

9. The Great Tribulation or Persecution.

Second Coming of Christ

Life's Character-Building Trials

Over the last eight studies, we have looked at Scriptures that indicate that God will allow His people to go through a time of persecution, distress, or tribulation in the last days. God's goal in letting His people go through trials and tests is to bring forth a pure radiant bride for His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul the apostle writes about this goal for 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). Many of us 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 things start getting hot in the furnace of life. God allows times of testing for our faith. The end goal of tribulation is character building. Paul the apostle writes, **“Tribulation [Gk. *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 correct 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 and threaten to consume your joy and energy. When you are going through sufferings, trials, or tribulations, remember that you are always under the watchful eye of a loving heavenly Father who allows situations and challenges to mold you into a more faithful, consistent, and stronger “you.” He is forging or sculpting your soul, mind, and character 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. We are driven to call upon greater resources from above when times are hard. I have heard someone say that Christians are like elastic bands—they must be stretched to be effective! Believers in Jesus Christ grow strong and are much more effective in what they are called to do and be when experiencing tests and trials of faith. The testing of your faith produces character, and character is the stuff of eternity. You may have heard the saying, “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 temple desecration by the Antichrist (Matthew 24:15, 21). There will be great tribulation or distress on earth when that event occurs. This event precipitates a time of testing that God will use to deepen us in our faith and bring maturity and a heavenly perspective to the Body of Christ. As we have said before in this series, there will be a war that will begin against believers in Christ. This war will pressure believers to compromise their faith and succumb to taking the Mark of the Beast. I believe this persecution will be initially launched against Messianic believers in Jesus who will not bow down to Antichrist's image in the newly built temple in Jerusalem. But when Jewish believers heed the warning and escape, the Antichrist will turn and demand worship from all people worldwide (Revelation 12:13-17). There will be a falling away, rebellion, or apostasy (depending on your translation, 2 Thessalonians 2:3) of those who go to church but never come into a relationship with Christ. We have looked at the possibility that this falling away might happen when this world leader requires all inhabitants of the earth to take the Mark of the Beast. I believe part of taking this mark will be the acknowledgment by many 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.

The persecution of Jewish believers in Messiah will not be without Gentile Christians suffering at the Antichrist's hands. All who serve the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will suffer persecution and, in some cases, die at the hands of the enemies of God. Jesus said:

“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 taking place on earth. When the right situation arises, many so-called Christians will compromise and turn away from the faith (v. 10). Why? Because they never really knew Christ in the first place! The Antichrist will tempt some who go to church just out of tradition to give up true believers, more than likely because there may be a price on our heads. Some may be so in debt and having no work that they will be tempted to give up Christians to get food subsidies. Just as true Bible-believing Christians were hauled off to prison along with Jewish people during the Second World War by the Nazis, there will be an outbreak of hatred towards Christians and Jewish believers sometime in the future. Satan and the occult motivated the Nazis, and the History channel has documented this for us. If you doubt this fact, you can also search Google using the 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.

Some of us will be hated and betrayed by friends or family because of our stand against the enemy's deception and for the truth of the Gospel. Do not allow the enemy to sow bitterness in your heart towards them, but forgive them just as our Lord did:

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).

In the passage spoken by Jesus above, it could be that the Lord was warning His disciples about the persecution that we read of in Acts 8:1: **On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1)**, but often in Scripture we see a double fulfillment, and in the Matthew passage above (v. 22), believers are given hope that deliverance will take place, in what many believe to be the rapture. The Greek word translated as *saved* means to deliver out of danger and into safety; used principally of God rescuing believers from the penalty and power of sin, but also of physical deliverance from harm. Those that stand firm at that time will be believers, so the word saved, I believe, should be translated as *delivered*.

How terrible will it be for some of us whose unbelieving family members will betray us? Does this mean that some of us will be hiding from those seeking us out and that members of our own family will hand us over? 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).

Some believe the passage above speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., but John didn’t write the passage above until 96 A.D., and the Caesars of Rome did not have authority over every tribe, people, language and nation (v. 7). Jesus encouraged us that when the time comes, we are 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 are those alive during this time of persecution. If we see these things occur 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 on earth during the time of the Antichrist, how will you respond to the persecution? What will be your primary objectives besides food, water, provisions, and staying alive?

If you are in Jerusalem at the time of the Abomination of Desolation, Jesus warned us to get out of the city immediately (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 believers in Christ to worship Antichrist. Some would suggest that those aware of what is happening should leave the cities for camps devoted to armed extremism. I think these will be the first to experience the wrath of the 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 decide what we will do to protect our families. 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 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 words of forgiveness like Stephen can influence a lot of people. We must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit as to what we should do.

2) **Leave the cities** ahead of time, retire to farmland, and survive by living off the land and not needing food from the grocery store is the second option. How will that work if you wait until you see the Abomination of Desolation on the T.V. screen to get out of the city? If we take, for example, the city of Cincinnati, how many Bible believers that know of the warning of Great Tribulation or Distress would be seeking to get away to hide in the surrounding countryside all at the same time? Out of two million people in the greater Cincinnati area, would 100,000 believers be trying to find places of refuge simultaneously? How would that scenario turn out? We will have great difficulty hiding with heat-seeking cameras and RFID receivers to sort out those with the mark and those without.

3) **Trust the Lord for Direction.** The third option is to wait on the Lord in prayer 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 on 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 by governmental authorities, with people going underground into 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. The early church met daily for mutual support of one another in the persecution they went through at the hands of the authorities: "With one accord they continued to meet daily in the temple courts and to break bread from house to house, sharing their meals with gladness and sincerity of heart" (Acts 2:46).

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 placed on all new vehicles and tires. If we were to use any connected device, it would broadcast our exact position. Companies advertise to us on social media and other sites on our phones, showing that our position and searches are continuously tracked. We are being digitally surveilled. At some time in the future, there will be no ability to buy things via cash. All money will go digital and can only be accessed by those with the Mark of the Beast. Those who 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, a signature/authorization chip allowing you to buy or sell via stores, mobile phones, 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 world leader, the 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 will intervene and cut short the time (Matthew 24:22) by catching up believers before the second half of the seven-year period 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 must trust and lean on one another. We must also remember that the third seal opened will be a time of famine. We must learn to depend on the Spirit of Christ and His power and receive direction before famine comes at the third seal, which, I believe, will be sometime in the first three and a half years, the time of beginning birth pains (Matthew 24:7-8).

The Antichrist will wage war against believers but not have everything his way, for a war speaks of two sides fighting against one another. God's holy people will wage a war of light against darkness, and this writer believes that many will come to Christ in the war that will take place. We should not think that God's people will fight with guns and weapons of war; our weapons are the weapons of truth against lies. The enemy's deception tactics will be brought into the light and made manifest before the inhabitants of the earth, and they will choose that day whether to walk with Christ or to obey the enemy and worship him. I believe many millions of people will come to Christ in the end times harvest.

I do not know everything about this time ahead, but one thing I do know, Scripture says that believers will overcome the Antichrist. In one sense, God's holy people will be conquered because there will be imprisonment and martyrdom that some, perhaps many, believers will have to endure. But even in that struggle of good against evil, we will overcome Satan by loving one another in unselfish agape love. We will overcome through the power of the shed blood of Christ and the word of our testimony of holding to Christ, even though the enemy is executing his plan to rid the earth of God's name and His people:

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.** ¹¹**They 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?

John the apostle, in the Book of Revelation, says that Gentiles will trample on the city of Jerusalem and the newly built temple of God for forty-two months:

¹I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, “Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, with its worshipers. ²But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months (Revelation 11:1-2).

John is given a measuring reed and told to measure the temple, the altar, and its worshipers. Scholars have difficulty with this chapter, especially regarding measuring the temple. Suffice it to say that a new temple will be built in Jerusalem, Israel, a temple that will be desecrated according to Paul the Apostle (2 Thessalonians 2:4) at the mid-point of the seventieth week of Daniel (Daniel 9:27), i.e., the last seven years before the end of the age.

Israel keeps to a lunar month of 30 days, 360 days to a year, so Gentiles will occupy Jerusalem for 1,260 days. God has two witnesses prepared for that very time:

³And I will appoint my two witnesses, and **they will prophesy for 1,260 days,** clothed in sackcloth.” ⁴They are “the two olive trees” and the two lampstands, and “they stand before the Lord of the earth.” ⁵If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. ⁶They have power to shut up the heavens so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have the power to turn the waters into blood and strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want (Revelation 11:3-6).

Who Are the Two Witnesses?

The Scriptures do not tell us who the two witnesses are, so we are left to look at different Scriptures that give us possibilities. There are two opinions about the witnesses. Some believe that one of the witnesses represents those in Israel that cling to the *Tenakh*, the Old Testament, i.e., those who will not go along with the Antichrist's new world system and worship him by taking his mark upon their hand or forehead (Revelation 13:12, and 16). The other witness is the true church that walks with the Lord and will not take Antichrist's mark.

The other view is that the two witnesses are two powerfully anointed individuals chosen by God to witness to the Gospel and the Lord Jesus during the Great Tribulation or persecution. This view of the two witnesses being just two individuals is strengthened by the fact that, while these two witnesses cannot be killed for three and a half years, other believers are being beheaded because they refuse the mark: “And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were **beheaded for the witness of Jesus**, and the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, **neither had received his mark** upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4). When one reads of the two witnesses, the enemies of God try as hard as they can to kill these two men, but they cannot kill them until the three and a half years of their prophesying and preaching is concluded. They will inspire millions worldwide via social media as the enemy tries to destroy them. Only at the end of their testimony is the beast (the Antichrist) allowed to kill them (v. 7).

So, let's look at who the two witnesses could be. Scholars point first of all, to Enoch and Elijah. The reason for these two men is that the Bible tells us, “**Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment**” (Hebrews 9:27), two people in the Scriptures have yet to die. Enoch is one: “**By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: He could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God**” (Hebrews 11:5). Elijah also did not die: “**Suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind**” (2 Kings 2:11). Once to die is not always a hard and fast rule, though, for Lazarus died twice. The Lord resurrected him, and he lived on and died a second time.

Elijah certainly seems to be one of them because the prophet Malachi prophesied his return before the great and terrible Day of the Lord. In the last two verses of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi wrote: ⁵**Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome Day of the LORD.** ⁶**And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse**” (Malachi 4:5-6).

The second view is that the two witnesses are Moses and Elijah. These were the two individuals seen speaking with Jesus when Christ was transfigured before His disciples, Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:1-8). This view also gains credence due to the miracles the two witnesses will do. Chapter 11, verse 6, says that they will turn rivers to blood and bring plagues on the earth, which Moses did during his ministry. On three occasions, Elijah brought fire on the earth: once on Mount Carmel in a spiritual dual with 400 prophets of Baal, and twice destroying a band of fifty soldiers who had come to arrest him (2 Kings 1:9-15). In our passage in Revelation, the two witnesses destroy those who attack them with fire (v. 5) and have the power to shut up the heavens so that it does not rain for the period of their prophesying, something that Elijah also did (1 Kings 17:1). At God's timing, the enemy is allowed to kill them:

⁷Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. ⁸Their bodies will lie in the public square of the great city—which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt—where also their Lord was crucified. ⁹For three and a half days some from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. ¹⁰The inhabitants of the earth will

gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth (Revelation 11:7-10).

At the end of the three and a half years, the beast (the Antichrist) is allowed to kill them. A festival similar to the western Christmas tradition of giving gifts begins at the two witnesses' death, showing us the world's hatred towards these men. Verse nine of the passage above says that people worldwide will see their dead bodies and gloat over them. This prophetic passage could not be fulfilled until only recently. With satellite and cable T.V. everywhere, all that is happening at the temple mount in Jerusalem is broadcast live. It is interesting that I watch a live cam focused on the Temple Mount's Western Wall in Jerusalem even as I write these words.¹

¹¹But after the three and a half days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. ¹²Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on. ¹³At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. ¹⁴The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon (Revelation 11:11-14).

Imagine the T.V. newscasters' shock in Jerusalem when they suddenly see the two dead bodies come back to life and stand on their feet. I think the media will be stunned and step back, fearing them. The two witnesses will hear a voice in heaven calling them up. Imagine seeing the two ascending into the sky together as a severe earthquake rocks the city. No wonder the survivors will be terrified.

Since we are not told the identity of these two witnesses, it is possible that they are unknowns and readied for this time. We only know that they will be invincible until their job is complete, i.e., carrying out plagues and judgments until they finally accomplish all God has for them to do. We can confidently say that these two witnesses appear to sum up the miraculous and prophetic ministry, marking the end of an era. The window of repentance for all humanity is closing quickly; the final judgment time is swiftly approaching.

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 difficult for some to endure, 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!

What an incredible 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 the grace to come to your Church as these days advance on us. Wake us up to the days we are in, that we may invest our lives for your kingdom purposes. Amen!

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¹ <https://www.skylinewebcams.com/en/webcam/israel/jerusalem-district/jerusalem/western-wall.html>

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