

# 5. Going through the Great Tribulation

## The Word “Tribulation”

The teaching about the millennium is inseparably connected to the teaching about “the great tribulation.” A time is coming when both the church and the world, but especially the believers, will face a great tribulation. This tribulation is not a minor event, for it is termed “great” in the sense that it will be greater than ever before.

Let us note some Bible passages that speak about this tribulation. Sometimes, the word “tribulation” is used in a non-specific sense. For example, we read in Matthew 13:21 (in the context of the parable of the Sower), “When trouble or persecution comes because of the word...” The word used here for “trouble” is the word *thlipsis*, the same word used for the great tribulation. The KJV therefore translates with “tribulation” in the aforementioned text. In this case, it is a more undefined tribulation that believers everywhere experience from time to time.

There will always be a certain tribulation – the common difficulties that believers face when living in a (hostile) world. The same is said by the Lord Jesus in John 16:33, where we read, “In this world you will have trouble (tribulation).” He adds, “But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Whatever happens to us in this world is not decisive. What really counts is Christ’s victory over sin and death.

In these passages and others, the word “tribulation” is used in a more general way. In this world, we will experience trouble in many ways and from many sides. We also have to fight our own wicked nature. Being a Christian is never easy, although situations differ from time to time and place to place.

## *Thlipsis Megale*

Things are somewhat different when the adjective “great” is added to the word “tribulation.” In Matthew 24:21, we find these words: “For then there will be great distress (tribulation), unequaled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equaled again.” The original has *thlipsis megale*, and we may translate this as “mega tribulation.” It will indeed be so severe that it simply has no precedence.

In Mark 13:19 (a parallel passage), we read the same: “...those will be days of distress (*thlipsis*) unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now – and never to be equaled again.” The time will be so difficult that Christ will have to shorten the days for the sake of the elect.

The term reappears in Revelation 7:14, where John receives an answer to the question of who the great innumerable multitude is that stands before the throne and in front of the Lamb: “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation (*thlipsis megale*); they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

It appears from the above-quoted passages that not all tribulation is the same. There is a tribulation that we *all* experience from time to time and from place to place in a world that hates the Lord Jesus Christ, and this can be more or less severe, but it culminates in what is called “the great tribulation.” We do wise to keep this distinction in mind.

## What are the Characteristics of the Great Tribulation?

We will return to the question of the characteristics of the great tribulation when we speak of the coming of the lawless one in the next chapter. From what we have learned thus far, however, it is already clear that the great tribulation will show an unequalled disdain for God’s law and God’s people and be a time of widespread persecution. The great tribulation will therefore result in massive martyrdom, hence the consistent mentioning in Revelation of martyrs.

The great tribulation will be a time of widespread and unequaled apostasy. The word “apostasy” means a falling away or standing away from the truth of God’s Word. People will not know the Bible, much less live according to its demands or walk in its comfort.

The apostle Paul speaks about this in 2 Thessalonians 3, a passage that will have our attention later. There will be widespread lawlessness. In 1 Timothy 4, we read that the faith will be abandoned and deceiving spirits followed. In 2 Timothy 3:1-5, we get a chilling account of what people will be like in the “last days.” There may be much religiosity, but no true religion. People will be lovers of themselves. Love for God and the neighbor will grow cold. It’s hard to live in such a cold climate.

To be sure, this apostasy has been in the world since the fall into sin, and from time to time it has reared its ugly head, but in the last days it will become intense and global. Demonism and humanism will come to their highest peak. The time of the great tribulation is compared to the extreme perversion as seen in days of Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 7).

## The Pressure of Persecution

The word *thlipsis* (meaning tribulation) especially denotes the *pressure* that Christians will undergo because of persecution. I see this as the main biblical characteristic of the tribulation.

When you are persecuted, you are under constant pressure. You cannot stay anywhere, but must always be on the move. You are in fear for your own life, and you fear for your loved ones. There is no rest for a fugitive. You run a constant risk of being captured and executed. You have no control over your destiny and no security on earth, but must lay all things in the hands of the Lord Jesus.

Combined with this uncertainty is the reality of a massive boycott. In Revelation 13, we read about the beast out of the earth that forces everyone to bear a mark “so that no one [can] buy or sell unless he [has] the mark....” Christians everywhere will have to be very inventive in finding food and refuge.

Sin and Satan will have a monopoly. Christians will be shut out from society and no longer able to function as a community. It will be like the dispersion of old, but in a worse and global framework.

The devil (the dragon) and his cohorts will appear to have achieved a complete victory. All this puts tremendous stress on the believers, and it is no wonder that the Bible tells us that Christ will shorten the days. Otherwise, even the elect will not be able to stand.

## When Will the Great Tribulation Come?

I can understand that everyone, especially Christians, would like to know exactly when this great tribulation will come and end. Many millennialists have placed the tribulation *after* the Rapture because it seems inconceivable that Christ would let his church go through such immense suffering.

In the thinking of many, the order is that Christ will first return from heaven, accompanied or followed by the (first) Rapture, and then will follow the great tribulation. In that case, the great tribulation may yet serve to bring some to repentance and faith.

But the biblical order is clear. The millennium is *concluded* by the great tribulation. It is the last phase of demonic activity. The times will get progressively worse. Then Christ will return in glory and rapture all the believers, living and dead, who have been called out of their graves or changed in the twinkling of an eye. When we are finally delivered, we are delivered from the great tribulation.

## A Sign of Christ's Coming

The great tribulation is therefore more than a supreme trial. It is also a sure sign of Christ's coming. It tells us that the time of Christ's return is near. In Matthew 24, where we read about the signs of the end of the age, we also read about the great tribulation. Look at verse 29: "Immediately after the distress of those days 'the sun will be darkened...'" The great

tribulation propels us on to Judgment Day. In verse 30, we read, “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.”

Note the word “immediately” in verse 29. Christ will not delay. His church on earth will not be in the great tribulation a moment longer than is required. God does not torment his children. In Matthew 24:31, the Rapture is described as coinciding with the (one) return of Christ: “And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from the end of the heavens to the other.”

The great tribulation will be global, but so will be the glorious Rapture as well, involving saints from all corners of the earth. Not one will be left behind. The world writes a series of books about those allegedly left behind, but the Bible tells us in no uncertain terms that there will be *no one* left behind. All believers will be raptured to enter the glory of Christ, once and for all.

## Signs of the End of the Age

The section of Matthew 24 from which I just quoted speaks about the signs of the end of the age. Precisely in terms of Christ’s return and the tribulation that precedes it, we need to be clear on the nature of a sign.

We do not know when Christ will return. In Matthew 25:13, we find this warning: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” The idea is that we *constantly* keep watch and do not become slack in this respect. This exhortation is understandable. As the night drags on, the watchmen can fall asleep, but this must not happen to the saints. Constant watchfulness is required because we do not know the day or hour.

It does no good to speculate. We must understand the difference between a sign and a date. A sign is a general indication, while a date is a specific time. When asked about his return, our Lord himself said, “It is not for

you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). Instead of trying to figure out the times and dates, we must be active in our calling to promote the Gospel. The date has already been set, but it is only God’s prerogative to know that date.

We have been given signs. We must learn to recognize and read them for they are general indicators as to how far we have come in the history of salvation. The difficulty is that we cannot properly discern these times or understand their immediate significance.

We do know that we are already living in the last age, since the apostolic time. The apostle Paul exhorts us to understand the present time. He writes, “The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here” (Rom 13:11-12). The time of the last age is when Christians must truly show what they are made of.

The same element comes to the fore in Revelation 22:11, where we read, “Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right, and let him who is holy continue to be holy.” The final age, which also brings the great tribulation, is one in which the hearts of all will become completely manifest. The decision falls *in* the millennium, not *after* it.

Our Lord once chastised the Jewish leaders for not paying proper attention to the signs of the times: “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (Matt 16:3). They were able to read the signs in nature, but that was it.

The signs of the times can only be properly understood from the Scripture and by faith. We know generally when spring is coming, for we can read the signs. We know that spring *will* come, for God has promised it. And, indeed, nature comes alive every year again. But like the Jewish leaders of old, many people today fail to understand the signs that are present in the world. Many natural disasters and man-made calamities are ascribed to “Mother Nature” while, in truth, they are brought about by the Lord.

We do not know exactly when the great tribulation will be here. We cannot oversee the ages or understand their significance. But we do see how the love of many grows colder all the time. We live in a society that *has* turned away and *is* turning away from the Word of God. False religion is increasingly setting the tone. The signs are clear: this world is becoming an inhospitable place.

The great tribulation may have already begun. The sooner it starts, the quicker it will be over. And when the going really gets tough, Jesus Christ will be here. The teaching about the great tribulation is not meant to frighten us. Our Lord told his disciples, “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28).

Our redemption is drawing near. This is the positive side of the great tribulation.