

In The World You Shall Have Tribulation

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3; 1 Peter 4:13

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Suffering for Christ and His truth is something that should never seem strange to the Christian. The Lord Jesus clearly told His disciples before He was crucified that they could expect tribulation while living in this world: "In the world YE SHALL HAVE TRIBULATION" (John 16:33). Why does the Christian suffer tribulation and oppression? Because Satan and this evil world system hate Jesus Christ. Therefore, they hate the truth of Christ, and they hate the faithful disciple of Christ. In fact, when this wicked world system that hates Christ loves you and me, we have a very big problem. For the Lord Jesus pronounced a blessing upon all those disciples who are hated by this wicked world (Luke 6:22-23). Whereas, the Lord pronounced a curse upon all those disciples of whom the world speaks well (Luke 6:26).

Now this is not an excuse to offend as many people as we can (by our lack of love, patience, and grace in our presentation of the truth) so that no one speaks well of us, and then to lay that offense at the feet of Christ as if we are suffering for Him. As faithful followers of Christ, we are commanded to love even those who make themselves our enemies and to do good to them that hate us (Luke 6:27). We are commanded NOT to return evil for evil, but good for evil (Romans 12:17). We are commanded NOT to suffer as evil doers, but rather as faithful witnesses for Jesus and His truth (1 Peter 4:15-16). Dear ones, when we suffer for speaking and doing what is right before God, our suffering is not a rod of shame, but is rather a badge of honor.

From our text in Ecclesiastes, the theme of oppression and tribulation in this world is considered by King Solomon as another potential hindrance to a lasting joy and enduring happiness. Solomon is no ivory tower philosopher or theologian. He is carefully considering all the possible ways that he might demonstrate how a lasting joy and happiness can never be found by pursuing it in the people, possessions, or circumstances of this world. For the material blessings of this world vanish like a vapor, and the miseries, afflictions, and tribulations of this world sweep over us all like a tidal wave at times, so that the joy of this world is as changeable and perishable as the circumstances and people of this world—here today and gone tomorrow. Solomon is destroying every human argument that would offer to us a lasting joy from a perishing world.

Dear ones, joy now and for all eternity comes from the Lord and not from the world. It is the JOY OF THE LORD that is your strength. It is a joy purchased by Christ for you and applied to you by the Spirit of Christ, as you trust our Savior and obey Him. You do not have to act like the living dead simply because you will have tribulation. For the Lord Jesus has given you this certain hope: "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but BE OF GOOD CHEER; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Therein is your joy made firm and steadfast—even when you are in the midst of tribulation and oppression. The Lord Jesus has overcome this evil world system, and so shall you who trust in Him. Your victory is guaranteed by His victory (through his death and resurrection). The enemy tried to keep Him in the tomb, but could not do so. He is alive and reigns over all His and our enemies from His throne in heaven (even as I speak). When you as Christians are oppressed and suffer tribulation in this world, it is not because Jesus Christ has not been raised from the dead nor because He is not King of kings and Lord of Lords, but rather is because He intends to use that oppression to shape and build your faith and character for your good and for His glory. Of that you may be certain. It is only that kind of hope that can bring the joy of the Lord, even in the midst of oppression and tribulation. Is your faith weak? Expect that faith to be tried in the furnace. Do you lack patience? Expect tribulation (Romans 5:3) to increase your patience. Do you lack love for the brethren? Expect to have many opportunities to love brethren who do not appear very loveable. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) The Suffering of the

Oppressed Considered (Ecclesiastes 4:1); (2) The Suffering of the Oppressed Compared (Ecclesiastes 4:2-3).

I. The Suffering of the Oppressed Considered (Ecclesiastes 4:1).

A. Solomon has just demonstrated (in Ecclesiastes 3:16-22) the vanity of finding a lasting joy if your joy is dependent upon finding true justice in this world. Injustice lurks everywhere. It is in high places and in low places. Injustice is in the very heart of every man. It is an evil you will all receive from others, as well as an evil you will give to others throughout your lives. Dear ones, if your joy is so connected to how you are treated by those in authority, or even by those who are your peers, you will never know what it is to rejoice in the midst of tribulation. If it is possible to rejoice in the midst of tribulation (and it is), I want that grace. Don't you? I want to trust my God and His good and perfect plan for my life, even in the midst of tribulation. Don't you? I want to look in hope to that heavenly court where all wrongs will be made right, even in the midst of injustice. Don't you? I want to cling to Christ who has already overcome the world when it feels like the world has overcome me. Don't you? That and only that is the road to joy, peace, and satisfaction in this world.

B. Solomon says he "returned" (Ecclesiastes 4:1) or "turned again" to consider another potential hindrance to joy in the life lived under the sun: oppression.

1. Oppression conveys the idea of pressing down on a person with a heavy weight they cannot bear or can only bear with great difficulty. Oppression is taking advantage of others, defrauding others, and wronging others, while not considering or even caring about the burdens they already carry. Oppression can come from those in authority, or from those under authority, or from peers. Oppression can come from friend or foe. Oppression can be in the form of actions or in the form of words. Oppression can be outward in nature (as it affects the body) or inward in nature (as it affects the soul). Oppression can come from Satan or it can come from your fellow man. Oppression is unlawful. It is destructive. It is wicked, whether it is found in your life or mine.

2. The word "tribulation" is similar in thought to that of oppression. For the idea behind tribulation likewise conveys the sense of pressing or pressuring someone with a great weight (as when one presses and squeezes grapes in a wine press with one's feet). Have you felt (as it were) the feet of others on your back, neck, or head, with so much pressure that you feel like you are going to drop under the burden of that weight? In the world you WILL HAVE TRIBULATION according to Christ. It is inevitable.

3. The Apostle Paul certainly knew what it was to face tribulation for the Cause of Christ. In the city of Lystra he was stoned because he refused to be called a god after healing a lame man. He was then dragged out of the city and left for dead ("supposing he had been dead" Acts 14:19). But as the brethren gathered around him, Paul stood up (no doubt, miraculously). And where did Paul go? Did he immediately leave the city of Lystra, fleeing for his life? No, he didn't, even though he could have lawfully done so. The Scripture says he went back into that very same city, in order to encourage the brethren who likely were very fearful at what had just happened to Paul. Shortly thereafter, Paul returned to Lystra and preached these words in that city where he was stoned and left for dead, "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). He did not say, "We must through NO TRIBULATION enter into the kingdom of God." He did not say, "We must through LITTLE TRIBULATION enter into the kingdom of God." But dear ones, hear this and hear it clearly: "through MUCH TRIBULATION" do we enter into the kingdom of God. I ask you, do you expect much oppression and tribulation as a Christian? Are you surprised by it when it comes your way? If you expect little or no tribulation in this world, you have deceived yourself and are living in a fantasy world. If you actually do have little or no tribulation in this world for your faith in Christ, then perhaps you have come to Jesus by night when no one else could see you (as did Nicodemus). Perhaps, like Nicodemus, you are an undercover Christian, keeping your faith in Christ hidden so as to avoid any persecution, or perhaps you compromise in front of your co-workers that for which you vigorously stand when you are in the presence of

your brothers and sisters (just to make it easier on you).

C. As Solomon considered the oppression and tribulation of people (and particularly God's people), he was moved with compassion by their tears ("and behold the tears of such as were oppressed" Ecclesiastes 4:1).

1. Are you moved with sympathy and compassion by what others are suffering? Or do you tune out the cries of others who are undergoing trial and tribulation as easily as you turn off the television? Is your "righteous indignation" so stirred up at what others say, that you cannot see or do not want to see the tears that are behind those eyes or behind that computer screen? Have you become such staunch defenders of the truth, that compassion has little or no place in your hearts for your brethren?

2. If you are to have compassion and love even for those who make themselves your enemies, how much more for those who embrace the same Savior and the same Terms of Communion and with whom you will spend all eternity. The truth must be defended, but dear ones, not at the expense of love and compassion. If the truth be known, there is often more self-righteousness in our public debates than brotherly love, and more vengeance than compassion. God have mercy upon us all.

D. Solomon continues by saying that there was no comforter to those who were oppressed (Ecclesiastes 4:1). In fact, he says it twice just to emphasize the point. When Jesus suffered in His soul, there in the Garden of Gethsemane the impending wrath of God and man, there were no comforters—they fell asleep. When Jesus suffered the cruelest injustice ever faced by man in the courts of this world, there was no comforter. When our Savior was beaten and his back made raw, when a crown of thorns was driven with rods into the skull of His head, when he was taunted and teased, spat upon and hit with the fists of His persecutors, there was no comforter. A small group of the faithful did stand from a distance to watch His crucifixion, but that is all they dared do because of the injustice and oppression of the Jewish and Roman leaders. Dear ones, sad to say (and I say it to our shame), one of the most lonely times we will often face is when we stand for what is right and true. Few want to come along side those who are hurting from the bruising they have taken for the truth. They do not want to get involved because there may be consequences from others if they do so. As you hear of what Christ suffered and suffered for undeserving sinners like you and me, where should you have been at such a time? Safely tucked away in bed or rather weeping and praying just as close as you could possibly get to the Lord?

E. When raw power seems to be in the hands of those who hate the Cause of Christ and their oppression and tribulation press down upon us with little or no relief, where can joy then be found? How can you have joy when the wicked can break all of the rules to get ahead and when they seem to hold your jobs (and your very lives in their hands)? Dear child of God, a joy that no power on earth can suppress or destroy comes from knowing that those who oppress you would have no power to do so if God did not give it to them (as Christ said before Pilate at His trial, John 19:11). So the God who loves you, dear Christian, with an infinite and everlasting love, and did not withhold even His own sinless Son from suffering His holy justice and wrath for you who were the chief of sinners, this God is the one who has delivered you (for the present time) into the hand of your oppressor. When the love of God is so manifested for you in sending Christ to suffer for you, there must be some good purpose in view when God could stay the hand of every oppressor that comes against His beloved children. Consider with me how joy in the Lord can be yours even in the midst of tribulation for the Cause of Christ. No power or tribulation on earth can take away your joy in the Lord when you embrace these truths by faith.

1. Consider those whose ranks you join when you suffer for Christ, namely the faithful prophets of old and Christ Himself (Luke 6:23-24; 1 Peter 4:13).

2. Consider how Christ will manifest His power through your suffering (2 Corinthians

12:10).

3. Consider how tribulation produces a righteous harvest of fruit in your life (Romans 5:3; James 1:2).

4. Consider that suffering for Christ is not a dishonor, but rather the greatest honor you will ever have in this life (Philippians 1:29).

5. Consider that tribulation prepares you to comfort others and serve others in a way that only those who endure tribulation can do (2 Corinthians 1:4). Dear ones, even when there is no human comforter who knows or perhaps even cares that you are suffering for Christ and His Cause, Jesus cares. He sees the tears and puts your tears as it were in a bottle (Psalm 56:8). He hears the cries for help. He knows the groans that cannot be expressed. He is your compassionate and sympathetic high priest, who the Scripture says is touched with your infirmities (Hebrews 4:15). If you want real comfort and real joy, flee into the bosom of your Savior. There is no place on this earth that can be compared to the "shadow of the Almighty" for comfort (Psalm 91:1).

6. Consider that neither the oppressor nor the oppression can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35-39).

7. Finally, consider that tribulation reveals you are a pilgrim and sojourner in this world and that your ultimate home is in heaven (1 Peter 4:13). There in heaven all oppression and tribulation will cease. There the oppressor cannot touch you. There joy, peace, and satisfaction cannot be measured by any standard here upon the earth. The greatest joy you have ever had here upon earth, multiply it by hundred times (yea a million times) and then multiply that joy not by 100 years but by eternity, and you have some faint idea of the joy that will swallow up all oppression and tribulation in heaven. Dear ones, those considerations faintly describe how you are able to rejoice now in the midst of your present tribulation.

II. The Suffering of the Oppressed Compared (Ecclesiastes 4:2-3).

A. Solomon having considered the plight of the oppressed upon the earth now looks at their condition and concludes from a mere earthly perspective of one who lives "under the sun" (from a mere earthly perspective) that the oppressed are better off dead (Ecclesiastes 4:2). Solomon shows the utter vanity and futility of seeking to find a lasting joy in this life when he says to the oppressed (in effect), "You are better off dead than living, for at least then you will be free of these oppressions."

1. It is common to hear it said to those who have lost a loved one: "At least now they are suffering no more." But, dear ones, for those who have not embraced Jesus Christ by faith alone as their only hope of eternal salvation, death brings God's just punishment and an everlasting torment in hell that cannot be described with mere human words (Revelation 14:11). In all such cases, it is not better to be dead than to be alive (even in the most intense suffering one might endure in this life).

2. Dear ones, how many of you have sinfully and shamefully sought escape from your tribulations, afflictions, trials, temptations, and besetting sins in this life by thinking about or talking about suicide (which is simply self-murder). In the state of Oregon, one can even now have a doctor help him/her commit this heinous act of suicide. I know I have not suffered in any way to the degree that many have suffered in this life. But all such foolish and wicked speech is contrary to God's Commandment ("Thou shalt not kill" Exodus 20:13). Certainly, as those who have Christ, we can do or endure all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). There is always grace sufficient for a Christian to obey Christ, no matter what you must endure. Just as you may selfishly use the word "divorce" at times to sinfully manipulate your spouse, so you may selfishly use the word "suicide" with family or friends to do the same thing. Yes, if you hear someone speak of murdering himself/herself, you should not ignore it (but rather take it seriously), but it is still most wicked to do so.

3. However, there is a right and good use of the longing for death. And that is when the Christian desires to be free of sin and the miseries of this life and to stand in the presence of His Savior, perfected forever in glory. This is not to desire self-murder. This is not to crave death at the expense of one's duties here upon the earth, which God has given to him/her. This is not a mere escape hatch to be free of all responsibility to do what is right before God and our fellow man. This is simply an earnest hope that should burn in the heart of every Christian (even when things are going well upon the earth): to hunger and thirst to be in the very presence of his/her Savior. You see the Apostle Paul wrestling with this very issue in Philippians 1:21-24. He was torn between heaven (which was better for him) and earth (which was better for the church). But dear ones, if you do not have that conscious hope of heaven in the midst of the oppression you face here upon the earth, you will not know the joy of the Lord as your strength. You will be acting as if this world is all there is, and what happens here is all that really counts or really matters. You will be acting like an animal, whose life consists only of the things of this world (contrary to the words of our Savior in Matthew 5:25,33).

B. Secondly, Solomon shows the utter vanity and futility of finding a lasting joy in this life when he says to the oppressed (in effect), "It were better for you that you were never born in the first place." Such a view carried to its logical conclusions could be used to justify abortion. How many times have you heard by those who support abortion, "Every child should be a wanted child", or "How difficult it is for a child to be born into an unwanted family", or "What an unfair burden for a child to bear to be born with a disability." This is the reasoning of one from "under the sun" (that is from a mere earthly perspective of one who is apart from Christ), rather than the reasoning of one from "above the sun" (that is from a heavenly perspective of one who trusts in Christ). To Job's shame (Job 3:1-3) and to Jeremiah's shame (Jeremiah 20:14), they both fell into this sinful kind of speech. I must, however, confess that when I consider the character of these men of God who endured great suffering for the Cause of Christ, and see that they had their times of sin and weakness, I draw comfort from the fact that the Lord yet forgave them and used them mightily, as they repented of their foolish words.

C. Dear ones, remember that suffering for Christ is an honor, whereas suffering for sin is a shame (1 Peter 4:16). Suffering for Christ brings joy, whereas suffering for sin brings misery (1 Peter 4:14). Yes, oppression and tribulation are inescapable in this world. The non-Christian as well as the Christian will suffer in this life. So the only question then is, how will you suffer, not will you suffer. Will you suffer as a Christian and know the joy of the Lord in doing so? Or will you suffer as a sinner and know the misery in doing so? Dear ones, your hope and your joy is beautifully and concisely summarized for you in these words, "If we suffer [for Christ—GLP], we shall also reign with him (2 Timothy 2:12). No one can rob you of your joy in the Lord when that is your hope.

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