

Word Study

TRIBULATION AND DISTRESS

(Ian S. Davidson, Motherwell)

Tribulation is from the Latin *tribulum*, a threshing instrument. A *tribulum*, for example, separated the grain from the chaff. Suffering and trials also do that. The Greek word for tribulation is *thlipsis* and simply means pressure i.e. pressure from without. The early Christians knew what it was like to live under pressure. They were assailed by many forces, but overcame them all. They were a remarkable people and a wonderful example to all.

Thlipsis is found over forty times in the New Testament Scriptures and is translated as tribulation, affliction, persecution, anguish and trouble. Jesus warned His disciples of coming tribulation. They would suffer just as He suffered at the hands of His enemies. Tribulation would separate the wheat from the chaff and the strong from the weak. Jesus said: **"In this world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."** (John 16:33b). Paul wrote: **"And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation works patience..."** (Romans 5:3); **"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"** **"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory..."** (2 Corinthians 4: 17). (It is interesting to note that the term *thlipsis* is found more often in Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians than in any of his other letters. 2 Corinthians is a great letter sadly neglected by many writers, who have tended to concentrate on his first epistle. I think I have been guilty of this too!)

THE APOSTLE JOHN

The apostle John spoke of tribulation in the Revelation letter. It affected him personally. He wrote: **"I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ."** (1:9). John had been banished to this island by the Roman authorities because they regarded him as a dangerous man. He was the last surviving apostle on the earth. Christianity, by then, was making its mark on the Empire and the reaction was persecution. In fact, there turned out to be ten major persecutions of the Christians by the pagan Romans. These persecutions ended in 311 A.D. Thereafter, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan (313 A.D.) in which the Christian religion was the subject of toleration. John foresaw the triumph of the persecuted. We read: **"And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, Who are these who are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, you know. And he said to me, These are they who came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."** (Revelation 7:13,14).

DISTRESS

There is distress as well as tribulation. Distress is from *stenochoria*. One writer has commented: "It signifies a strait or narrow confine. It is from *stenos*, strait, and *choros*, a place. It was sometimes used for a mountain passage so restricted that one had to literally worm his way between the rocks. Both tribulation and distress indicate pressure, but the first has to do with pressure from without, the second, pressure from within. The import of the

original for distress is to be hemmed in on every side. We use the expression, 'Everywhere I turned I ran into a wall!' This is the mental state of distress." Paul uses the word four times in all. It is found in Romans 2:9; 8:35; and 2 Corinthians 6:4; 12:10. Inward pressures can be as bad, if not worse, than outward pressures. Many psychiatrists would confirm this statement. Truly, most of man's problems are not found in outer space, but in the inner space, where no probes can go.

THE APOSTLE PAUL

Paul wrote of suffering for Jesus' sake. In mentioning his famous "thorn in the flesh", he went on to say: **"Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong."** (2 Corinthians 12:10). He was a remarkable man to take pleasure in all these things. He knew that suffering was for a while, but joy was for eternity. He lived in the hope of far better things to come. He wrote to the Romans: **"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."** (8:18). No matter the outward pressures; no matter the inward pressures, Paul was going to see things through. It would not all be plain sailing, but the safe heavenly haven would undoubtedly be reached. Jesus would see to that. After all, He Himself is captaining the ship and can be completely trusted. He knows the way because He is the way!

OUR WORLD TODAY

Tribulation and distress cannot always be avoided, but they can be overcome in the strength of the Spirit. We Christians in the West might think we have things bad here, but we should spare more than a thought for many of our brothers and sisters in the Third World. There, many experience all sorts of pressures: political, economical, social, religious, etc. I know it's bad because they write and tell me. A number will read this paper. I urge them to keep strong and keep the faith no matter the cost. They are an example to us all. They must be mystified when they read of the goings on here in the rich man's world: violence, vandalism, vice, gloom, grief and godlessness. Secularism, humanism and atheism are now reaping their rewards. The world has gone full circle. In the United Kingdom, I now live in a pagan society. The rest of the West, I believe, is also pagan. Christianity, of course, began in such a world and triumphed. Now it has to do it all over again. The early Christians overcame everything, including tribulation and distress, to obtain victory. They feared nothing, not even death itself. So we today have to take up arms and fight a similar battle. And remember, as Paul said, **"We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."** (Ephesians 6:12). The warfare is spiritual. It is not just a matter of life or death, but of eternal life or eternal death.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Fellow saints, we are all in this together, no matter where we live. Let us then help one another; encourage one another and cheer one another as we see the great day approaching. Let us all live up to our responsibilities. Let us tell others of the good news of Jesus. We have been saved to serve, and the cry of each should be: **"Lord, not my will, but thine be done!"** Jesus overcame tribulation and distress; Paul overcame tribulation and distress; and many of the early saints did too. Let us then be uplifted by their faith and example. So many of them resisted unto blood. God saw them as true and faithful martyrs. Brothers and sisters, where do we stand today in comparison with them?