

2nd Coming of Christ

Session 5

The Great Tribulation or Persecution

Warm-up question: Think of a time of great trial in your life. Could it have been a test of your character? If so, what did you learn about yourself?

Over the last four sessions we have seen a number of scriptures indicating that God will allow His people, the saints of God, to go through a time of persecution, distress or tribulation in the last days. God's goal in allowing His people to go through trials and tests is to bring forth a pure radiant bride for the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In the book of Ephesians, Paul writes about this goal for the church, 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). For many of us, including myself, we are not yet at a stage where the stains and wrinkles of our character have gone. Would you describe yourself as a mature, strong, devout believer of Christ? We are in process to be transformed into the likeness of Christ:

¹⁸ 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 the blast furnaces of God's sheet metal factory start getting hot. God allows for times of testing to our faith.

Life is a Series of Tests

I think of myself as a perpetual student in this life. You can never come to the end of truth and knowledge, as there is always something new to discover. We often find that in seeking the truth, we have to be open to change our world view as God adds to our finite picture and unfolds new lessons to us. I have found that life is not about how happy we and our families can be, (as happiness depends on what happens to you). Rather, it is about preparing for eternity and having a heavenly perspective as you make your journey through this life. It is easy to get bogged down in the mundane details

of life, but our heavenly Father is seeking to mold us into what we shall be in eternity. Keeping a heavenly perspective can be hard, especially when challenges loom ahead of you and threaten to consume your joy and energy. When you feel like this, remember that you are always under the watchful eye of a loving heavenly Father who is allowing all of these challenges in your life to mold you and craft you into a more faithful, consistent, and stronger "you." He is crafting your soul, your mind, your resilience, and finally your ability 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. It is only when times are hard that we are driven to call upon greater resources from above. I have heard someone say that Christians are like elastic bands—they have to be stretched in order to be effective! The Church of Jesus Christ grows strong and is much more effective in what she is called to do and be when she experiences tests and trials of her faith. The testing of your faith produces character, and character is the stuff of eternity. You have heard people say, "You can't take it 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 is worked into your character through the Holy Spirit, and will live on in eternity as part of who you are! That is something you CAN take with you.

Our adversary, the devil, is trying to hoodwink us into believing that our lives are random situations that happen in a haphazard way with no cosmic meaning, but God is sovereign over every situation and trial we go through. Nothing escapes His watchful eye, and He is using these events and circumstances to our ultimate benefit, as the scriptures tell us, "...we know that in all things **God works** for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Becoming a Christian is just the first step in a journey that God oversees. He is leading you even when you cannot see where the path is going.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be con-

formed to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29).

In Romans chapter 16, Paul writes a number of specific things to specific people commending them on aspects of their character. For instance, he writes: “Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ” (Romans 16:10). There is depth in the meaning of the words Paul chooses to use here. The Greek word that is translated ‘approved’ is the word *dokimos*. It was used in the common Greek language for something that had been through the fire of testing, and the testing had established it to be seen as something genuine, accepted and approved. The word was also used by James, chapter 1, verses 2 and 3, where he says, “² Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the **testing** of your faith develops **perseverance**.” The word “*testing*” again, is the same Greek word “*dokimos*.” It is interesting to note that this word is found on the bottom of many ancient pieces of pottery unearthed by archeologists in the Near East. This mark meant that the piece had gone through the furnace without cracking; it had been approved. God allows us to go through trials and testing in order that having gone through the fire, we might become a vessel of honor. In every trial, God’s initial purpose is to produce *perseverance*. This word comes from a combination of two Greek words that put together literally mean “to abide under.” This word “*dokimos*” is like God’s “Good Faith Keeping Seal of Approval”, and it is applied only to those who persevere, or abide under the tests He sends. Enduring, and responding in the way Christ would respond to those tests is what brings about the maturity and character that is God’s ultimate purpose for our lives (James 1:4).

What trials and difficulties have you gone through or are going through at the moment? Do you see God at work in any of those trials? What changes to your character have you or others seen?

The Warning of Great Tribulation or Persecution

As mentioned earlier, I believe that scripture warns us about a time of persecution that is yet ahead. This time of testing God will use to deepen us in our faith and bring maturity and a heavenly perspective to all that we do in this world. I believe that this persecution will be against Jews and Bible believing Christians. I say Bible believing Christians because we are told that there will be a falling away, rebellion or apostasy (depending on your translation, 2 Thessalonians 2:3) of those who go

to church, but have never come into relationship with Christ. They will compromise when confronted with taking the mark of the Beast. Let’s look at the persecution of the Jews first:

Persecution of the Jewish People That is Yet Future

The Lord Jesus spoke of a time in the past when Jerusalem would be surrounded by the Roman army and the Temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed.

⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, **because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you**” (Luke 19:43-44).

There would be a time of judgment and dispersion of the Jewish people from their land because of their rejection of the Messiah. This rejection was not a surprise to God. He spoke through the prophet Isaiah that the Messiah would be rejected (Isaiah 53:3). When Pilate, the Roman procurator, tried to release Jesus from their hands (John 18:38-40), they would not have it, but brought upon themselves a curse that Satan was glad to ratify on them as a nation.

²⁵ All the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25).

Since that terrifying curse was uttered, and the choice was made to reject the Messiah, the Jewish people have suffered as a people group. It is estimated that around one million Jews died in the Great Revolt against Rome in 70 A.D. Many were taken as slaves to Rome and other cities; they were told not to return to Jerusalem under threat of death. Scattered all over Europe, the Jews were persecuted as God killers. As they settled they were frequently persecuted and massacred. They were often murdered for no reason at all, many times just to have their things stolen from them. The persecution reached its first peak during the Crusades. In the First Crusade of 1096 many communities along the Rhine and Danube rivers of Europe were wiped out. In the Second Crusade of 1147, the Jews in France were subject to frequent massacres. Again in 1251 and 1320, during the Shepherds Crusades, the Jews were attacked and murdered, many times hundreds at a time. They were not allowed to settle for any amount of time. In 1290, for instance, all English Jews were banished. *They soon*

were slaughtered, hung, or burned in retaliation due to many believing that it was the Jews who started the Bubonic plague. It was said that they were poisoning the wells of Europe. Another myth that was spread was that the Jews were murdering Christian children and using their blood in their Passover celebrations. In 1349, Landgrave Frederic of Thuringia wrote to the council of the city of Nordhausen telling them how he had burnt his Jews in honor of God and advising them to do the same. In 1396, 100,000 Jews were expelled from France, and in 1421 thousands were expelled from Austria. Often they fled to Poland where they were granted some rights. By 1351, 60 major and 150 smaller Jewish communities had been exterminated and more than 350 separate massacres had occurred. Basically, the massacres came about because of myths and the Christians owing the Jews much money in interest. Money again was what killed the Jews in Strasbourg. The Jews were either baptized to Christianity and gave the so-called Christians all their money or they were burnt alive. Many Jews agreed or were forced by their families to convert. All these events had been provoked by any act the Jews were doing because they had become the most hated figures in European society.¹

The massacres and expulsions of Jews continued in Russia during the Pogroms illustrated by the movie, Fiddler on the Roof. In the south of Europe persecution broke out as many Jews were forced to convert to Christianity or die at the hands of murderous men motivated by religious extremism. In fact, thousands upon thousands of Jews were slaughtered for little to no reason through the nineteen hundred years that led up to the Final Solution at the hands of the Nazis under Adolf Hitler of Germany in the 1940's when more than 6,000,000 Jews were murdered. A brief list has been compiled at this web address:

<http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/HistoryJewishPersecution/>

I love the Lord for His kindness and mercy in that He never leaves His people without hope. The Lord spoke through the prophet Hosea:

4 For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol. 5 **Afterward the Israelites will return and**

seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days (Hosea 3:4-5).

The Lord was saying to Israel, through her prophets, that there would come a time when God would bring the Jewish people back to their land. This began to happen in the early 1900's when God used a Jewish man by the name of Theodor Herzl. Until the Jewish people began to come back to the land, the land itself was barren and could not be farmed. Mark Twain, the famous writer, gives evidence of this in his travels to the Holy Land in 1867. He wrote about the lack of ability for the land to provide for people:

“Stirring scenes...occur in the valley (of Jezreel, now one of the most fertile places in the Middle East) no more. There is not a solitary village throughout its whole extent—not for 30 miles in either direction. There are two or three small clusters of Bedouin tents, but not a single permanent habitation. One may ride 10 miles hereabouts and not see 10 human beings.”²

The trickle of people in the early 1900's became a flood after the murder of six million Jews in the Second World War. God had promised that He would bring them home to their land. How did He begin to do it? He allowed persecution to come to them:

⁵ **Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west.** ⁶ I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’ Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth (Isaiah 43:5-6).

In Ezekiel, chapter 39, in a long prophecy covering more than four chapters, written more than 550 years before Christ, 593 BC to 563 BC, the prophet prophesied of a time when the Jewish people would be gathered back to the land of their ancestral home:

²⁵ “Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will now bring Jacob back from captivity and will have compassion on all the people of Israel, and I will be zealous for my holy name. ²⁶ They will forget their shame and all the unfaithfulness they showed toward me when they lived in safety in their land with no one to make them afraid. ²⁷ **When I have brought them back** from the nations and have **gathered them from the countries**

¹ Taken from: <http://bpjews.tripod.com/>

² Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (London:1881) p. 349.

of their enemies, I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations. ²⁸ Then they will know that I am the LORD their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, **I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind.** ²⁹ I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD” (Ezekiel 39:25-29).

This prophecy speaks of a time when God will destroy an enemy that comes against the nation of Israel from the far north (Ezekiel 38:15 and 39:2) that is allied with Persia, nowadays called Iran (Ezekiel 38:5), with several other nations as well. Right at the end of the prophecy God tells them that this act of His occurs during the time of Him gathering the Jewish people home. He specifically says He will not leave any behind in the nations that He is gathering them from (Verse 28) and that He will pour out His Spirit upon them (Verse 28).

How will this prophecy be fulfilled when one considers that 39% of the Jewish people, more than 5 million Jews, live in the United States? If God will not leave any behind, what will this look like?

I want to be quick to say that persecution of any race or people is a deadly evil that God will judge with severe judgment, especially when it is the Jewish people, the apple of His eye (Zechariah 2:8). If you doubt that, just read Ezekiel 35 to see how Edom (present day Jordan and the Palestinian people) have suffered for their ancient hostility toward the Jewish people (Verses 5, 10-15). Scripture does not tell what God will use to bring the Jewish people back from the nations, but if we look at the Jewish people’s experience at the hand of the Nazis, it very well could be persecution at the hands of the Antichrist when he comes to power.

Jeremiah, the prophet, spoke of a time when God would send fishermen and catch them and bring them back to the land:

¹⁴ “However, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when men will no longer say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,’ ¹⁵ but they will say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up **out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.**’ For I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers. ¹⁶ “But now **I will send for many fishermen,**” declares the LORD, “and they will catch them. After that I will

send for many hunters, and they will hunt them down on every mountain and hill and from the crevices of the rocks” (Jeremiah 16:14-16).

I interpret that passage to mean that if the Jewish people will not return home at the words of fishermen, that He will send for hunters. To my mind, the hunters speak of a harsher course of action with Jewish people being hunted, and I am sure that Christians will undergo the same situation at the same time. I like to think that maybe the words that I am writing today might find their way to the hearts of Jewish people and that God would use me (I used to be a commercial fisherman for many years) to speak words of hope and vision to call those He loves home to the safety and security of their land.

Persecution of Christians That is Yet Future

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

⁹ “Then **you will be handed over** to be persecuted and put to death, and **you will be hated** by all nations because of me. ¹⁰ At that time **many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other,** ¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹² Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³ but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved (Matthew 24:9-13).

Perhaps some would say that Jesus was saying this to the disciples, and of course, they were Jews. What do you think? Will it be Jews or Christians or both that will be hated and handed over?

We are in the midst of a spiritual war taking place on planet Earth. When the right situation arises, many so-called Christians will compromise and turn away from the faith (Verse 10). Why? Because they never really knew Him in the first place! Those who are nominal Christians will be tempted by Antichrist to give up true believers, more than likely because there may be a price on our heads (Revelation 18:13). It is possible that there will be some who are so in debt and having no work, will be tempted to give up Christians so that they can get food. Just as true Bible believing Christians were hauled off to prison along with Jewish people during the Second World War by the Nazis, so there will there be an outbreak of hatred towards Christians and Jews

alike sometime in the future. The Nazis were motivated by Satan and the occult. The History channel has documented this for us. If you doubt this fact, you can also do a search on Google using the search term, "Hitler and the Occult." There will be an occult dimension to Antichrist and his world kingdom just as there was in the Nazi party.

As in the passage about hunters going forth, we are specifically told that some of us will be betrayed and be hated by those that today we may consider friends or even family.

²¹ "Brother **will betray brother to death**, and a father his child; **children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.** ²² You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who **stands firm to the end will be saved** (Matthew 10:21-22).

How terrible will it be for some of us to be betrayed by our own families? Does this mean that some of us will be hiding from those who are seeking us out, and that members of our own family will hand us over? Some, perhaps, would suggest that the above passage was fulfilled in the persecution that broke out upon the stoning of Stephen in the Book of Acts, chapter 8, verse 1. But it is evident from other passages that the Great Tribulation or persecution is still ahead of us.

⁷ He 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. ⁸ All 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. ⁹ Whoever 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).

Jesus warns us ahead of time that He requires us to be faithful and endure even to death if need be. Death is never the end to a believer—it is but a door into eternal life. These words of Jesus should encourage us if we should so be the ones that will be alive in this time of persecution. When we see this things take place 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).

So what should we do when we see Antichrist seat himself in the temple of God and proclaim himself as God, knowing that tribulation and persecution will break out at that point? (2 Thessalonians 2:4, Matthew 24:15-29). Discuss how you will prepare for this time and what you will do when it arrives.

If you are in Jerusalem, Jesus warns us to get out of the city right away (Matthew 24:15-28). But for those of us who are in different places all over the world, we have three choices to make.

1. Take up arms against those who seek to enslave those of us who will not bow to Antichrist. Camps that are devoted for armed extremism will be the first to experience the wrath of Antichrist. He will waste no time in dropping bombs on such places that resist his will. I do not find anywhere in scripture where we are encouraged 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).
2. The second option is to leave the cities and retire to farmland and try and survive. How will that work? If we take, as an example, the city of Miami and Fort Lauderdale, how many Bible believing, Jesus loving, people would there be who would seek to get away to hide in the Everglades? Could we say that there are five million people in the Fort Lauderdale, Miami area? Could we expect that there would be 100,000 people, all around the same time, trying to find places of refuge? What would that look like? With heat seeking cameras and RFID transmitters to sort out those with the mark and those without, we will have great difficulty in hiding.
3. The third option is to wait on the Lord and get His specific direction, trusting Him to show us what to do. When thinking of that period of time, we often forget that God is waiting for us to depend on Him in the midst of dark times to show Himself strong on behalf of His church. He delights for us to lean upon Him in such times of need. I believe that the closer we get to the end-time the greater the darkness and evil, but at the same time, the greater the light and power that will be on the true believers. The gifts of the Spirit will be more evident in those

days. I believe that true Bible believing churches will be shut down, but the church will go underground in Small Groups or House churches. We must start to gather in community now, for we will need to know who we can trust in the last half of the seven year period.

What will be the difficulties that we will face by not taking the mark?

We will have to be totally disconnected from any computer, cell phone or electronic device. Even our cars will have the ability to be tracked through the RFID that is being placed in all new cars, and even on the tires. If we were to use a computer it will broadcast our exact position. Already I am being advertized on Facebook by companies in the area I work in, showing that my position is being tracked at all times through mobile phones or laptops or iPad. I believe that at some time in the future, the internet and other means of buying and selling will only be able to be accessed by those that have the mark of the beast. If I am correct it will be a RFID chip that will be a signature/authorization chip that will allow you to buy or sell via the stores, mobile phone or the internet. It will have all your personal information on it and I believe it will be able, in some way, to detect whether or not you have worshipped the beast when you came online.

We who refuse the mark will need to have food either growing or in storage to last several months, if not the full three and a half years of the second half of the seven year period (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 will have to trust and lean on one another. We must also remember that the third seal being opened was a time of famine. We must learn to depend on the Spirit of Christ and His power to receive direction before the time of famine comes at the third seal, which is some time in the first three and a half years, the time of beginning birth pains (Matthew 24:7-8). I do not know everything about this time that is ahead, but

one thing I do know, that we will be able to overcome Antichrist. We will overcome him by the power of the finished work of the shed blood of Christ, and by the word of testimony of our experience of Christ:

¹⁰ Then 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.** ¹² Therefore 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).

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 a difficult one to some, 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!

⁴ I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of **those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God.** They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had **not received its mark** on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years (Revelation 20:4).

What an awesome day that will be! Your joy will know no bounds! We will see His face, and enjoy Him and one another forever and ever. This is true treasure that is worth the fire of testing!

Prayer: Father, I pray for grace to come to your church as these days advance on us. Help us right now to wake up to the days we are in, that we may invest our lives for your kingdom purposes. Amen!

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