

Title: Tribulation

Text: 2 Thessalonians 1:4-5

Date: July 24, 2011

Place: Decatur Church of God

Theme: Packed Bags

Tsunami in Japan, oil spill in Yellowstone Park, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes in Haiti, and floods along the Mississippi are some of the natural disasters that create for us a time of tribulation. Greece in economic turmoil, financial crisis in the United States, loss of jobs and a declining job market create for us a time of tribulation. High profile figures caught in sexual escapades, married partners unfaithful to each other, sexual promiscuity being practiced at a Middle School level, sexual deviancy no longer seen as dysfunctional but as normal behavior creates for us a time of tribulation.

William Cox in *Biblical Studies in Final Things* writes, "Preceding the second coming of Christ there is to be a time of severe tribulation for the church. This tribulation has, in fact, already begun. It began with the first coming and will be terminated by the second advent of Christ."

I don't want us to be confused with the great tribulation predicted in Matthew 24:21...

Matthew 24:21

For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again.

- Also called "the time of Jacob's trouble"
- Also called "the abomination of desolation"

As I shared a few weeks ago, these prophecies regarding national Israel were fulfilled in A.D. 70, when Titus conquered Jerusalem and abominated the temple.

Cox writes, “Bible scholars generally agree that our Lord meant this was to be the greatest tribulation ever to come upon Israel as a nation. Since the Jewish state came to its prophesied end in A.D. 70, an even greater tribulation could come to pass—involving, not Israel, but the church—and still not be contradictory to the words of our Lord.”

Some believe that the great tribulation spoken of by our Lord in Matthew 24:21 began in A.D. 70 under Titus, but that it actually continues until the end of history. This is based on a statement by Jesus...

Matthew 24:29-30

"Immediately after the distress of those days 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

³⁰"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.

That Jesus spoke primarily of the destruction of Jerusalem is obvious but often prophecies have a dual meaning. While the primary fulfillment was in a historical setting, the second has more of a spiritual fulfillment.

I. Tribulation is obviously an indication of opposition to the kingdom of God by its enemies.

- A. The Old Testament prophets Jeremiah and Daniel already predicted this sign.

Jeremiah 30:7

How awful that day will be! None will be like it. It will be a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be saved out of it.

Daniel 12:1b

"... There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people--everyone whose name is found written in the book--will be delivered.

- B. In like manner the New Testament speaks to the tribulation.
 - a. It speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming end of the age.
 - b. Jesus addresses his disciples concerning the temple.

Matthew 24:2

"Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

- c. The disciples then asked, "When will this happen?"

Matthew 24:3

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

- d. Two questions are asked.

1. When will the temple be destroyed?
2. What will be a sign of your coming and of the close of the age?

* If the dialogue here in the scriptures is confusing to you, know that a technique called "foreshortening" is being used. That is when events far removed in time and events in the near future are spoken of as if they were very close together. The phenomenon is much like when one looks at distant mountains; peaks, which are miles and miles apart, may be seen as if they are close together.

- e. Jesus is proclaiming events in the distant future in close connection with events in the near future.

* Herman Ridderbos says, “The prophet paints the future in the colors and with the lines that he borrows from the world known to him, i.e., from his own environment... We see the prophets paint the future with the palette of their own experience and project the picture within their own geographical horizon.”

- f. The tribulation here predicted is described in terms, which concern the Jews, but must not be interpreted as having to do only with the Jews.

II. The Tribulation is a sign of the times, which is to be expected by his people.

Matthew 24:9-10

"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,

And then...

Matthew 24:14

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

- A. The gospel is to be preached throughout the ages and through tribulation, right up to the end of the age.
- B. Tribulation is looked upon as the badge of a genuine believer.

* On March 18, 1937, a spark ignited a cloud of natural gas that had accumulated in the basement of the London, Texas, school. The blast killed 293 people, most of them children.

The explosion happened because the local school board wanted to cut heating costs. Natural gas, the by-product of petroleum extraction, was siphoned from a neighboring oil company's pipeline to fuel the building's furnace free of charge.

London never recovered from the blast that turned the phrase "boom town" into a bitter joke. The one positive effect of this disastrous event was government regulation requiring companies to add an odorant to natural gas. The distinctive aroma is now so familiar that we often forget natural gas is naturally odorless.

There is a tendency these days to believe that the Christian life is filled with wealth, power, and good health. In reality, tribulation can be valuable, an "odorant" that warns us of danger.

Look at what the Apostle Paul says...

2 Tim. 3:12

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

And in,

2 Thessalonians 1:4-5

Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

⁵All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.

III. Tribulation is a natural by-product of genuine Christianity.

- A. Prophesied in the Old Testament.
- B. Announced by the John the Baptist.
- C. Attested to by Jesus, himself.
- D. Taught by the disciples.
- E. Experienced by every true follower of Christ.

* I asked God to take away my pride, and God said no. He said it was not for him to take away, but for me to give up.

I asked God to make my handicapped child whole, and God said, "No, her spirit is already whole. Her body is only temporary."

I asked God to grant me patience, and God said no. He said that patience is the byproduct of tribulation. It isn't granted; it's earned.

I asked God to give me happiness; God said no. He said he gives blessings; happiness is up to me.

I asked God to spare me pain, and God said no. He said I must grow on my own, but he will prune me in order to make me fruitful.

I asked God if he loved me, and God said yes. He gave me his only Son who died for me, and I will be in heaven some day because I believe.

I asked God to help me love others as much as he loves me, and God said, "Ahhh, finally! Now you have the idea."

IV. The fact of the Tribulation is self-evident.

- A. Its nature is primarily spiritual.
- B. Its purpose is to refine.
- C. Its end will come with the Second Coming of Christ.

* Tribulation has always been experienced by those faithful to God.

Conclusion: William Cox writes, "The church has already witnessed many persecutions. However, these persecutions will grow progressively worse...Individual believers are to accept persecution as a seal of their genuine conversion experience."

You might say, "then what's the use, I don't want to hurt."

I know better. I went through two knee replacements this past year. Barry has gone through two on the same knee. And we can tell you that there are times when it hurts...tribulation. Is it worth it? I can stand, walk, and do stairs. What do you think?

Suffering is for a season; the church in tribulation becomes the church triumphant.