

Tribulation, Judgment, and the Vengeance of God

Tribulation comes from a variety of sources. Every disciple of Christ is subject to the Father's discipline and pruning so we may bear fruit for the kingdom. (Jn. 15:2) He uses the gentle nudge of conscience, the voice of conviction, and the schooling of discipline before moving onto harsher methods. *"The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."* (Heb. 12:6) When God does resort to punishment it is to turn us away from sinful habits. Punishment usually involves something that creates tribulation (Gr. *thlipsis*: pressure, trouble, persecution), so we will seek God and reform our ways. *"He does it for our own good so we may share in his holiness."* (Heb. 12:10)

Just making one's way in the world results in another source of pressure, commonly known as stress: *"In this world, you will have trouble..."* (Jn. 16:33) Because the values of the world are diametrically opposed to those of the kingdom, believers endure the prejudice and even persecution of the world. This can range from subtle to intense: *"Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* (2Tim. 3:12) There is, however, a spiritual upside to this, because trials and temptations strengthen our faith. And ultimately, God's scales will ensure an equitable outcome; the just will be rewarded and the wicked punished before the throne of God.

This judgment of individuals at the end of the world is not God's only form of justice; he holds nations accountable as well. In the Old Testament the Lord deals with his chosen people not just individually, but as a nation. Because he is Lord of all the earth, he judges the Gentile nations as well. He sent Jonah to call the Assyrian capital of Nineveh to repentance and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for the grievousness of their sin. *"God reigns over the nations...for the kings of the earth belong to God."* (Ps.47:8-9) The prophet Jeremiah described God's future judgments on many nations: Babylon, Edom, Egypt, Syria, Gog, Magog, and so on.

Whether he is dealing with individuals or nations, there are some sins that anger the Lord more than others. Old Testament Scriptures convey the seriousness with which God views witchcraft and rebellion. Jesus illustrated the dire consequences of leading the innocent into sin: *"But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea."* (Mt. 18:6) The sin that causes God the most grief though is idolatry; his very first commandment forbids the worship of other Gods. When an individual or a nation embraces other gods, this involves a rejection not only of the commandment, but of God himself. Israel's pursuit of foreign gods resulted in repeated judgments by the Lord. And idolatry is not just an "Old Testament" sin. The church in Thyatira was facing the threat of great tribulation, not just because of the immorality of some members, but because their immorality was a gateway to participation in Roman sacrifices. (Rev. 2)

When a nation renounces the Lord, the ultimate result of its idolatry is the persecution of the righteous. God is therefore twice offended: first, because he has been rejected in favor of false gods, and second, because the righteous are betrayed and handed over to the wicked, with persecution eventually turning into bloodshed. The Lord takes a personal interest in the mistreatment of those who belong to him, and he will not let their deaths at the hand of wicked go unanswered: *"Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints."* (Ps. 116:15) The Lord hears the cries of the righteous, and he has pledged to avenge their blood. (Dt. 32:43) In

fact, he has prohibited anyone else from taking retribution for such persecution, reserving vengeance for himself. (Rom. 12:19)

In spite of this promise, though, the wicked continue to prosper and go unpunished for their crimes. Peter provides the answer to the question of why God delays his justice: “*God is... longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*” (2Pet. 3:9) When it comes to executing judgment on a nation, God allows even more time for repentance. An individual’s lifespan is on average 70 years, while a nation may continue for multiplied centuries, even a millennium or more. The Lord waits until the cup of judgment is full so there can be no question as to whether judgment is deserved. God’s judgment on the people of the land of Canaan, for example, had to wait 400 years because their sin had “*not yet reached its full measure.*” (Gen. 15:16)

Judgment vs. Vengeance

Whereas God’s judgment is an impersonal administration of justice (*Gr. Krino, krima*), his vengeance (*Gr. ekdikisis*), conveys the idea of retaliation, retribution, or vindication. Vengeance is passionate instead of impartial; it is personal, as in “*He who touches you touches the apple of God’s eye.*” (Zech. 2:8) As with judgment, when the time for God’s vengeance does come, it may occur through natural, perhaps even supernatural, events, or it may be carried out by one nation against another. God’s vengeance for the persecution of the righteous is even more rare than his judgment of nations for rejecting his ways. The New Testament relates only two instances of the Lord avenging the death of his saints. Both times this occurs at the close of an era, after he has allowed the nation(s) involved every chance of repentance, when an accounting has to be made and the books closed.

The first instance of God’s vengeance is the Roman invasion of Israel and destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus’ prophetic account of this judgment is found in the Olivet discourse, recounted in the latter chapters of the three synoptic gospels. God gave Israel a generation to hear the gospel, repent, and believe in Jesus, the Messiah. 40 years later, the time allotted to a generation, the judgment predicted by Jesus occurred. Israel subsequently lost its status as a nation for 1900 years, and the Jews suffered great tribulation during that time. Since its restoration in 1948, Israel has had to fight for its continued existence, and will continue to do so until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

*And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. **For these be the days of vengeance**, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. (For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. – Mt. 24: 21) And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. Lk. 21: 20-24*

The destruction of Jerusalem coincided with the end of the Old Testament era. Jesus had fulfilled the sacrifices, redeeming mankind from the power of sin and death and establishing the

New Covenant in his own blood. There was therefore no longer any need to continue the sacrifices of Old Covenant worship. It was time for the New Covenant to be taken to the ends of the earth. There was only one issue that had to be dealt with before the Old Testament age came to a close, and that was the persecution of the righteous. God had sent his prophets, and even his own Son to draw his people back to him, but Israel's leaders had persecuted and killed them. In order for justice to be fulfilled, this had to be set right. The only way to do this was to hold the final generation of Israel's leadership, and thus the nation itself, responsible. Starting with Vespasian's invasion of Galilee in 66 AD, the whole nation would experience the vengeance of God at the hand of the Roman army.

Just as God's vengeance was poured out on Israel at the end of the Old Covenant age, it will once again be poured out on the Gentile nations at the end of the New Covenant age.¹ God's vengeance for the death of his saints during the times of the Gentiles will be fulfilled in the destruction of spiritual Babylon by fire, as well as his trumpet and bowl judgments poured out on the kingdom of the beast. While it may not appear fair to hold one generation responsible for the blood debt of past ones, that is the nature of the judgment of nations. The crimes of the past cannot go unanswered, and it would be counterproductive for judgment to fall every 40 years.

Although Revelation describes a three and a half year period of God's vengeance on the Gentile nations, other forces are at work as well. The tribulation of that time also results from the persecution of the righteous by the Man of Sin, a culmination of the persecution of the righteous by the wicked, the final throes of the times of the Gentiles. Great earth changes also occur during this time. Many of these events are actually an indirect consequence of mankind's own sin. God created a world in perfect harmony and balance, and this was disturbed when he had to inundate the earth with water in order to cleanse it from its violence and preserve the Messianic line. Since that time, nations have polluted the earth in their search for both wealth and dominance over other nations. The Lord uses the timing of these 'natural' cataclysmic events to fulfill his judgments.

End of Old Testament Age:

Vengeance on Jerusalem: *"That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee..." Mt. 23: 35-37 For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. Luke 21: 22) NIV*

End of New Testament Age:

Vengeance on Mystery Babylon: *For true and righteous are His judgments, because He has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication; and He has avenged on her the blood of His servants shed by her. (Rev. 19: 2)*

Vengeance on the Kingdom of the Beast: *Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth, and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. Then the seven angels who had the trumpets prepared to sound them. (Rev. 8:5-6) Then I heard a voice from the temple*

saying to the seven angels, “Go pour out the seven bowls of God’s wrath on the earth.”
(Rev. 16:1NIV)

Vengeance on the wicked: *The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2Thess. 1: 7-8)*

The Great Tribulation

The book of Revelation offers a litany of tribulations, including natural catastrophes, persecution by the Man of Sin, and the judgments of God. Many therefore assume that its events are synonymous with the “Great Tribulation” mentioned in Revelation 7: “*These (the multitude dressed in white robes) are those who are coming out of the great tribulation.*” (Rev. 7:14 Young’s Literal Translation) However, there is ample evidence to indicate that this term actually describes the entire church age, i.e., the ongoing tribulation of the times of the Gentiles rather than just its last few years:

- The fifth seal martyrs of Revelation 6 symbolize the entire church age as a time of tribulation, continuing to the end of the times of the Gentiles;
- Scripture warns that believers would endure much tribulation for the sake of the kingdom of God;
- The natural catastrophes, divine judgments, and persecution of the saints have not yet started when the multitude is seen coming out of the ‘great tribulation’ in Revelation 7. (The Four Horsemen of Revelation 6 are not end times’ judgments. Instead, they provide a symbolic historical background of how the earth came to be in such bad shape at the end of the age. It would be difficult to recognize a new arrival of the conditions the horsemen represent – violence, famine, plagues, and the suffering of war – since these are already thriving in the world today. It is only America’s prosperity that keeps us from seeing this. See [Revelation 2.0](#) Commentary on Revelation 7);
- The word ‘great’ (Gr.: *megale*) in describing the “great tribulation” of Revelation 7 can indicate length of time as well as intensity;
- The uncountable size of the multitude renders it unlikely that the entire group comes up out of a mere three and a half year period of history;
- If this great uncountable multitude represented only tribulation saints, then where in Revelation is the much, much larger group of saints that have died over the preceding two millennia?
- The long view of the great tribulation is endorsed by Bible commentators.

A spiritual/historical approach helps put this issue in perspective. History can be roughly divided into the Old Testament (or Covenant) era and the New Testament, or New Covenant age. God’s vengeance against Israel fell at the end of the Old Testament age, during which time Israel was the light of truth in the world. The New Testament era is the beginning of the church age and the times of the Gentiles, in which the truth is carried into all the world.² The tribulation of this age, symbolized by the martyrs under the altar in Revelation 6, continues to its end. This tribulation will increase when the Man of Sin comes to power, because he will launch mass

persecutions against Israel and the saints to prevent Jesus from returning to establish the kingdom of God. The tribulation of that time will be increased because God's judgments and vengeance falls on the earth against the worldwide kingdom of the beast.

Numerous Scriptures support the whole of the church age as a time of great tribulation and suffering for the saints.

Tribulation of the Times of the Gentiles/Church Age:

- ❖ *For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. (Mt. 13:21)*
- ❖ *After that tribulation, (the times of the Gentiles – Luke 21:24-25) the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. (Mk. 13:24)*
- ❖ *In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. (Jn. 16:22)*
- ❖ *We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22)*
- ❖ *But we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Rom. 5:3-4)*
- ❖ *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Rom. 8:18NIV)*
- ❖ *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Rom. 8:35)*
- ❖ *You will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. (2Thess. 1:5NIV)*
- ❖ *But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. (1Pet. 4:13NIV)*
- ❖ *I John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and patience and kingdom of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Rev 1:9) (NKJV unless noted).*

¹ Although the New Covenant itself does not end, the *age* in which the covenant is confirmed to the Gentiles, or the “times of the Gentiles,” will end, to be followed by the kingdom age of Jesus’ millennial reign. 1Cor. 13 confirms the passing away of the gifts that characterize the New Covenant church age, supporting the passing of the age itself, but not the covenant, which Paul describes in Heb. 13:20 as being eternal.

² Some hold that the times of the Gentiles began with the destruction of the temple in 586 BC. The persecution to which Israel was subsequently subjected appears to support this. However, more weight may be given to this age actually commencing with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, as Jesus’ Olivet discourse implies. This is supported by the fact that the church age is synonymous with the light of the gospel being taken to the Gentile world. In this context, the times of the Gentiles takes on a dual meaning. It is both the ascendancy of the Gentile world over a fallen Israel, as well as the age of grace, in which Gentiles are allowed entry into the kingdom of God.

More information on the tribulation and the book of Revelation is available at:

<http://www.thefirsttrumpet.com>