

## What is Meant by the Term, "The Great Tribulation?"

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The careful student of the prophetic Scriptures cannot fail to observe that in both the Old and New Testaments, the Spirit of God directs attention to a time of very special trial involving the pouring out of divine wrath upon men, known as "the great tribulation," "the time of Jacob's trouble," "the coming hour of temptation," "the day of the Lord," and also designated by other striking terms. This specific period of judgment is clearly distinguished from the ordinary trials and tribulations to which the people of God have been subjected in all dispensations, and which are promised to the Church of God at the present time. "In the world," said our blessed Lord, "ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." "We must," declares the Apostle Paul, "through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God," and speaking for all right-minded saints, he can say, "We glory in tribulation." So long as Satan is the god of this world and saints of the Most High are in this scene, it cannot be that there will be other than trial and tribulation to face. This arises from the very nature of things. The world as such is opposed to everything that is of the Spirit of God. The Christian's trials arise therefore from the adverse circumstances through which he is passing, like Israel of old journeying through a waste and howling wilderness. More than this, there is the direct opposition of the enemy: "All they that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." But there is one character of tribulation that God's children in this age will never have to know, and that is exposure to divine wrath.

"God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." We look for His return as our Deliverer from the coming wrath. This is a principle of great importance when it comes to defining the Church's relationship to the great tribulation, when the vials of wrath will be poured out on guilty Christendom and apostate Judaism.

Many have taught in the past, and some still teach, that the Old Testament passages referring to the great tribulation were all

fulfilled in the days of Israel's sufferings under the nations, after the fall of Jerusalem, particularly in the era of Antiochus Epiphanes, who is sometimes called the Old Testament Antichrist. But a careful examination of the Scriptures of the prophets having to do with this time of trial, and a comparison of these with New Testament declarations make this position absolutely untenable. Others have supposed that the great tribulation referred either to the days of persecution under pagan emperors of Rome for two bloody centuries, following the death of the Apostle Paul, or perhaps the even more fearful persecutions under the Papacy during the dark ages; but there are very definite statements made by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself which positively negate any such view and make it evident that this solemn period of judgment is still in the future. Will the Church of God or any part of it go into or pass through this day of grief and sorrow? In order to answer this question aright, it will be necessary first of all to consider carefully a number of scriptures indicating the nature of and the time for the great tribulation.

So far as I have noticed, the first scripture that definitely speaks of this era is Deuteronomy 4:26-31. This is part of the message which Moses gave to Israel on the plains of Moab ere they entered the land of Canaan, very shortly before their great leader resigned his responsibility and went up into Mount Nebo to be put to sleep by God until the day of the Lord's coming. He said to the people, as he warned them of the folly of departure from God: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that ye shall soon utterly perish from off the land whereunto ye go over Jordan to possess it; ye shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall utterly be destroyed. And the Lord shall scatter you among the nations, and ye shall be left few in number among the heathen, whither the Lord shall lead you." These words we know have been literally fulfilled. For many centuries Israel has been scattered among the nations, and even though many of them have recently returned to Palestine, the day of their dispersion is not yet ended. This scattering of course was because of their sin and their violation of God's holy law. In verses 28, 29 Moses continued, saying, "And there ye shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. But if from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find Him, if thou seek Him with all thy heart and

with all thy soul." In my judgment this last verse has never yet been fulfilled. Evidently it does not refer to the return from Babylon. It has to do with the final repentance of the nation when they will be brought back from among all the nations on the earth. The scattering referred to was not simply that which took place in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, but rather the worldwide dispersion following the destruction of Jerusalem forty years after the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Never since that day have the people of Israel turned whole-heartedly unto God, and consequently they have not yet been restored to their land. The present movement is not a return to God but simply a natural awakening, leading many to go back to Palestine while still in unbelief. Such a return is elsewhere predicted in Scripture, but is not what is contemplated here. The circumstances which will result in the repentance of the nation are indicated in the verses that follow: "When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the Lord thy God, and shalt be obedient unto His voice; (for the Lord thy God is a merciful God;) He will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which He sware unto them" (30,31).

It seems clear that we have here the first definite mention of the coming tribulation. Certainly verse 30 does not refer to the age-long sorrows through which the people of Israel have passed, but to a definite set period of tribulation in "the latter days." This term, as any student of prophecy knows, refers to the closing days of God's dealings with this nation before they will be restored to Himself.

So far as I am aware there are no other clear references to this same period until we come into the Book of Psalms. Many of these psalms give us experiences that Israel will be called to pass through in that time of distress and show us what the glorious outcome will be. But to attempt to develop the truth of this would take far more space than is at my disposal. Consequently, instead of dwelling on the testimony of the Psalms, I pass on to the prophets.

Out of many passages which we might quote from the book of the Prophet Isaiah, I select but two. In chapter 13:6-13 we have a most graphic description of the day of the Lord's indignation. "Howl ye; for the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as a

destruction from the Almighty. Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart shall melt; and they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrow shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another; their faces shall be as flames. Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and He shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible. I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir. Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of His fierce anger."

By "the land" here is of course meant, as throughout all the prophets, the land of Palestine, the home of God's earthly people. "He shall destroy the sinners out of it" —this will be one result of the tribulation the nation will go through. The apostates will be destroyed but a remnant will turn to the Lord. Notice that there are certain supernatural events which must take place at that time, affecting, as our Lord Himself later indicated, the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof. The darkening of the sun and the shrouding of the moon are here definitely predicted. Keep these signs in mind for we shall come across them again. Not only will the people of Israel be punished in that day, but the judgments will fall on the world as such because of pride and arrogance. These verses give us a most vivid description of the end of our boasted civilization, when God is left out. They show us what this present evil world is hastening toward. They tell us what apostate Israel will have to endure and what unbelieving Gentiles will be obliged to go through.

We may get a little idea of at least part of the meaning of this prophecy if we remember what happened recently to the great Empire of Russia. How little there was of God for many years, and how corrupt and false the professing church! Evangelicals were terribly persecuted. Pride and arrogance prevailed, until God overthrew the ancient regime and permitted the awful conditions that have succeeded it, as if in answer to the sin and

corruption of those who professed to own His Name. His people have suffered dreadfully in that tribulation but, be it observed, the wrath of God as such has not been poured out, nor have the saints known divine indignation.

Turn now to Isaiah 17:4-11: "And in that day it shall come to pass, that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin, and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean.. .that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel. And he shall not look to the altars, the work of his hands, neither shall respect that which his fingers have made, either the groves, or the images. In that day shall his strong cities be as a forsaken bough, and an uppermost branch, which they left because of the children of Israel: and there shall be desolation. Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the Rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips: in the day shalt thou make thy plants to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow."

In verses 4-7 we see the remnant of Israel in the latter days, and in verses 8-10 the conditions that will prevail in the land of Palestine. Already we see everything working up toward this. Notice the striking prophecy of verse 10, where God tells the people that because of their long years of rebellion against Him, their land shall be denuded of trees, that just prior to the day of their great tribulation they shall plant that land with pleasant plants and shall set it with strange slips. It is a remarkable fact that in recent years many millions of plants and slips have been imported into and planted in the soil of Palestine. At the present moment the Jewish leaders are congratulating themselves that the day of their long trial is almost ended, and that their ancient patrimony will soon be again a land flowing with milk and honey. God has said, "In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and desperate sorrow." Whose grief and whose desperate sorrow? The answer to this question will settle the problem that is before us. It is perfectly clear that in this passage God is speaking of Israel's apostasy and His dealings with them. When our blessed Lord was on the earth, Palestine was one of the most fruitful of lands. Josephus' account of the conditions prevailing in Galilee before

the siege of Jerusalem is almost unbelievable, so productive was that land and so thickly populated. But, alas, they knew not the time of their visitation, and when the Saviour was rejected as Messiah, and His authority refused, God rejected the people and cast them out and blasted their land, and since then Palestine has been like a great desert, with here and there an oasis, unable to support a large population. The climate of that country has also been changed, chiefly because of the fact the large forests upon the Lebanon Mountains have been destroyed. The Turkish government but helped the desolation. The Turk never planted a tree where he cut one down, and in the last hundred years of his rule he put a tax on trees, which was so exorbitant that the people found it cheaper to cut down their orchards and groves than to pay this tax. But ever since the [First] World War they have been busy planting the land with pleasant plants and setting it with strange slips. If we did not have the word of prophecy we might take it for granted that the new day of Israel's final blessing is dawning. But as we study what God has revealed, our hearts might well bleed as we realize what these poor Jews are going back to, and how little they understand that this, their hour of tribulation, is still in the future, how that they must pass through it ere they recognize the Messiah their fathers rejected.

Now let us turn to the prophet Jeremiah, chapter 30, and note particularly verses 4-9: "And these are the words that the Lord spake concerning Israel and concerning Judah. For thus saith the Lord: We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear, and not of peace. Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child? Wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness? Alas, for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it. For it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off thy neck, and will burst thy bonds, and strangers shall no more serve themselves of him: but they shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them."

Reading this chapter carefully and the one that follows, will give us many more particulars in regard to the subject that is before us. But what I particularly wish to stress here is the different name now given to the era of tribulation. It is called specifically "the time of Jacob's trouble," and it is important that we have

this clearly in mind. It is not the time of the Church's trouble. As we have seen, we are having our time of trouble now. We have been enduring tribulation ever since the beginning of the Church's testimony here on earth, but the passage before us refers to something very different, a time of unprecedented distress which is called "Jacob's trouble." If Christian students of the Word would always distinguish carefully what prophecy has to say concerning the Jew, the Gentile, and the Church of God, it would not be difficult to clear up this entire subject. It is by confusing these three distinct classes that many strange unscriptural theories are foisted upon the people of God.

Observe that the time of Jacob's trouble is to be immediately followed by the repentance of the remnant and their deliverance from Gentile oppression, when once more they will serve the Lord their God and David their King, that is, when the true Son of David will be recognized as their Messiah and will be seated upon David's throne. David means "beloved," and God the Father has already designated the Lord Jesus Christ as His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased. He was refused as the Son of David when He came in grace the first time. He will be received in that very character when He returns in power and glory.

From many passages which we might quote in the Book of Ezekiel, I will confine myself to only one selection, found in chapter 20, verses 33-38: "As I live, saith the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you: and I will bring you out from the people, and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out. And I will bring you into the wilderness of the people, and there will I plead with you face to face. Like as I pleaded with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I plead with you, saith the Lord God. And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant: and I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against Me: I will bring them forth out of the country where they sojourn, and they shall not enter into the land of Israel: and ye shall know that I am the Lord."

Note carefully that here too this time of fury, divine fury, poured

out upon the people, is to be Israel's culminating experience immediately preceding their restoration to the Lord, when He will purge from among them the rebels and those that transgress, and will bring the redeemed remnant out of the lands of the Gentiles into their own country and reveal Himself to them as the Shepherd of Israel. By no possible system of sound exegesis can these experiences be made to refer to the Church of God. Most definitely the Lord tells us why He will permit this time of trouble. It is to be a judgment on those in Israel who rebel against Him. It will be the time when He will separate the remnant from the rebels. He will cause that remnant to pass under the Shepherd's rod and will acknowledge them as His own flock.

The Book of Daniel, as we know, is the great prophecy of the times of the Gentiles and gives us Israel's experiences under the domination of the nations. One could pause over many passages, but we draw attention particularly to chapter 12, verses 1-4: "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. 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. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased."

In Daniel's eleventh chapter God gives us a remarkable picture of His dealings with the nations, from the overthrow of the Persian Empire right on to the time of the end immediately preceding Messiah's second coming. In that day Israel will be passing through a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation, even to that same time, but what will the result be? God says, "Thy people, (that is, of course, Daniel's people, the Jews) shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book," or those who are regenerated. For centuries they have been sleeping in the dust of the earth. Some take this literally. My own thought is, in common with many others, that it refers to their present condition as scattered among the Gentiles. But in



this time of trouble, some shall awake to everlasting life, referring to the remnant, and some to shame and everlasting contempt, which takes in all who are apostate. This era of trouble is to prevail right on to the time of the end. Evidently the Spirit of God has in view that particular period spoken of by Moses as the tribulation of the latter days.

The Minor Prophets abound with awesome descriptions of this same day of distress, but we must content ourselves with two more Old Testament quotations. Notice Joel 3:9-11: "Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles: Prepare war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning-hooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong. Assemble yourselves, and come, all ye heathen, and gather yourselves together round about: thither cause Thy mighty ones to come down, O Lord." It is the call of God to the heathen to come up into the land of Palestine for the great conflict of the latter days when Israel will be back in the land in unbelief. The fearful wars of that time will go on until the Lord Himself descends with a host designated here "Thy mighty ones." Who are these mighty ones? If we had nothing else to guide, we might think of them as angels—and undoubtedly angels will be in His train, as many scriptures show—but we shall see as we go on, I believe, that these mighty ones are the saints of the past and present dispensations, who shall have been caught up to be with the Lord and glorified ere the great tribulation begins.

Zechariah in his last chapter describes the great Armageddon gathering, and tells us of the last siege of Jerusalem immediately preceding the Lord's return. Read carefully verses 1-4: "Behold, the day of the Lord cometh ... Then shall the Lord go forth, and fight against those nations, as when He fought in the day of battle. And His feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south."

Here we have a wonderful description of the appearing of our Lord, answering undoubtedly to His coming with His mighty ones in the passage we have just noticed. And again it proves

that the great tribulation does not refer to any past experiences that the Jews have gone through, nor yet to any experiences the Church has suffered, but to that time of Jacob's trouble which immediately precedes the revelation of Jesus Christ from heaven to set up His kingdom and reign over all the earth in righteousness.

From the Old Testament, then, we have learned that the tribulation will take place in the latter days of Israel's history; the people who will feel it most will be the Jews, but all the apostate nations of the Gentiles will also share the afflictions; it will not be a time of mere providential judgments but a time when there will be terrific and startling signs in the heavens and on earth, and men will be obliged to acknowledge that God Himself is dealing with them in His wrath and great indignation. All past tribulations have been merely natural and providential, as for instance in the days of the great war; but this time of trouble will be characterized by supernatural events that will add to the horrors under which men will live, so that they will desire to die, and death shall flee from them. We have also seen, I trust, that this tribulation goes right on to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ with His mighty ones to rule with the rod of iron. During the trial, a remnant of Israel will be separated from the apostate part of the nation and will turn in repentance to the Lord and be led to recognize Him when He comes. This remnant He will own as the true Israel and in them "all Israel shall be saved." They will be the handful of corn on the top of the mountains, the gleanings of the olives on the topmost boughs that will eventually "blossom and bud and fill the place of the whole earth with fruit."

Now let us turn to the New Testament and see if we can get any further light on this day of grief and desperate sorrow. Look first at Matthew 24. In this portion of the Kingdom Gospel, our Lord portrays the conditions that will prevail on earth right up to His second coming. He does not, however, speak definitely of the Church, which is His Body, or of any testimony such as we now know. This great prophecy was given before the revelation of the mystery and it is fully in keeping with the older predictions. He shows us the conditions that will prevail in the land of Palestine where there will be a remnant who cleave to Him and love His Name immediately preceding His second coming. In verse 15 He indicates the beginning of a time of very special trial "when ye

shall see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place." This carries us back to Daniel 12, and is clearly the starting-point of the great tribulation, which He describes in verses 16-29: "Then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains: let him which is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house: neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day: for then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened. Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, He is in the desert; go not forth: behold, He is in the secret chambers; believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be. For wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together. Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken."

Note particularly that all of this is Jewish, and all refers to the land of Palestine, excepting of course as the Gentile nations are linked with the conflict of that day. Here we have the definite name given to this period of trial, "the great tribulation," and that by the Lord Himself. That it is exactly the same period spoken of by the prophets from Moses to Malachi, is clear in the verses that follow, where we read: "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (verses 30, 31).

This makes it very plain that the great tribulation has never taken

place in the past either in connection with Israel's experiences or those of the Church. It could not refer to Israel's sufferings under Antiochus Epiphanes, for our Lord speaks of it as in the future. It cannot refer to their sufferings in the days of Titus and Vespasian, for those experiences did not culminate in the return of the Son of God. Neither can it by any possibility be fitted in to the experiences of the Church, either in the days of the pagan emperors or the papal persecution, for both of these are long since in the past and the Son of Man has not yet returned. His coming definitely puts an end to the great tribulation. We can only conclude therefore that it is still in the future and the scriptures we have gone over show it has to do with the future of Israel, not of the Church.

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