

How Much Suffering and Persecution will Christians Endure before the Tribulation?

by Jeremy James



The question in the title is perhaps the most unpleasant question we can ask. It reaches out and embraces everyone we love and care about and leaves no aspect of our lives untouched. It threatens to overturn and tear asunder everything we have ever striven to achieve. And it exposes our faith to the most demanding tests we can imagine.

Let's look at what happened to Christians in former times. Just about anyone who came to Christ during or shortly after the Apostolic era was persecuted in some manner or other. Their pagan relatives rejected them, they were often uprooted from their community, and they were hard pressed at times even to feed themselves. They were also subject in many places to state persecution and pressed to deny their Christian faith. Those who refused were treated brutally and even murdered.

There was a short respite around the time the emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the empire. However, many who professed to be Christian at this time were Christian in name only, having chosen instead the counterfeit doctrines of the Roman Catholic church, which was then in formation.

When the Moslems began their campaign of terror across North Africa and the Middle East, they gave Christians a stark choice: convert to Islam or die. Most chose death and died as martyrs. About half of the Christians in the world at that time were murdered by the Moslems.

Christians were cruelly exploited under the tyrannical yoke of feudalism for several centuries, serving as serfs and tax slaves to the ruling elite, and often dragooned into local armies to fight their futile wars. Living conditions were mostly at subsistence level and life expectancy was less than half what it is today.

As Rome grew in power, she instituted three momentous programs of destruction and social upheaval. The first was the Crusades, which led to the death, mutilation or impoverishment of millions of Christians across Europe. Next came the Inquisition, which ran for several hundred years and caused the death by execution of hundreds of thousands of innocent Christians, as well as the torture or imprisonment of millions more, the theft of their property and the destitution of their families. Then came the brutal campaign of repression known as the Counter-Reformation, where Bible-believing Christians were hunted down and systematically murdered in virtually every part of Europe. The climax was reached in the widespread anarchy and appalling carnage of the Thirty Years War, 1618-1648. Millions died from starvation and disease in lengthy blockades and sieges, from brutal attacks on defenseless towns and villages, and from atrocities committed by the rampaging armies and sadistic mercenaries employed by Rome and her allies to destroy the Reformation.



Detail from a painting by Sebastian Vrancx and Jan Breughel the Younger of the Thirty Years War

It is clear from this brief summary that for 1,600 years or so Bible-believing Christians had a difficult and perilous existence. The opening up the United States in the later seventeenth century brought a measure of relief. For the first time ever they could practice their religion in large numbers, own property, study the Bible, evangelize, and move freely from place to place without fear of harassment.

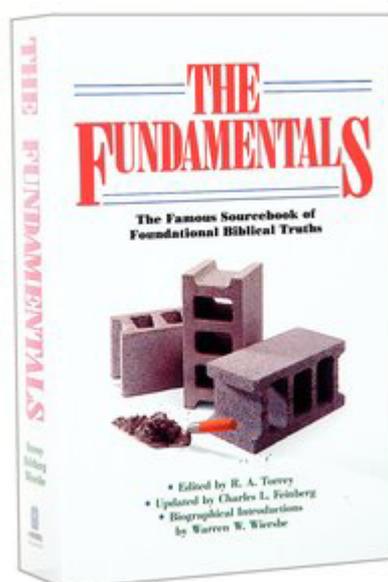
Rome hates the United States since it is the only region on earth that has continued to defy her influence. The early generations of Christians who populated America were immensely appreciative of the gift the LORD had given them. But as their descendants prospered, they lost sight of the enemy. Rome never went away; she simply changed her strategy. And it has worked very well.

Over the past hundred years or so Americans have been lured into a version of Christianity which has no power to save. As a result, the vast majority of professing Christians in the US are under the illusion that life owes them a living or, at the very least, a secure and predictable existence. They have never known persecution or religious oppression and have little understanding that, for 1,600 years or so, a long shadow had been cast over the life of nearly every believer. Few have read or even heard of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. Few recognize that the freedoms and benefits they enjoy today were won through the blood of the saints, a fabulous treasure that has since been squandered on endless entertainment and empty pleasures.

The LORD's mirror

Earlier this year the LORD held up a mirror to the people of America. He showed them two horrifying reflections – Planned Parenthood and Ashley Madison. These sin-ridden organizations were supported financially by millions of 'ordinary' Americans and tolerated by the rest of society. Few Christian churches condemned them, and fewer still did so consistently. A church that takes a stand on nothing stands for nothing, and a church that stands for nothing will not stand for very long.

Many Christians in America in 1900 recognized that this crisis had arisen in their own time. The most zealous among them rallied to the defense of true Christian doctrine and produced *The Fundamentals*. But succeeding generations succumbed to the soothing whisper of ecumenism, inclusiveness, and inter-faith dialogue. By 1960 a fatal decay had set in and the ultimate collapse of the Bible-believing church was almost assured.



Today we have arrived at that juncture, where the Enemy can virtually select a date on which to deliver his crushing blow, a blow whereby the institutional structures of the United States will be thrown into disarray, where 'normal' life will cease to function, and where Christians from every strata of society can be rounded up and relocated into work camps.

This may seem unthinkable. Alas, Christians today have wandered so far from the Word of God that they no longer understand the intimate connection between judgment and mercy. Expecting endless mercy in an age of mercy, they forget that sin must be judged. And great is the sin of those who have been greatly blessed.

The mighty empire of Nebuchadnezzar and his descendants was overthrown in one night. Yes, one night! This was an imperial dynasty that ruled the entire world, that had vast armies and untold wealth, that possessed the very best military equipment and every possible strategic advantage. And yet it was utterly overthrown in just one night.



The Fall of Babylon by John Martin

To understand where we are today we must study God's Word. Through it He reveals His will and His ways. Through it He gives answers to our deepest and most perplexing questions. In addressing the question posed in the title of this paper, I can do no more than point to the answers I have found in God's Word. In doing so I would hope to provide some guidance in a matter which I believe will shortly trouble almost every child of God in the world today.

It has always struck me as highly significant that the oldest book in the Bible, the Book of Job, deals with the hardest possible question: Why do the righteous suffer? Not only does God address this question first, but He does so in extraordinary detail. At the end Job must finally come to see that God oversees and permits all things through His sovereign will.

There are times when we understand His ways (or seem to), but there are also times when we have no understanding of what He is doing in our lives, or why. God deals with the hardest question first, I believe, because we need to view every other truth in Scripture through the lens of His absolute sovereignty. Man rebelled in the first place because he did not fully accept God's absolute sovereignty, nor did he understand it.

Many in the coming days will react as Job's wife did, objecting furiously to the gross futility of all that she and her husband had to endure. "**Curse God, and die!**" she railed (Job 2:9). Her fallen, rebellious nature is crystallized in words of great bitterness. This one verse – her only recorded remark – is all we need to recognize where she stood. She prefaced it with a stinging rhetorical question to her husband: "**Dost thou still retain thine integrity?**" – in effect, Why on earth do you still trust in God?



When the prophet Habakkuk saw the great desolation that would befall the land of Judah and her inhabitants, he trembled in himself and "**rottenness entered into my bones**". He could hardly believe that something so terrible could happen to his people, and yet he went on to say:

**"Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation."
(Habakkuk 3:17-18)**

In his second letter to Timothy, which he wrote from his prison cell just prior to his execution, Paul reminded his beloved student – the first pastor to the city of Ephesus – that "**all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.**" (2 Timothy 3:12).

This stark fact is mentioned several times in the New Testament. For example, Luke records that Paul and Barnabas preached that "**we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.**" (Acts 14:22)

Christ himself said: "**If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you**" (John 15:20). Peter expanded on this when he wrote, "**For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps:**" (1 Peter 2:21)

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that a truly born-again Christian must expect to face difficulties in life, simply because he is a Christian. These may even escalate into deliberate persecution. History itself has borne this out. Well over half the Christians who have ever lived have either faced or lived in the shadow of real persecution.

When Christ reviewed the performance of the seven churches in Revelation, which collectively express the character and condition of the church as a whole throughout the ages, he referred several times to persecution:

"I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty...Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer...the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried... be thou faithful unto death... "
(Revelation, chapter 2)

Christ also referred seven times in chapters 2-3 to the Christian that "overcometh."

Very likely, much of this is alien to the understanding of many believers today. It was not what their pastors taught. Perhaps that is so, but it is what *Christ* taught.

The Coming Persecution

From all that we have seen of late, it is clear that Christians who adhere faithfully to God's Word and who refuse to budge are going to be persecuted in the years ahead. What is more, this may not necessarily start with fines and police cautions, and build up slowly from there. Rather, it may come with disturbing suddenness and affect a great many people all at once.

The great tragedy is that most believers today are not prepared for this. Their teachers never told them about the wickedness of Satan, of his cunning and his cruelty. They can hardly believe that there exists an entire army of supernatural beings who hate them with a hatred that is too awful to describe. They don't seem to realize that the Enemy wants to destroy each and every one of them, to completely erase all trace of Christianity from the earth and replace it with a perverse system of moral, mental and physical enslavement.

In closing I would like to draw attention to four verses from Psalm 60 which I feel encapsulate much of what we have been discussing:

"O God, thou hast cast us off, thou hast scattered us, thou hast been displeased; O turn thyself to us again. Thou hast made the earth to tremble; thou hast broken it: heal the breaches thereof; for it shaketh. Thou hast shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment. Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth. Selah." (Psalm 60:1-4)

When the Apostle Paul speaks of our hope, he does not use the word *hope* in its modern sense, as something desirable but uncertain. Rather, the *hope* of every true believer is grounded in something that is certain to happen! We must live daily in the certainty that everything Christ has foretold will come to pass. Even if all our earthly hopes have been destroyed, this glorious and immutable certainty will remain.

Those who are strong will be called upon to embolden, comfort and encourage those who are distressed or enfeebled by coming events. Their strength – which may seem miraculous at times – will come only from the source and foundation of their hope, which is Christ himself:

**"The LORD is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works."
- Psalm 145:17**

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For more information visit www.zephaniah.eu

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