be gathered back to the land of their ancestral home. Towards the end of the prophecy, he spoke something significant to us living in the end-times:

²⁵"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will now bring Jacob back from captivity and will have compassion on all the people of Israel, and I will be zealous for my holy name. ²⁶They will forget their shame and all the unfaithfulness they showed toward me when they lived in safety in their land with no one to make them afraid. ²⁷When I **have brought them back from the nations** and have **gathered them from the countries of their enemies**, I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations. ²⁸Then they will know that I am the LORD their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, **I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind**. ²⁹I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD" (Ezekiel 39:25-29).

This prophecy speaks of a time when God will destroy an enemy that comes against the nation of Israel from the far north that can only be Russia (Ezekiel 38:15 and 39:2). This northern nation is allied with Persia, nowadays called Iran (Ezekiel 38:5), with several other countries as well. Right at the end of the prophecy, God told them that this act of His occurs during the time of Him gathering the Jewish people home. He explicitly says He will not leave any behind in the nations from where He is gathering (v. 28) and that He will pour out His Spirit upon them (v. 28). This gathering of Jewish people is still happening at the time of this writing in 2018.

Persecution of any race or people is an evil that God will judge with severe judgment, especially when it is the Jewish people, the apple of His eye (Zechariah 2:8). If you doubt that, just read Ezekiel 35 to see how Edom (present-day Jordan and the Palestinian people) has suffered for their ancient hostility toward the Jewish people (Verses 5, 10-15). Scripture does not tell what God will use to bring the Jewish people back from the nations, but if we look at the Jewish people's experience at the hand of the Nazis, it very well could be persecution at the hands of the Antichrist when he comes to power.

⁴ http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Transfer_Agreement.html?id=QjVxPwAACAAJ

Why You Should Pray for What God is Doing Among the Jewish People

Many Jewish people will come to Christ when the Lord intervenes in this war with Russia, Iran and the other nations allied with them. Verses 28-29 tell us that He will no longer hide His face from them. We don't know at what time this happens, but I believe it to be in the first half of the seven-year period called the 70th week of Daniel. When the Jewish people are brought into the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34), there will be a massive revival that Paul says will be "life from the dead" to the church:

¹¹Again I ask: Did they stumble to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. ¹²But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring! (Romans 11:11-12).

For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (Romans 11:15).

As we have observed earlier in previous studies, prophecy can sometimes have multiple fulfillments. Can you think of other times in Israel's history when God allowed temporary suffering and ultimately rescued or delivered His people?

Persecution of Christians That is Yet Future

The abuse of Jewish people will not be without Christians also suffering at the hands of the Antichrist. All those who serve the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will suffer persecution, and in some cases, will die at the hands of the enemies of God. Jesus said:

⁹"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. ¹⁰At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, ¹¹and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹²Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved (Matthew 24:9-13).

We are amid a spiritual war that is taking place on planet Earth. When the right situation arises, many so-called Christians will compromise and turn away from the faith (Verse 10). Why? Because they never really knew Him in the first place! Those who are nominal Christians will be tempted by Antichrist to give up true believers, more than likely because there may be a price on our heads. It is possible that there will be some who are so in debt and having no work that they will be tempted to give up Christians so that they can get food. Just as true Bible-believing Christians were hauled off to prison along with Jewish people during the Second World War by the Nazis, so there will be an outbreak of hatred towards Christians and Jews alike sometime in the future. Satan and the occult motivated the Nazis. The History channel has documented this for us. If you doubt this fact, you can also search Google using the search term, "Hitler and the Occult." There will be an occult dimension to the Antichrist and his world kingdom just as there was in the Nazi party.

As in the passage about hunters going forth, some of us will be betrayed and hated by those that today we may consider friends or even family:

²¹“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ²²You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved (Matthew 10:21-22).

Those that stand firm at that time are believers, so the word saved should be translated as delivered. The Greek word translated into English with the word *saved* means to: “deliver out of danger and into safety; used principally of God rescuing believers from the penalty and power of sin – and into His provision of safety.” How terrible will it be for some of us to be betrayed by our unbelieving family members? Does this mean that some of us will be hiding from those who are seeking us out and that members of our own family will hand us over? Some, perhaps, would suggest the above passage was fulfilled in the persecution that broke out upon the stoning of Stephen in the Book of Acts, chapter 8, verse 1. But it is evident from other passages that the Great Tribulation or persecution is still ahead of us. The “He” in the below passage speaks of the Antichrist:

⁷He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. ⁸All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb’s book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. ⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear. ¹⁰“If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed.” This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God’s people (Revelation 13:7-10).

Jesus encourages us that when the time comes, He requires us to be faithful and endure even to death if need be. Death is never the end of a believer—it is but a door into eternal life. These words of Jesus should encourage us if we bare those alive during this time of persecution. If we see these things take place on the Earth, we know that the time is not far off. We shall soon see Him coming in great power and glory to receive us to Himself (Matthew 24:30-31).

If you find yourself alive and well on planet earth during the time of the Antichrist, how will you respond to the persecution? What will be your primary objectives?

If you are in Jerusalem, Jesus warns us to get out of the city right away (Matthew 24:15-28). But for those of us who are in different places all over the world, as far as I can see, we have three choices to make:

- 1) Take up arms against those who seek to enslave the saints who will not bow to Antichrist. Some would say that those of us that are aware of what is happening should leave the cities for camps that are devoted to armed extremism. I think these will be the first to experience the wrath of Antichrist. He will waste no time in sending drones with missiles and dropping bombs on such places that resist his will. This is where we all have to make decisions as to what to do. It is clear that we should defend ourselves. Jesus, in the Upper

Room, told the disciples to prepare for what would happen in the Garden of Gethsemane by arming themselves: ³⁶And He said to them, "But now, whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one... ³⁸They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." And He said to them, "It is enough"(Luke 22:36, 38). In another place, though, we are encouraged to not to fight back in times of persecution, in fact, we find Jesus saying, "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles (Matthew 5:39-41). We must ask for wisdom in whatever situation we go through. When Stephen was persecuted, he responded with gracious words to those abusing him. Such words were what hooked the apostle Paul, then named Saul (Acts 7:57). Dying with Christ's word on your lips can influence a lot of people.

- 2) The second option is to leave the cities and retire to farmland and try and survive. How will that work? If we take, as an example, the city of Cincinnati, how many Bible believing, Jesus loving people would there be who would seek to get away to hide in the surrounding countryside? Could we say that there are two million people in the greater Cincinnati area? Could we expect that there would be 100,000 believers in this city trying to find places of refuge all at the same time? How would that look? With heat-seeking cameras and RFID transmitters to sort out those with the mark and those without, we will have great difficulty in hiding.
- 3) The third option is to wait on the Lord and get His specific direction, trusting Him to show us what to do. When thinking of that period, we often forget that God is waiting for us to depend on Him amid dark times to show Himself strong on behalf of His church (2 Chronicles 16:9). He delights for us to lean upon Him in such times of need. The closer we get to the end-time the more significant the darkness and evil, but at the same time, the greater the light and power that will be on the true believers. The gifts of the Spirit will be more evident in those days. True Bible-believing churches that teach about what is going on will be shut down with the Church having to go underground in Small Groups or House churches. We should start to gather into communities of Christians now, for we will need to know who we can trust in the last half of the seven-year period.

We will have to be wholly disconnected from any computer, cell phone or electronic device. Communication with other believers will not be through any digital devices. Even our cars can be tracked through the RFID that is placed in all new vehicles, and also on the tires. If we were to use any connected device, it would broadcast our exact position. Already there are companies in the area I live that are advertising to me on Facebook according to the Google searches that I have made on my laptop, showing that my position and my searches are tracked at all times through mobile phone, tablet or notebook computer. I believe at some time in the future; there will be no ability to buy things via cash. All money will go digital and will only be able to be accessed by those that have the Mark of the Beast. Those of us that decline to take the Mark of the Beast might have to go to a bartering system. We will know when the time comes. God will not leave us in the dark. Part of it will be an RFID chip that will be a signature/authorization chip that will allow you to buy or sell via the stores, mobile phone or the Internet. It will have all your personal information on it and will be able, in some way, to detect whether or not you had worshipped the beast when you came online. Once a person has taken the Mark they are bound

to worship Satan and his Antichrist. If a person has taken the Mark and changes his mind and refuses to worship the image of the Antichrist, they will be killed:

The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed (Revelation 13:15).

We who refuse the mark will need to have food either growing or in storage to last how long we don't know, for we know that the Lord intervenes and cuts short the time (Matthew 24:22) by catching up the believers before the second half is over (We don't know the day or the hour of His coming). There will be no cash to buy things for true believers, so we will have to trust and lean on one another. We must also remember that the third seal opened was a time of famine. We must learn to depend on the Spirit of Christ and His power, to receive direction before the time of famine comes at the third seal, which is some time in the first three and a half years, the time of beginning birth pains (Matthew 24:7-8). I do not know everything about this time ahead, but one thing I do know, Scripture says that believers will overcome the Antichrist. We will overcome him by the power of the finished work of the shed blood of Christ, and by the word of testimony of our experience of Christ:

¹⁰Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.

¹¹They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. ¹²Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short (Revelation 12:10-12).

How do you think God will shine through His saints in the last days? Amid persecution, why do you think people will be drawn to Christ and His Church?

Our destiny is to be married to our heavenly bridegroom who is preparing us to be powerful agents of His kingdom. The testing process may be a difficult one to some, but there will come a day, Christ has assured us when we will stand and receive heavenly rewards and enter eternal life in close relationship with the lover of our souls, the Lord Jesus Himself!

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years (Revelation 20:4).

What an awesome day that will be! Your joy will know no bounds if you are a believer in Christ! We will see His face, and enjoy Him and one another forever and ever. This is the real treasure that is worth the fire of testing!

Prayer: Father, I pray for grace to come to your Church as these days' advance on us. Help us right now to wake up to the days we are in, that we may invest our lives for your kingdom purposes. Amen!

Keith Thomas

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com

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