

3. THE GREAT TRIBULATION

For then there will be great tribulation (mega thlipsis), unequalled from the beginning of the world until now, and not to be equalled again (Mt 24:21).

And he said: These are they who have come out of the great tribulation (mega thlipsis). They have washed their robes in the Lamb's blood and made them white (Rev 7:14)

If the death of Jesus, when mortal man crucified the immortal Son of God, was the most tragic event that has ever taken place on Earth, it will be closely followed by the martyrdom of millions of God's people at the end of this age; a great multitude of Christians from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

The prophet Daniel was the first to prophesy about this event, which is significant in itself, because the OT prophets were almost exclusively concerned about Israel, not the Church. Daniel was told by an angel, probably Gabriel who had appeared to him in an earlier vision, that there would be a time of distress such as had not happened from the beginning of nations until then. However, at that time his people would be delivered (Dan 12:1). The word for distress in the Greek Septuagint is *thlipsis* which means oppression, affliction, tribulation, and distress. He was talking about the greatest time of oppression that would ever occur on earth. Daniel had already been warned about it in an earlier vision about a little horn, the Antichrist, who would wage war against the saints for 3 ½ years and defeat them (Dan 7:21, 25). The saints are defined as everyone whose name is found written in the book (Dan 12:1, cf. Exod 32:32), otherwise known as the Lamb's book of life (Rev 3:5, 21:27). Daniel would have understood 'your people' as his fellow Jews. The vision about the saints being destroyed wore him out, and he lay exhausted for several days (Dan 8:23-27). The period of this distress would last for 3 ½ years, beginning with the erection in the temple of the abomination that causes desolation (Dan 8:13-14) and finishing with the

resurrection at the Messiah's return (Dan 12:1-3). Half the world's population is Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, and yet many of them are oblivious to the fact that the Messiah will come soon.

Jesus confirmed Daniel's prophecy about the great tribulation as quoted above (Mt 24:21). The distress would be followed immediately by cosmic violence and darkness and the coming of the Son of Man (Mt 24:30-31), when the elect are resurrected. The elect are defined as Jesus' followers, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. Mark also records Jesus' words about this distress unequalled from the beginning of the world (Mk 13:19-24), beginning with the abomination that causes desolation being erected in the temple, and finishing with the arrival of the Son of Man.

The same terminology was used by an elder in John's vision of a great multitude of martyrs (Rev 7:13-14). Who are these in white robes, the elder asked John, then he explained: These are they who have come out of the great tribulation. They are a great multitude of people that no one can count from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They are martyrs standing in heaven before the throne of God and the Lamb. During these same 42 months, Gentile nations will invade Israel and trample on the holy city, Jerusalem (Rev 11:2). Satan, working through the Antichrist, will wage war against those who keep God's commands and bear testimony to Jesus. John declares that the Antichrist will be given power to wage war against the saints and to conquer them (Rev 13:7). The False Prophet will order people to set up an image in honor of the Antichrist in the temple at Jerusalem. He'll give the image life and the ability to speak and cause everyone who refuses to worship it to be killed. Millions will die for refusing to take the Antichrist's mark on their foreheads or hands, without which they can't buy or sell anything. Millions will starve to death. The whole world will be polarised into two groups: those who side with the Antichrist, ultimately Satan, and those who remain faithful to Jesus. Many nominal Christians will deny their faith, and many Jews and Muslims will believe in Jesus at this time because the prophecies are all there in the Bible for people to read, and they'll repent.

The final years of this age will continue to give Israel and Jerusalem great prominence. Israel is already counted among the top ten most powerful nations. Daniel 9:27 suggests that the Antichrist will make a

covenant with Israel for seven years and allow them to rebuild the Jewish temple at Mount Zion. Then, in the middle of the week, he'll break the treaty, set himself up as God in the new temple, and demand worship from everyone. And so will begin the time of terrible suffering, worse than any dictatorship that has preceded it. It'll be a time of trouble, particularly for Israel (Jer 30:7), but also for those who refuse to worship the Antichrist. Only those whose faith is strong will overcome.

The Antichrist will rise to power during the previous 3 ½ years, and he'll do as he pleases. He'll exalt and magnify himself above every religion, speaking amazing things against God. He'll succeed until what has been determined by God is carried out. He'll glorify the god of fortresses (nuclear armaments?) and plunge the world into a war so horrific that a third of the world's population will be slaughtered (Rev 9:18). Near the end, Egypt will oppose him. As fundamentalist Muslims, perhaps they'll rebel against his blasphemy. The Antichrist will invade many countries, moving swiftly and sweeping through. He'll extend his power over many countries, and Egypt won't escape. Libya and Sudan will submit. Then reports from the East and the North, beyond the Euphrates River, will alarm him, and he'll march out in great anger, intent on destroying many. He'll enter the beautiful land (Israel) and come to his end at Mount Zion between the Mediterranean and Dead Seas (Dan 11:36-45). Vast armies from the East and the North will invade Israel, 200 million in number (Rev 9:13-16), killing one-third of the people on Earth in the process. They are the nations of the world that gather for battle against the Lord at Armageddon. It is truly a time of great tribulation for all peoples.

Paul was thinking about this text when he counseled the Thessalonians. He said Jesus' coming and the accompanying rapture won't occur unless the rebellion takes place first and the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thess 2:3-4). This rebellion is worldwide as the nations conspire and band together against the Lord and his anointed and his people, Israel and the Church.

The Antichrist will be destroyed at the Lord's return. There will be continuous war during his reign, but when Jesus returns, he'll be eliminated by the breath of his mouth and destroyed by the splendor of his coming.

Jesus assured his disciples that God would give justice to his elect quickly; martyrdom would be quickly followed by resurrection. However, to show the gravity of the event, Jesus asked his disciples whether they thought he would find faith on Earth at his return (Lk 18:8).

The Great Tribulation will finish with the pouring out of the seven bowls of God's wrath (Rev 16). This is directed towards the beast. His kingdom will be plunged into darkness as a bowl of wrath is poured out on his throne. His followers will gnaw their tongues in agony and curse God. The greatest earthquake known to man will destroy the cities and Earth's infrastructure as the Messiah descends with his resurrected saints and sets foot on the Mount of Olives just East of Jerusalem.