

# The Great Tribulation

by Pastor Paul F. Nolting

## Popular Conception

In the popular endtime fiction of our day “the great tribulation” is the name given to the seven-year period between the “rapture” of the Church and the beginning of the “millennium.” More precisely, “the great tribulation” refers to the second three and a half years of that period. It is believed that at the mid-point of the seven year period the anti-christ will break his covenant with the Jews and institute a reign of terror against all believers. It is this that will be “the great tribulation.”

## The Tribulation - The Great One

This form of the term occurs only once in the New Testament in a vision that the Apostle John saw: *“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’ And all the angles stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, Be to our God forever and ever. Amen.’ Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, ‘Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?’ And I said to him, ‘Sir, you know.’ So he said to me, ‘THESE ARE THE ONES WHO COME OUT OF THE GREAT TRIBULATION, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:9-17).*

A.. John saw a great multitude, innumerable - an ecumenical multitude

consisting of representatives from all nations, kindreds, peoples, and tongues. Note the fourfold ecumenical designation!

- B. Where did John see this multitude? *“Before the throne and before the Lamb!”* The word “throne” occurs seven times in the vision. The multitude and the heavenly beings are gathered before the throne, which is surrounded by angels and occupied by God with the Lamb in the midst of the throne. The scene takes place in heaven.
- C. How is this multitude described? They are clothed with white robes which they have washed in the blood of the Lamb. They are carrying palm branches in their hands, symbolizing victory. They serve God day and night. They shall not hunger or thirst anymore. The sun shall not strike them nor any heat. (Recall that the glory of God and the Lamb is the light in the New Jerusalem, 21:23.) The Lamb shepherds them, leading them unto living fountains of water. God wipes away all their tears.
- D. What was this vast multitude doing? Praising God as the Author of salvation: *“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*
- E. One factor of this glorious description demands special attention. The innumerable multitude is described as those COMING OUT OF THE TRIBULATION, THE GREAT ONE. The verb form in the Greek for “come” is a present participle. It has the force of naming a characteristic feature. It is an unusual form at this point. The KJV translates with a past verb form: *“These are they which came out of the great tribulation.”* The NIV and Beck versions translate with the perfect tenses: *“have come,”* as does Luther: *“die kommen send.”* The NASB and NKJV translate most literally and correctly with the present tense: *“who come.”* The entire innumerable multitude is described as COMING OUT OF THE TRIBULATION, THE GREAT ONE.
- F. To what does “the tribulation, the great one” refer? The futurists and dispensationalists assert that “the tribulation, the great one” will occur during the three and a half-year period before the Battle of Armageddon and the beginning of the millennium. It is the intensity of the alleged persecution during these three and a half

years that convinces some that this period of persecution is “the tribulation, the great one.” Others, including this writer, believe that “the tribulation, the great one” is a composite term that lumps into one tribulation all the tribulations of all the saints of God from Abel to the last one before the coming of the Lord.

## Great Tribulations

There are two other instances in the new Testament where the adjective “great” is used to describe tribulations. One of them occurs in the book of Revelation, in the letter to the church of Thyatira. The congregation is rebuked for tolerating the prophetess Jezebel who refused to repent of her fornication. Because of that the Son of man who stood in the midst of the candlesticks (churches) threatened: **“Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into GREAT TRIBULATION, unless they repent of their deeds” (Revelation 2:22).** Here the “great tribulation” is the sickness of one individual and her followers.

The second instance is in the Olivet Discourse where our Lord described the horrors of the destruction of Jerusalem: **“For then there will be GREAT TRIBULATION, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21).** These prophetic words came from the lips of Israel’s Messiah. He knew what would happen some forty years later - that the Nation of Israel would commit national suicide and be utterly destroyed by the Romans. The futurists identify this tribulation, which is past history, with “the tribulation, the great one” which they believe to be future. Whenever past fulfillment of prophesy is ignored, any conjectured future fulfillment becomes nothing more than religious fiction. Here the “great tribulation” is the destruction of the Nation of Israel, Jerusalem, and the Temple by the Romans.

## Tribulation Common to All Believers

For a child of God tribulation is not at all unnatural, but very natural. It is to be expected as completely normal. The night before His death our Lord prepared His disciples by assuring them: **“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have over come the world” (John 16:33).**

Thereafter our Lord lifted up His eyes and prayed His prayer, known as the “high priestly” prayer. He knew that the world would vent its hatred upon His followers, as it had upon Him. He prayed: **“I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15).** There are some futurists who teach that the Lord will “rapture” the saints before the great tribulation. The Lord, of course, knew that this heresy would arise to mislead the saints, so He refuted it in His prayer. He did not ask His Father to take or “rapture” them out of the world, but that He should protect them from the evil one. These words are part of that protection.

After the Apostle Paul had been stoned at Lystra and left for dead, he later returned to confirm his disciples in the faith, saying, **“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).** A reading of the book of Acts and Paul’s autobiographical account in 2 Corinthians 11 reveal that he suffered tribulation, great tribulation, for the Gospel’s sake throughout his ministry which came to a climax with his being beheaded. Shortly before his death the Apostle wrote young Timothy these sobering words, **“Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12).**

The Apostle John introduced himself to the seven churches as **“your brother and companion in tribulation” (Revelation 1:9).** How else? Tribulation must and does follow all those who take up the cross and follow after the Lord Jesus.

Great tribulation was threatened to Jezebel and her followers of the church in Thyatira. Great Tribulation was also threatened to the unbelieving Nation of the Jews. That tribulation began in 70 AD and will continue to the end of time. These tribulations were punishment for sins. What a contrast in the vision in Revelation 7. There all the saints in heaven are described as coming out of “THE TRIBULATIONS, THE GREAT ONE.” That tribulation was not punishment inflicted upon the saints for their sins. All the saints **“have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** The Lamb suffered tribulation. All those who follow Him will suffer tribulation. The sum total of all the tribulations of all the saints of God is “THE TRIBULATION, THE GREAT ONE!”