

Through The Tribulation

The Great Basin bristlecone pine can live more than 4,000 years and is believed to be one of the oldest living trees on the planet. Found on lonely mountain tops, some of these ancient evergreens have weathered thousands of years of intense freezing wind, pounding rain, scorching sun, and violent electrical storms. How do they manage to survive such harsh, adverse conditions? They send their roots deep, wrap them tenaciously around a solid rock, and hang on.

God's people will need to practice those same survival skills in the days just ahead. Jesus said that a terrible time of trouble would come upon the world just before His return and that it would be more intense than any other in the history of this world. "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." Matthew 24:21, 22.

As Jesus spoke these words to His disciples, no doubt He was referring to a similar prophecy made by the prophet Daniel. "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." Daniel 12:1.

The good news is that God's children will survive the coming tribulation. Like the bristlecone pine, the saints will have to sink their roots of faith deep into the Word of God and cling tenaciously to the mighty Rock of Ages.

What Is the Tribulation?

As we discuss the great tribulation to take place just before Jesus returns, keep in mind that there have been several other "times of trouble" for God's people in the past.

For example, the children of Israel endured 400 years of tribulation just before the Exodus (Acts 7:6). The early Christians also passed through a time of trouble immediately after the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1). From A.D. 303-313, during the era represented by the Smyrna church (Revelation 2:10), God's people suffered a 10-year period of tribulation. But perhaps the most notable time of trouble was the 1,260 years of intense persecution waged against true Christians during the Dark Ages. "And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and threescore days." "And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman." Revelation 12:6, 13.

As dark as each of these times were for God's people, none can compare with the final, great tribulation that is yet to take place. The great tribulation corresponds with the time during which the seven last plagues of Revelation chapter 16 will fall. "And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvellous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God." Revelation 15:1.

God's wrath will be directed against the ones who disobey His law, distort His truth, and oppress His people. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness." Romans 1:18.

The great tribulation also coincides with the Battle of Armageddon. Both take place immediately before Christ's second coming. "And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon. And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air; and there came a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done."

It is my belief that the great time of trouble will last only a month or two. Here are a few Scriptures that show it will be a short period of time.

Revelation 18:8 tells us, "Therefore shall her plagues come in one day." A "day" in Bible prophecy represents one literal year (Ezekiel 4:6, Numbers 14:34, Luke 13:32). So when Revelation says that "her plagues come in one day," it means within, or less than, one year's time. The very nature of the seven last plagues-the rivers and seas turning to blood and the planet being scorched with great heat-would render it impossible for the human race to survive more than a month or two. This is why Jesus said, "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened." Matthew 24:22

The Dragon's Fury

The experience of the children of Israel just before the plagues fell on Egypt is a type, or symbol, of what will happen to God's people before the seven last plagues described in Revelation 16.

After 400 years of slavery, the Israelites had become influenced by the religion of Egypt and had lost sight of God's law. So before Moses and Aaron met with the Pharaoh, they first met with the leaders of Israel to encourage a revival of commitment to God's law-including the Sabbath of creation (Exodus 4:29-31). The people responded wholeheartedly, which is why the Pharaoh got angry and said to Moses and Aaron, "You make them rest from their labor!" Exodus 5:5, NKJV. Remember that the children of Israel knew the Sabbath was part of God's law before they ever came to Mount Sinai (Exodus 16:22-28).

Before the onset of the great tribulation, special attention is once again called to the subject of worship and the Sabbath commandment. In Revelation 14:7, an angel calls God's people to "worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters." Revelation 14:7. The angel is clearly quoting from the Sabbath commandment, which says, "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day." Exodus 20:11.

A rediscovery of the law of God, including the Sabbath truth, will be the alarm that wakes the dragon to fury. The devil hates the Sabbath because he knows that all love relationships are built upon time. If he can destroy the day that was set apart for God's people to spend quality time with their Creator, he can destroy the relationship. We see this happen over and over again between husband and wife as well as father and son. If you stop spending quality time together, soon the relationship will fall apart.

When the children of Israel responded to God's call to keep the seventh-day Sabbath holy, the Pharaoh became furious. He knew that as long as the people focused only on work, work, work, they would have no time to think about freedom. The devil is using the very same strategy today. His goal is to keep people so busy with work and so preoccupied with the cares of this life that they have no time to worship their Creator. He knows that if

he can cause people to neglect the Sabbath rest, they will never have time to think seriously of salvation.

Looking down through history to the end of time, the Lord knew His faithful people would keep the Sabbath of the fourth commandment. That is why, in connection with the tribulation, Jesus advises His followers to "pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day." Matthew 24:20.

The time of trouble begins with the wrath of the devil against God's obedient children (Revelation 12:17) and ends with the wrath of God against the ones who obey the beast (Revelation 14:9, 10).

No Second Chance

Before the great tribulation begins, God's people will experience a small time of trouble. During this time the saints will have to share their faith in the face of stiff social, political, and religious opposition. "And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name." Revelation 13:17.

This small time of trouble will resemble the period of time just before the plagues fell on Egypt. The angry Pharaoh tried to turn the hearts of his Israelite slaves against their God by forcing them to produce the usual quota of bricks without providing the necessary straw. In the same way, before the tribulation the government will use political and economic sanctions to pressure God's end-time people into receiving the mark of the beast. When this fails to deter the people of God from obedience, there will be a final death decree. "And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed." Revelation 13:15. At this time, the great tribulation begins and the seven last plagues start to fall.

The main reason this time will be so intense is because it will come after probation closes for the lost. "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." Daniel 12:1. Notice that when the tribulation begins, the cases of all people have been forever decided.

The door of salvation and grace will close for the world-just as the door on the ark closed seven days before the Flood began. At that time Jesus will declare, "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give to every man according as his work shall be." Revelation 22:11, 12.

For the first time in the world's history, God's Spirit will be completely withdrawn from the lost. The unsaved will be given wholly over to demonic control. The saved will be sealed and the lost forever lost. No more changing teams!

God on Trial

If no one is converted by the plagues, then why does the Lord allow it?

For thousands of years God's Spirit has worked in the hearts of men. But He has warned that this would not always be so (Genesis 6:3). Satan must have an opportunity to demonstrate what a world that is completely under his power would be like. And so God will finally allow the winds of strife to blow unhindered-but not before His servants are sealed (Revelation 7:1-3).

The great tribulation will prove to the universe that nothing-not even the worst conditions in the history of the world-would change the characters of those still alive upon the earth. God's people will trust Him no matter what, and His enemies will rebel against Him no matter what.

Sometimes adversity brings a lost soul to repentance, but as the seven last plagues are being poured out, the wicked will reveal that there are no longer any redeemable threads in their fabric.

"The fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues; and they repented not to give him glory."
Revelation 16:9.

"They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds." Revelation 16:11

"Men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great." Revelation 16:21.

Through the Tribulation With Christ

Many Christians believe that the righteous will all be raptured out of the world just before the time of trouble and that the wicked will be left behind to endure seven years of tribulation. Because it sounds appealing, this doctrine has gained widespread acceptance. But the fact remains that the Bible clearly teaches otherwise.

Here are but a few of the many Scriptures which teach that God's end-time people will go through the tribulation:

The Bible describes the 144,000 as "they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Revelation 7:14.

In His great prophetic discourse on the mount of Olives, Jesus made the following statement immediately after mentioning the tribulation: "And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened." Matthew 24:22. If the elect were not in the world during the great tribulation, they would not need the days to be shortened!

All throughout Scripture we see examples of the Lord saving His people through tribulation, not from it.

Noah was not saved from the Flood, but through it.

Daniel was not saved from the lions' den, but through it.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were not saved from the fiery furnace, but through it. In fact, Jesus went through it with them, and He will go through the great tribulation with us as well!

The children of Israel were not saved from Egypt before the plagues fell, but afterward. God demonstrated His love and power by preserving them in Egypt through the ten plagues. In the same way, the righteous will be in the world when the seven last plagues fall (Revelation 16), but God will preserve them.

God never promises that our lives will always be easy. Christ prayed to His Father for His disciples, "I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil [one]." John 17:15. Likewise, in 2 Timothy 3:12 Paul states, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." Paul also told a group of disciples that "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God." Acts 14:22.

Although God does not always provide an escape from tribulation, He does promise to give us the power and strength to get through it. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13.

In His parable of the two home builders, Jesus taught that the storm comes to the wise man who builds on the rock just like surely as it comes to the fool who builds upon the sand (Matthew 7:24-27). The storm will come to all.

No Need to Fear

Picture, if you dare, this terrifying recipe. First, pour the entire contents of Armageddon into a pressure cooker, then slowly mix in the seven last plagues with one full bottle of Jacob's trouble and one whole crushed Babylon. Next, evenly stir in two full boxes of wrath—one from God and one from Satan. Cover securely and cook on high.

Sound appetizing?

We all seem to conjure up these frightening images when we think of the tribulation. Now try this instead. Picture Jesus in a fragile little boat on a dark sea, with the waves mounting and wind roaring. Mark 4:38-40 records the scene. "He was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish? And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm."

Then Christ said to them, "Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?" Jesus rested with the peace of a baby because He lived by faith in His heavenly Father. One message He delivered repeatedly throughout His ministry was "Fear not."

In John 16:33, Jesus said, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

God does not want us to live by fear, but rather by faith. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." 1 John 4:18.

During the world's darkest hour and greatest trial, God will supply the greatest peace and faith. We need only to remember that Jesus is in the boat with us. Though the furnace be heated seven times over, we can pass safely through it if Jesus is at our side.

The ninety-first Psalm contains special promises for those living during the last great tribulation. It says, "You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, Nor of the arrow that flies by day, Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, Nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, And ten thousand at your right hand; But it shall not come near you. Only with your eyes shall you look, And see the reward of the wicked." Psalm 91:5-8

The Psalmist makes it clear we will be in the midst of the world during the plagues yet remain untouched if God is our refuge. "No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling." Psalm 91:10

Rescue from the Skies

On Friday June 2, 1995, Captain Scott O'Grady was flying his F-16 over Bosnia when his plane was cut in two by Serbian anti-aircraft fire. He quickly ejected and parachuted to the ground. Suddenly he found himself in a different, hostile world with the entire Serbian army combing every inch of ground in search of him. For six days he prayed, often hiding with his face in the dirt to avoid being seen by enemy soldiers passing within a few feet. For six long days he survived-cold, wet, tired, hungry, eating bugs and drinking dirty water, calling every night on his little radio for help from above, running from enemies, and hiding under bushes. Then came a daring rescue from the skies. Forty airships, hundreds of soldiers, satellites, and the combined technology of all NATO were all engaged to rescue one hunted soldier.

Will God do less for His people?

When Captain Scott O'Grady returned to the United States, he was hailed as a hero. Why? Because he had come out of great tribulation. We too may have to endure a brief time of trouble, but it will fade into insignificance when compared with the glorious moment when Jesus comes crashing through the skies with his angelic armies to rescue His children.

"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Romans 8:18.