

PROPHETIC STUDIES

PART V.

*The
Great Tribulation.*

By W. W. FEREDAY.

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The Great Tribulation.

IT has never been an easy thing to live and testify for God in a revolted world. The first man who did so was murdered by his own brother (Gen. iv.). Heb. xi. gives us a dismal account of what faithful men had to endure in the ages that preceded the Christian era. "They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth" (Heb. xi. 37, 38). The Psalms are full of the earnest appeals and pitiful cries of holy sufferers for God. "Help, Lord; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men" (xii. 1). "Lord, how are they increased that trouble me! Many there be that rise up against me" (iii. 1). The reason of this is not far to seek. Flesh hates God. It would dethrone Him if it could. But seeing that man is too puny to reach Him, he vents his spite on all who dare to confess Him here below.

The coming into the world of the Lord Jesus has accentuated this. His rejection has increased the difficulties of the path of faith enormously. To a Scribe who volunteered to follow Him whithersoever He went, He said, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head" (Matt. viii. 20). To the multitudes who followed Him after hearing the attractive parable of the great Supper, He addressed a deeply solemn warning in ample terms (Luke xiv. 25-35). He would have them understand that if they really wished to have to do with Him they must be prepared for self-sacrifice and loss. When two of His own disciples asked for right and left hand places in His Kingdom, He sought to divert their minds to a cup of agony to be drunk, and to a baptism of death to be endured (Matt. xx. 20-23).

WHOSE DISCIPLES ARE WE ?

We need to remind ourselves continually that we are the disciples of a murdered Lord. Ease and honour need not be expected at present; indeed, to accept such conditions in the scene of His rejection is the deepest unfaithfulness, as the Apostle told the Corinthians in his first epistle. While himself and others, in their loyalty to Christ; suffered hunger, thirst, and nakedness; while they were battered, and treated as the filth of the world, and as the offscouring

of all things, the Corinthian believers, in their carnality, were reigning as kings. So the Apostle sarcastically describes their worldly ease. (1 Cor. iv. 8-9). Everywhere these faithful men went, they warned the saints "that through much tribulation, we must enter the kingdom of God," (Acts xiv. 22). And to the Thessalonians the apostle wrote very definitely, "When we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know," (1. Thess: iii 4).

All such tribulation has the character of privilege. It is viewed in Holy Scripture as an unspeakable honour to be afflicted for His sake. "Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil. i. 29). In the coming day the highest rewards await those who have endured these sufferings patiently and well.

But beyond all this, the Word of God speaks of

A PERIOD OF UNPARALLELED TRIBULATION

for the people of God just before the Kingdom of God is established in the earth. Whatever the horrors of the past, all will be eclipsed during that awful time. The character of the sufferings will also be different, for they will be retributive. They are divine inflictions upon men for the rejection of God's Christ. But who are the sufferers in that furnace of affliction?

A question surely of the deepest importance. Are they the present Christian company, or are they instead another body of witnesses, yet to be created by the Spirit of God? The question cannot lightly be dismissed; the issues are too grave. The end is so manifestly approaching that the predicted great tribulation cannot be far distant. If the saints at present in the earth are destined to pass through it, let us distinctly understand it, and seek by grace to prepare ourselves for it; but if it be really so that the forces of evil will not be let fully loose until after our removal to the Father's house, let us enjoy the comfort of it.

The only possible way in which to settle the point is to examine carefully the various passages of Scripture which speak of the great tribulation.

WE BEGIN WITH MATTHEW XXIV.

If the bearing of this chapter, which with chapter xxv. gives us our Lord's Olivet prophecy, is understood, it will materially help to make other passages clear also.

Let us endeavour to place ourselves in thought where the disciples stood when they asked the Lord the questions of Matt. xxiv. 3. They were not yet

the Church; for the Church had no existence until Christ was glorified, and the Holy Spirit came down. It is true the Lord had already spoken of it in its "building" aspect (Matt. xvi. 18), but even so as something still future. The disciples when they stood with Him on Mount Olivet were just a handful of Jewish believers, who, in the very teeth of their nation, were convinced that the lowly Nazarene was the expected Messiah. The Lord addressed them in Matt. xxiii. as still part of the nation, and bade them do all that the Scribes and Pharisees taught them while avoiding their inconsistent ways. After listening to His words concerning the overwhelming disaster about to befall the temple, they inquired from the standpoint of their earthly Jewish hopes: "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the age?" (not "world"). The coming referred to is certainly not the descent into the air—"the blessed hope"—for not a syllable concerning it had yet passed His lips; the disciples had in mind the glorious appearing, of which prophets and psalmists wrote glowingly and abundantly long before their day.

The first question obviously relates to the destruction of the city and the sanctuary. Be it observed that Matthew passes over what the Lord said in reply thereto, while Luke (chap. xxi.) dwells principally upon that part of the great prophecy. Matthew (guided by the Spirit) gives us the reply to the second and third questions. The desolation of Jeru-

salem was but thirty years ahead when the Lord spoke; the end of the age was in the distant future; indeed, it has not come to pass yet.

THE OLIVET PROPHECY

may be divided into three parts thus:—

Chap. xxiv. 3-44. The Lord's appearing in relation to the Jewish people.

Chap. xxiv. 45-xxv. 30. The appearing in relation to Christendom.

Chap. xxv. 31-46. The appearing in relation to the nations.

The Jewish part may be subdivided as follows:—

v.v. 3-14. The first half of the seventieth week.

v.v. 15-28. The second half of the seventieth week.

v.v. 29-44. The appearing of the Son of Man and its tremendous consequences.

It is with the second of these sub-divisions that we are now concerned. In verse 15 the Lord speaks of a terrible sign to which all who hear His word in the last great crisis must pay careful attention. "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand

in the holy place (whoso readeth, let him understand:) then let them which be in Judea flee unto the mountains." Compare this with Luke xxi. 20—"when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies" etc. Here we perceive the difference between these two accounts of the Lord's prophecy. Not a word about Jerusalem beseiged in Matthew; not a word about the abomination of desolation in Luke. The latter speaks of that which was imminent; the former of that which will take place in the last days.

"Abomination" means an idol (1 Kings xi. 5-7). It is called "the abomination of desolation" because the acceptance of it by the apostate Jewish mass brings upon them in divine retribution "the desolator"—i.e., the king of the North (Dan. ix. 27; xi. 40-45). Ezekiel was shown many abominations in the temple of old; the Lord in the passage before us speaks of something very specific. It is the image of the Beast (Rev. xiii. 11-18) which in defiance of the God of Israel, the last head of Western Gentile power, aided by his co-adjutor, the Antichrist, King in Jerusalem, will set up. Not exactly "in the holy place" (for the Lord does not appear to have used the definite article): not the inner shrine therefore, but "in a holy place,"—somewhere within the sacred precincts. Rev. xi. 1 shows that the temple of that day will be owned by God. It is interesting to observe how the Lord quietly assumes the rebuilding of the temple in the last days. He had just been speaking of the complete overthrow of the temple as

soon to take place; now He speaks of profanity in the temple at the time of the end.

THE SETTING UP OF THE IMAGE

is the signal for flight. But what persons are thus warned? Indisputably believers resident in Judea. This fact stamps a Jewish character upon the passage under consideration; the reference to the Sabbath in verse 20 confirms this. Here let us observe the tender thoughtfulness of our blessed Lord. He thinks of women with child, and others with babes at the breast compelled to make hasty flight! He thinks moreover of the possibility of the abomination being set up in the winter, and of saints compelled to flee without having opportunity to get their warm clothes! He thinks too of the dilemma in which pious men would find themselves if the dreaded sign appears on the Sabbath day! What an insight these details give us into His heart of love!

“Then shall be great tribulation, such as was not from the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened.” All the might of the Roman Empire, energised by the Dragon, will be put forth for the extermination of all who dare to make a stand for God. The un-

godly mass in Judea will be in full sympathy with the persecutors. Hence the cry in Psa. xliii. 1. "Judge me (or, Do me justice), O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation (the Jews): O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man (the Antichrist)." Both Psalms xlii. and xliii. express the grief of those who have been driven across Jordan, and who can no longer worship in the sanctuary they love.

Everything is under divine control. The enemy can only act within divine limitations. The tribulation is definitely fixed for 1,260 days (Rev. xi. 3), and the cruel oppressor is unable to make it one day longer. It is the second half of the last of the seventy prophetic weeks of Dan. ix., during which human wickedness, especially in its fearful claim that man is God, rises to its utmost height, to be quickly avenged by a long-patient Creator.

The great tribulation will probably end shortly before the Lord's appearing. Rev. xvi. 10 would suggest that some divine strokes fall upon the chief persecutors, filling them with anguish: Matt. xxiv. 29 suggests convulsions of a more general character. But whatever relief these happenings may yield to the hunted saints, their full deliverance takes place when He for whom they yearn plants His feet on the Mount of Olives.

Meanwhile they must beware of false reports, set afoot by the deceiver for their destruction. If any say "Lo, here is the Christ, or there," they must not believe it. His appearing will be as public as the lightning. Everyone will be aware of it, friends and foes alike.

But how clearly we are on Jewish ground in Matt. xxiv! None but saints with earthly hopes could be led astray by such reports. Christians look, not for the return of the Lord to earth, but to be caught away from earth to meet Him in the air (1 Thess. iv. 16, 17). Our hope, our portion, our calling—everything connected with us is heavenly in character. It is otherwise with the godly Judean remnant. Earthly deliverance and earthly blessing are alone before their minds as their expectation from God.

Not many words need be said concerning the

OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES

to the great tribulation. Their language is so precise that comment is almost superfluous. We take Jer. xxx. 4-9 first. "Alas! that day is great; so that none is like it." Impossible that there should be two periods of unparalleled trouble. Moreover, the issue of the trouble is final and complete deliverance for the people of God. "For it shall come to pass

in that day, saith Jehovah of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off thy neck, I will burst thy bonds, and strangers shall no more serve themselves of him: but they shall serve Jehovah their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them." But who are the people before the mind of the prophet whose appalling sufferings will be followed by deliverance and blessing? Verse 4 gives the answer: "These are the words that Jehovah spake concerning Israel and concerning Jerusalem." Jer. xxx. thus connects itself with Matt. xxiv.

The other Old Testament passage is Dan. xii. 1. "At that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, everyone that shall be found written in the book." What period are we to understand by the words "at that time"? Let the reader note carefully that Daniel's twelfth chapter is simply the continuation of an angelic message which commences in chapter x. Glancing back therefore, we find ourselves face to face, as it were, with Judah's last apostate king, i.e., the Antichrist (xi. 36). His overthrow is not shown there, but rather the overthrow of his enemies. But immediately we read of the intervention of the archangel, the time having at last come for the de-

liverance of God's down-trodden people. But who are they? Note the words, twice repeated, "thy people." This can only mean Daniel's people—the nation of Israel. Connect this with Gabriel's words in chap. ix. 24 in answer to the prophet's intercession—"Thy people, and Thy holy city." Daniel could only understand by such language Israel and Jerusalem.

Thus the Church has no place whatever in the two Old Testament passages which speak of the coming great tribulation. It remains to add that the delivered ones are not the nation in the bulk, but simply "everyone that shall be found written in the book," i.e., the elect remnant (Rom. ix. 27). Of these it is said in Isa. iv. 3, "it shall come to pass, that he that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem."

We now return to the New Testament—to the closing book of Holy Scripture. In chap. vii. we find

A PALM-BEARING MULTITUDE

ascribing salvation to God and to the Lamb. They have passed through sore afflictions, and are now seen in the enjoyment of peace and rest. Who are these blessed ones?

In order to understand the vision, it is important to observe the place the chapter holds in the book of the Revelation. It is clearly a parenthesis between the Lamb's breaking of the sixth and seventh seals. The chapter is in two parts, and is intended to show what God is doing in the way of mercy while His judgments are abroad in the earth. In verses 2-8 we have 144,000 sealed Israelites, and in verses 9-17 an innumerable company of Gentiles. We thus learn that the Spirit of God will work amongst both Israelites and Gentiles at that time. These latter are expressly said to "come out of the great tribulation." This language incidentally proves that although the trouble will be at its fiercest in Palestine it will spread more or less over all the earth.

But note carefully that it is one of "the elders" who explains to John who these blessed ones are. We have already shown that the four and twenty elders represent the saved of all ages down to the moment of the Lord's descent into the air. They are all seen enthroned and crowned in chap. iv. before the Lamb takes the book out of the hand of Him who sitteth upon the throne, and before the judgments begin to fall upon the earth. Throughout the succeeding chapters of the book of Revelation the number is never increased. They continue four and twenty to the end. The palm-bearing multitude

is thus a company wholly distinct. They are the fruit of the latter-day preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom. They will suffer severely during the great tribulation, but will get deliverance at the Lord's appearing. The elder's description of their blessings in verses 15-17 is really an anticipative Millennial picture. It is a lovely presentation of earthly bliss, peace, and worship, the language being partly borrowed from Isa. xlix.

There remains to be considered

THE LORD'S PROMISE IN REV. III. 10

where, beyond all question, the Church is in view. We quote the passage in full:—"Because thou hast kept the word of My patience, I will also keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." Here the Lord uses a more comprehensive term than we have met hitherto. "The great tribulation" is of 1,260 days duration; "the hour of temptation" (or trial) commences earlier—as soon as the Man of sin shows himself, and while as yet his true character is not fully revealed. His plausible words—"smoother than butter," and "softer than oil" (Psa. lv. 21) will deceive the blinded multitude, but not God's elect. The testing time will not find them wanting, albeit the persecution has not yet broken out. But from

the whole period the Lord says to the Church in Philadelphia, "I will keep thee." This can only mean removal from the scene. If the hour of temptation is indeed to "come upon all the world," it is clearly impossible to escape it except by removal to another scene altogether.

It will be a question with some, however, whether so blessed a promise relates to the whole Christian company or to a select faithful few. In reply, let it suffice to say that if the question of faithfulness is taken into account when the Lord descends into the air, then surely all will be left behind. Who of our readers has sufficient self-complacency to look for translation to the Father's house if merit is to be considered? If any saints are outside the promise to the overcomer in Rev. iii. 10, why are they not also outside the promises in chap. ii. 7 and ii. 11? Yet who would dare affirm that there are true believers who will not eat of the tree of life, and who will be hurt by the second death?

"THE WORD OF MY PATIENCE"

is an expression to be noted. It refers to Christ's present attitude as He waits for His rights. The Apostle had this in mind in 2 Thess. iii. 5, and the Patmos prisoner describes himself as our "brother and companion in tribulation, and in the Kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ" (Rev. i. 9). The patience that reigns in the heart of earth's rejected

One now seated at God's right hand is reproduced by the Spirit in the hearts of His waiting ones below.

What prospects are ours! May our affections be deeply stirred as we look for the Bright Morning Star! May our hearts be so detached from things here, that we may be free to cry, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. xxii. 20).

Sealed with the Holy Ghost,
We triumph in that love,
Thy wondrous thought has made our boast,
"Glory with Christ above."

