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Great Tribulation Matthew 24:21

By Elder Keith Ellis

"For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor shall ever be."

Matthew 24:21

This verse is a favorite of the "*dollar-called*" preacher. It is probably used to scare more people into giving money than any other verse in the Bible. The modern day huckster will not tell you this event has seen its fulfillment. He wants to keep you in the dark about the entirety of Matthew twenty-four. Regardless of whether you believe it or not, it has been fulfilled.

Let's remind ourselves of Jesus' earlier statements. He said the very generation which was alive during His personal ministry would have the blood of ALL the righteous prophets upon their heads. (Matthew 23:34-36) Luke records for us, "these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled." (Luke 21:22) Those who cried out, "crucify him, his blood be upon us and our children," would get their wish. (Matthew 27:22-25) The rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people was not a light thing. There was to be great wrath upon the people, their system, and *their* way of living.

There are three participants in this tribulation period. The church, (the takers) The Jews (the givers then the takers) and Rome. (the givers) First lets look at what happened to the church. The book of Acts records five persecutions which took place upon the church in Jerusalem in about an eleven year time span.

There was persecution at the hands of the Saducees. This is due to the fact that Peter and John boldly preached the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This doctrine was firmly disbelieved by the Saducees. (See Acts 4:1-3) It was important that this doctrine be placed in check by those who opposed it. This teaching of the resurrection was central to the very existence of Christianity, and Satan knew it too! Peter and John were arrested, and then threatened for preaching these truths concerning Jesus' triumph over death and the grave. It was this same power which gave the man at the gate beautiful the ability to walk. Yet all the threatening just made them bold to speak the truth in the name of Jesus. (See Acts 4:29-31)

In the fifth chapter of Acts we find the Apostles working many signs and wonders among the people. The Saducees were filled with indignation and had the Apostles thrown in common prison. On this occasion we read how the angel of The Lord opened the prison doors and lead them back to the streets where they were instructed to preach to the people "*all the words of this life.*" After being discovered absent from the cells the next day, they were discovered in the city preaching and were again brought back before the high priest. After questioning the Apostles and having been charged with the crucifixion of Jesus, the council sought to slay the Apostles. Had it not been for Gamalilel, this is probably what would have

taken place on this occasion. The Apostles were beaten and let go. They left rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus. They continued to preach in His name.

Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian church at Jerusalem. Stephens message was this:

"For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us."

Acts 6:14

This message which Stephen preached was true. **Your days are numbered**, he tells the Jews in so many words. This message threatened the comfortable way of life which many enjoyed in that day. They would not stand for such teaching. Such a one who taught these things would have to die. This is where Saul, who had authority to imprison Christians, came into the picture. He stood by and watched as the crowd stoned Stephen to death. Yet this Saul, who is later referred to as Paul, would learn how great things he must suffer for Jesus names sake. (Acts 9:16)

In Acts chapter eight, Luke speaks of the great persecution which came against the church at Jerusalem. Saul it is said made havoc with the church. He is said to have imprisoned many men and women who professed Christ. This persecution accomplished a *scattering abroad*. It is said that the disciples went everywhere preaching the word. Just as persecution has always done, its blood furthers and increases the cause. It does not extinguish it.

Acts twelve. Herod Agripa I, grandson of Herod the Great instigated a persecution. In order to please the Jews, whose company he favored, he murdered James, the brother of John. Once he saw to what degree it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to take Peter also. While Peter waited in prison for Easter to pass, the church prayed for his deliverance. The story goes that Peter was sleeping in between two soldiers and the angel of The Lord came upon him and loosed him from his chains and led him out of the prison. Once Herod had heard of the Peters escape, he examined the keepers of the prison and then had them executed.

Foxes book of Martyr's tells us all the Apostles except John suffered martyrdom. All for preaching in the name of Jesus. This period of tribulation helped to establish the church of Jesus Christ in the world. However it accomplished just the opposite among the Jews.

Our Lord warned the disciples about persecution;

"But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.

Matthew 11:23

Two things in the above text deserve our notice. Besides the mention of persecution which Jesus said would come upon the disciples we see the mention of Israel in the text. This

is telling us Israel is the region under consideration. The ‘*where*’ of the text. The persecution is confined to Israel. The statement “till the Son of man be come,” tells us the ‘*when*’ of this text. Nor is the text concerning some future generation. This text was written to those to whom our Lord spoke it personally. The coming of the Son of man has direct reference of the spiritual coming of Christ in the destruction of Jerusalem.

If you consider the entire context of the above verse, you can easily see this is referring to a past generation of Christian disciples. It is confined to a specific region and a specific time. It speaks to the twelve disciples which the scriptures mention by name. (See Matthew 11:2-4) The context tells of a time when the apostolic gifts were in operation. Jesus prophesies of events and we read of their fulfillment in the book of Acts. There is no doubt this persecution which was to come upon the church came and went before the destruction of Jerusalem. This persecution against the church was an element of **the great tribulation**.

The scripture tells us there is more than one “*great tribulation*.” In the book of Revelation John address the seven churches in Asia. Jesus sends warning to the church of Thyatira about toleration of the spirit of Jezebel and their unrepentant attitude. The penalty for their continued rebellion is said to be “*great tribulation*.” (See Revelation 2:22) However we know this tribulation is concerning a place in Asia, not Judea. Nor is this **the** great tribulation which Jesus says will not be equaled or repeated. (See Matthew 24:21)

Here are a few other references to tribulation in the infant New Testament church. John 16:33, Acts 14:22, Romans 8:35, 1 Thesalonians 3:4.

The events spoken of in Matthew chapter twenty-four speak of a great reformation period. The New Testament church age was being established. God was bearing witness to the Divine mission and authenticity of the church through mighty signs and wonders at the hands of the Apostles. A system which was renowned the world over was being placed to rest. A supposed group of zealots was gaining wide acceptance and the more you killed them, the more they increased. There had never been anything like unto this since the days when Moses stood before Pharaoh. God was shaking the heavens and the earth;

“...Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.”

Hebrews 12:26-29

We can easily see in context the verses just quoted refer to God establishing the church and retiring the Law of Moses. If we were to consider the magnitude or severity of this “shakeup” we need only think of God shaking heaven and earth. Of course we understand this has reference to the power and authority of the Jews being removed. (more on this in a later chapter) When something this magnificent takes place, when people’s lives are dramatically

changed all at once, when love waxes cold and hatred increases the result will be ‘*great*’ tribulation.

Just for a moment consider some of the circumstances and conditions which prevailed. Place yourself in their shoes for just a moment. It will not take us long to see this was an extremely troublesome time. By our standards today, it becomes great tribulation for us the first time someone even speaks a word against us. Could you imagine what things would be like with this major shaking taking place? These events are unmatched in the history of the world or the church for their importance and necessity. It had to happen.

Another aspect to consider when thinking about the great tribulation which the New Testament church went through and when it took place is to be found in the book of Revelation. Chapter seven speaks of the result of faithfulness for some to the King of kings. In verse thirteen the question is asked about who it was which were arrayed in the white robes.

“And I said unto him, Sir, thou knoweth. And he said to me, These are 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

Mention is made in verse fifteen about these people serving God in his temple. Of course we know the temple of Jerusalem is not under consideration here. Nor is a rebuilt temple being spoken of. Our bodies are the temple of The Lord, where we serve Him day and night.

The above verse (Revelation 7:14) is set in contrast with Revelation chapter one verse five. Here we read how Jesus washed us from our sins in His own blood. Here, ‘**Jesus**’ does the washing, and those being washed are passive. This speaks of the eternal aspect of Jesus’ blood. Salvation by grace, apart from the works of man. This is grace. In Revelation chapter seven verse fourteen it is said “**they**” had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Now keep in mind the robe signifies the righteousness of Jesus. This is what Jesus tells us to seek. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His *righteousness*...” (See Matthew 6:33) So those who had these robes on had apparently found the kingdom of God, and the righteousness of God. They had come out of great tribulation by remaining faithful to the teachings of Jesus. In effect they were saved (temporally) by enduring. (See Matthew 24:13)

Add to all this the truth that anti-Christ’ were everywhere. False prophets were in no short supply. Rome was putting pressure on the Jews to get things under control. All the while the conditions continued to deteriorate. Things got worse and worse as each day passed.

Jesus says in verse twenty one of Matthew chapter twenty-four there would be great tribulation. And this was not only referring to the New Testament church, it is referring to the Jews also.

Many of the things which led up to and happened during this time frame were in fulfillment of prophecy. God, through Ezekiel foretells the destruction of Jerusalem. He speaks of the wickedness and rebellion of the Jews. Let's hear what he had to say.

"Thus saith The Lord God; This is Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nations and countries that are round about her. And she hath changed my judgments into wickedness more than the nations, and my statutes more than the countries that are round about her: for they have refused my judgments and my statutes, they have not walked in them. Therefore thus saith The Lord God; Because ye multiplied more than the nations that are round about you, and have not walked in my statutes, neither have kept my judgments, neither have done according to the judgments of the nations that are round about you; Therefore thus saith The Lord God; Behold, I even I, am against thee, and will execute judgment in the midst of thee in the sight of the nations. And I will do in thee which I have not done, and whereunto I will not do any more the like, because of all thine abominations. Therefore the fathers shall eat the sons in the midst of thee, and the sons shall eat their fathers; and I will execute judgments in thee, and the whole remnant of thee will I scatter into all the winds. Wherefore, as I live, saith The Lord God: Surely, because thou hast defiled my sanctuary with all thy detestable things, and with all thine abominations, therefore will I also diminish thee; neither shall mine eye spare, neither will I have any pity."

Ezekiel 5:5-11

In the beginning of this work I referenced the writings of Josephus. He was an eye witness to these very things happening. The only bright spot in the above text is where God says He will not do it anymore. However unpleasant it is to think about such things they were the judgment of God which came to pass in the events surrounding the demise of Jerusalem and its inhabitants.

Jesus is echoing the same things Ezekiel is saying. The prophet of old was right on target when he described what would happen to Jerusalem. Notice he mentioned in verse nine and ten God would permit things to decay to the point of cannibalism. Again notice in verse nine God had not done it before, nor would He do it after. This sounds like Jesus' statement concerning the great tribulation in verse twenty one of Matthew twenty-four.

It is hard to imagine a worse thing among men than being reduced to actual cannibalism. Couple this with the mass confusion, death, slaughter, persecution and oppression. All of these things were connected with the end of the law and the fall of Jerusalem as God was pouring out His wrath upon this disobedient people. We can easily see this was the great tribulation which Jesus foretold.

The Old Testament has many references to the destruction of Jerusalem. Space will not permit the discussion of all of them. It may benefit the reader to keep this in mind when he reads the law and the prophets.

By teaching the great tribulation as having seen its completion in the destruction of Jerusalem, I by no means want the reader to get the impression Christians will not undergo

tribulation and persecution. Luke records for us that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. Notice he did not say "great tribulation," but "much tribulation." (See Acts 14:22) This is individual tribulation. And also we shall hear of other nations which will undergo trials and tribulation. Yet the great tribulation spoken of by Jesus in Matthew twenty-four saw its fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem AD 70. And as Jesus says, there will not be a time like it again on the face of the earth.