

Coming Up through Great Tribulation

Charles G. Finney:

"And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." --Rev. vii:14, 15.

In discussing this subject, I shall attempt to show--

I. THAT GREAT TRIBULATIONS ARE THE COMMON LOT OF SAINTS IN EVERY AGE AND NATION.

II. WHAT THESE TRIBULATIONS CONSIST IN.

III. THE REASONS WHY GOD CAUSES CHRISTIANS TO PASS THROUGH SUCH SCENES.

I. Great tribulations are the common lot of saints in every age and nation.

It is most striking to observe how often and in how many various ways this fact is taught in the Bible. Everywhere throughout the writings of prophets or apostles, whether in its history or poetry, in the diaries of saints or in the precepts and promises of their Lord, the Bible teaches that the saints are moving on to glory through much tribulation. This fact stands out upon the very face of the Bible. You cannot read your Bible with any attention, without seeing it in bold relief on almost every page. It is every where implied; every where assumed. We are told how they passed through fiery trials; of Moses we are told that he chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than enjoy the pleasures of sin, as if to go with God's people must be of course to suffer affliction. But I need not stop to quote passages of which the Bible is full. Christ told his disciples that they must expect tribulation. All the great leaders of the Church in every age have found it true.

I am to notice,

II. Some of the things in which these tribulations consist.

One is, persecution. In every age the wicked have persecuted the righteous. This persecution may take on different types in various ages according to external circumstances; yet it is still true--the wicked hate and persecute God's people. It is vain to expect, while the world lies in sin, that any body will live godly without suffering persecution. It may take the form of cold and sneering contempt; it may develop itself in the venom of slander, or in the malignity of opposition to the gospel; but shut in as it may be by external forces, it will still burst out somewhere and annoy the saints of God.

Another form is that of Satanic temptation. The true children of God must always expect to be tempted by Satan. He has small cause to tempt the wicked; generally he can lead them captive at his will with little trouble, so great is their selfishness and so controlling their constitutional tendency to self-indulgence; but let them attempt to break quite away from his grasp and they must expect a fierce and frightful struggle. Real saints always have conflicts with Satan, and especially when they are about to snap the last bond of his that holds them. Satan growls hideously when he sees them about to ascend the table land of promise beyond his control. At this point they should look for a fierce struggle.

Again, saints often suffer much from spiritual desertion. Saints in all ages have had seasons of spiritual desertion in which the light of God's countenance has been withdrawn. I do not mean that in these cases God abandons them so as not to be in them and with them, and so as not to be indeed a Father to them, seeking ever their best good. I only mean that for the best of reasons he hides his face, and leaves them to grope awhile in darkness and great agony. Some of the bitterest scenes of anguish I ever saw have occurred in such cases. One man I knew intimately who had lived for some time in unclouded communion with God, often enjoying visions of divine glory most enrapturing, but for some just cause God withdrew this light of his face, and his deserted child wailed and groaned in agony. He fell to the floor and rolled in anguish, refusing to be comforted. No physician ever saw a patient suffer more, or seem in keener pain.

I am aware that this is among the extreme cases; yet I have seen many of the same sort, and similar cases are

by no means infrequent.

Abraham knew what it is to have a horror of great darkness come upon his soul; nor he alone. Many others know what this means. Saints in every age have known it.

These are among the most severe trials they have or can have. Often they would not suffer more in the flames of martyrdom than they do under these hidings of the face of God. The man whose case I just now mentioned might better have burned at the stake than have endured the agony he did. The history of the church has taught us abundantly that under any amount of outward losses and pains, the soul may still be calm and peaceful, nay joyful, if the light of God shine on it. What Christian would not promptly say, Give me the light of God's face, and then I can bear the loss of all things else. All are not so much to my present enjoyment each moment as my God.

Another portion of these tribulations consists in the Christian's struggle with his own weaknesses and infirmities. I allude now particularly to those which result from the flesh and from habits of sensual indulgence. It often happens that these pernicious habits, during a long career of indulgence acquire the rigidity and strength of iron. Hence it costs the convert a mighty struggle to overcome them.

Some years since a man came into this place and called to see me at my study, who had long been a slave to the habit of using tobacco. When he came to see the claims of God upon his conscience to exercise self-control and self-denial, he was thrown into a fearful conflict. He fell on the floor of my study, and groaned and wailed out in agony, "I am an undone man. I never can subdue this tyrant appetite." Nor is this a solitary or a very peculiar case. Every saint who attempts to overcome and hold in complete subjection to reason and the will of God all his constitutional tendencies to self-indulgence will find work enough for severe conflict. Indeed were the whole diary of some Christians to be written out on this subject, you would see the drawing of many a battlefield, and you might be amazed to learn that the subjection of the flesh costs so many struggles, tears, and groans, and so much prayer ere victory is gained.

The pastor of a church near Boston told me of one of his church members, a commodore in the navy, that in his struggles with one particular temptation, he often lay in agony whole nights, rolling on the floor and groaning like a wounded soldier in his blood, in such mental anguish and conflict as his athletic frame could scarce sustain. Yet he was a bold man, and could have faced the cannon's mouth undaunted. This was with him no quailing of timid sensibilities before imaginary evil; it was a real conflict with a hostile power of fearful strength in his own flesh.

Yet even in this case there is nothing very peculiar, certainly not in the nature of the conflict. Almost every person who has risen to adult years in the indulgence of his appetites, will find ample occasion for fierce struggles, groans, and agony.

There is no help for these protracted and terrific struggles, but in Christ. When his mild but mighty voice commands these agitated waves of passion, (sic.) "Peace, be still;" suddenly there is a great and most blessed calm. O, how blessed if the whole church might learn that in Christ there is victory over both the flesh and the devil--indeed over every enemy that can rise up against our souls.

Again, many of these tribulations are occasioned by the perversion of the sensibility and the weakness of the intellect.

The sensibility have been grievously perverted by a long and greedy indulgence in sin, it becomes inevitable that God should compel its development in some other direction. Perhaps it is sometimes inevitable that he should wither our sensibility to some specific form of sinful pleasure by making us drink the bitter dregs of that same cup. He gives us the grief and disappointment which belong to that kind of indulgence and thus wakes up a different class of sensibilities. Through this pathway of flame, we may enter the haven of spiritual peace. How much it sometimes costs our Spiritual Teacher to bring us quite over from loving earthly good intensely, to loving as intensely the solid good of his presence and favor!

The intellect too, long crippled or perhaps knotted up by sin, must with much pains be unraveled and developed, and often in the school of tribulation. How many of God's people can testify that afflictions have made them really think as they never thought before, and consequently take views of truth never before taken.

Again, we must not omit to notice that many of the Christian's tribulations results from impaired health, poverty, losses, disappointments. With this fact every one is abundantly familiar. It enters into the experience

and observation of every day life.

We are next to consider--

III. The reason why God causes his children to pass through such scenes.

These tribulations are often, properly speaking, unavoidable. By this is meant that the state of the world being what it is, nothing less than a miracle can entirely prevent the occurrence of tribulations. Thus, the world being as wicked as it is and as absolutely under the dominion of the devil, it would need as many miracles as there are saints and particular events, to shield every saint continually from being persecuted by the wicked.

The same substantially may be said of all those trials which result from the usual course of nature and of providence; for example, from sickness, losses, bereavements.

But again, very many of these trials are sent from the hand of God as parts of our needful discipline.

The spirit of a child of God needs to be subdued. The Bible represents God's people as being like a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke, in which case of course, they need to be "broken" before they can be safely used in the service of their Master. It should be observed, however, that this expression is used of the corrupt state of the ancient Jewish church, and therefore, as used by Jeremiah, may denote a really unconverted state. This seems probable, especially because Ephraim is immediately afterwards represented as praying--"Turn thou me, and I shall be turned:" and then as saying, "Surely after that I was turned, I repented." We may however plainly infer from the passage, that if God's real children apostatize into a rebellious state, God will follow them with his discipline till he breaks them into a submissive and docile spirit. Of course he can be satisfied with nothing short of this, and never ought to be.

Those of us who have children understand this. You know it costs you much trial and many tears often before you have completed the painful work of thoroughly subduing your children, as far as you can carry on the process. How much more then when God takes up the same sort of labor, and pushes it to the radical cure of the heart; when he does not stop short as you sometimes do with mere external reform;--and much more still, when it is considered that you wisely undertake your task while your children are yet young and consequently pliable; while God often and indeed usually has to carry his course of discipline into the rigorous and fixed habits of adult years. He takes up a fresh case perhaps after years of wofully perverse training, after the worst of sinful habits are formed, and knit together into the very fibers of the soul. O what a work is this to tear out these strong roots of sin, and wrench off these attachments by which the soul has suffered itself to be bound to sinful pursuits and pleasure! No wonder it should cost the saint of God many a trial ere he can say; "My soul is even as a weaned child." To subdue self-will is therefore the first step in this needful discipline

On this point however it should be well considered that this struggle will be long or short--will be sore, terrific, heart-rending, or will terminate soon in the sweetest submission, according as the individual shall attempt to do it mainly in his own strength, or shall take hold by faith of the promised strength of God. Let him fight out this battle alone by dint of resolutions, vows, mental struggles, and he will find toil enough to crush and weary out an archangel; but let him look up submissively and confidingly into the face of his Savior, saying, "Save, Lord, that I perish not,"--let him throw his arms round the neck of this Heavenly Helper, and before he is aware the work is done, and his "soul is like the chariots of Amminadab."

The next object is to correct and duly develop the sensibility. After the will has been subdued in conversion, and yet even more thoroughly by a process of subsequent trial, the sensibility may be still but imperfectly rectified. It may have been long trained to a course of monstrous development, so as to exhibit a really monstrous enlargement towards some forms of sinful pleasure. The consequence of this must be a constant tendency to fall under temptations in that direction.

The only remedy is for God to subdue and purify the sensibility. This he does in part by trials. He throws the Christian into deep waters; gives him gall and wormwood to drink; stirs up and draws out all the keenest sensibilities of the soul, until its old habitudes are thoroughly broken up. He pushes on this work, overturning and still overturning; fouling every fountain of sinful pleasure, quickening the sensibility to other moods of action; pushing the law-work of conviction until the soul really feels the bitterness of sinning, and turns with irrepressible loathing from those pleasures which it has so long trained itself to relish. The convicting power of the Spirit, co-operating often with afflictions from God's providence, brings the soul into deep trouble; the searching process goes on and develops more and more the fearful fact that the sensibility is too keenly alive to earthly good and far too insensible to heavenly; still God pushes the trial, until the sensibility seems to let go

the earthly and be satisfied with the heavenly. In a certain respect, this process renews the scene of the soul's first conversion: the individual is brought to loathe those sinful pleasures he once relished so keenly, and then he turns with all his heart to those pleasures which flow immediately from God's own right hand. Smitten by the law till sinful pleasures are embittered, he turns to the gospel of infinite grace and finds that now his soul can feel in view of these blessed realities.

The sensibility of most wicked men is not developed at all towards the great law of God. Keenly alive to every thing else, they are really dead to this. Its precepts and its penalties alike affect them not. Why? Because their sensibilities are strongly developed towards selfish pleasure and towards worldly objects, but little or perhaps none at all towards these spiritual objects. Hence such persons need to be searched and smitten all the pieces and their souls agonized with conviction, before they will let off their keen sensibility to sinful pleasure and throw their souls out in another and opposite direction. This work is not usually if ever finished at the soul's first conversion. The radical cure of the sensibility demands yet another, a longer, often a different process. As a matter of fact, God very often secures this result by afflictions. Almost all Christians who have had much experience in the divine life can testify to this. They know how God has dried up the current of their sensibility towards selfish good till he has left them nothing but himself to love, and then has drawn out their hearts towards himself until they felt that this is bliss enough for them.

It is a sweet consideration connected with this point, that like a kind-hearted parent, God always prefers the milder mode of attracting the soul, rather than the more painful one of compulsion. The latter is adopted only as an alternative when the other utterly fails. It is only when the love and the cross of Jesus fail to touch and command our sensibility, that God pours wormwood into our cup of idolatrous pleasure, and compels us to give him our hearts.

It often happens that Christians under trial fail to understand the philosophy of God's dealings with themselves. Hence they are greatly stumbled. Yet if they would study their own moral state and the manifest result of tribulations as developed in a thousand cases under their own eye, they would see that often the design is simply to discipline and rectify the sensibility.

Another reason for sending tribulations is to develop the intelligence. Unconverted men often think they know much on religious subjects, while in fact they know almost nothing. They are mere children. Perhaps their minds have never been thoroughly roused to action on any subject. Hence the necessity of great intellectual development. For this end how often does God make use of great tribulations. What Christian has not observed that when God would really wake up his intelligence, he first throws his soul into a state of deep agitation and agony, so that the mind seems to heave like a volcano; the intelligence is wrought up to a state of most intense activity, on the rack to get hold of the great and deep truths of God.

For this end deep and thorough discipline is requisite. Fiery tribulations are often the means employed by God to rouse up the intelligence and quicken its search for truth into an earnestness almost like agony.

So of all the other faculties of our whole mental and moral being. They all need discipline. Made originally right and tuned to mutual harmony, it has been the constant work of sin and Satan to wrench them out of place and order, and fill them with the dissonance of hell. God must put the whole instrument in tune. Every string, every wire, every tube, must be set right, till under his master hand it shall pour forth the music of heaven. How beautiful the process! Yet sometimes how mysterious! The result will fill heaven with melody, and make the chastened saints more than thankful for all the pain of the needful process.

Thus is God perfecting the character and developing the whole being to fit the soul for heaven. Thus through much tribulation he develops faith. He shuts the Christian up in a strait place where he can find none else to trust but God.

Thus too he develops the patience of the saints. See that dear child of God on a sick bed. Days and nights of weariness are allotted; why? Perhaps only to cultivate and develop the grace of patience. There may be nothing else lacking to put that soul into complete tune for the harmony of heaven; and now when this last wire is fitted, when this last tube in the great organ is properly adjusted, he will say--"Now take it home. It will do for the choir above."

So God disciplines his saints here for usefulness hereafter. He has work for them to do there. Only himself knows just what it is, and just what training is requisite for its successful prosecution. Then let us leave him to go on in this school of training us for a service which lies open before his eye but not before ours.

Again, it is most manifest that Christ is preparing the saints to be glorified with himself. He passed through this same school of discipline to his work and reward on high; so he asks us to follow him in his tribulations that we may be ripened for the same final glory. Having himself suffered being tempted and tried amid tribulations, he knows how to sympathize with those who are struggling along the same pathway. Who would not follow cheerfully such a Leader! Especially while cheered by such sympathy, and conducted onward to such a weight of glory!

Once more; the unbelief of Christians is the real occasion of very many of their trials. The Lord in mercy sets himself to cure this unbelief; and for this purpose employs the two-fold agency of external providences and the internal work of his Spirit. Providences from without press, and the Spirit within constrains us towards God. Oppressed with trials, we must seek God and believe his word and promises; drawn by his Spirit, we renounce our unbelief and dare to trust our own Father.

Thus the Lord makes his providence and his Spirit conspire together to expel the Christian's unbelief and beget faith.

It is indeed a most interesting consideration that nothing can occur in the universe which does not tend towards this same result. "All things work together for good to those that love God." All the latitude given to external temptations is allowed and still controlled with reference to this very end. With every temptation, God will provide a way of escape that we may be able to bear it; and having borne it victoriously, we learn to trust God more than ever. Thus every temptation through grace may serve to dispel unbelief, quicken faith, and ripen the Christian for future usefulness and final glory.

REMARKS.

1. The true picture of the Christian life is very seldom presented. Almost all Christians are prone to take partial, one-sided views of the Christian life; a fact which seems often to result from dwelling too exclusively on one particular aspect of practical religion. By consequence we fail to represent it accurately as a whole, and false impressions are given.

Thus, the Christian life is sometimes represented as almost wholly a state of bondage to sin. You are made to see the Christian daily groaning under a body of sin from which no deliverance comes or is hoped to come till death. You cannot help inferring that his state is one of the most pitiable forms of slavery the world every saw--with no emancipation possible in the present life. Now this is a great perversion of the real truth.

Or again, the Christian life is represented to be a bed of flowers, with no toil, no ruffling anxiety, no strife within or strife without. This too is an extreme and one-sided view of the case. The fact is that the Christian life is a checkered, varied scene--a storm and then a calm, a rugged mountain pass, and then a verdant valley--the light and joy of hope and of victory, succeeded often by fell conflicts with Satan or with lusts, forming the dark shades of the picture.

So the Bible sketches the Christian life; so all experience and observation testify; so therefore it should be represented.

2. In consequence of these defective representations, real Christians and especially young converts are often greatly stumbled. Not finding religion to be what they expected, their confidence is shaken. If they have been told that all will be joy, light, quietude, with no sorrows, struggle, toil, they will be greatly discouraged when they find the fact to be otherwise. Hence a strong temptation to let go their confidence and apostatize from God.

It would be of vast service to every young convert, and indeed to every Christian to understand the relation of all these trials to their own spiritual improvement. Every Christian needs to know that these are the wisest means which God can use for molding, chastening, and purifying his own heart for the work of faith here and the bliss of heaven hereafter. Then no one need be stumbled. All would love to see a Father's hand both wise and kind, in every form of tribulation.

3. These tribulations are not arbitrary or accidental. This is a great and a most injurious mistake. They always come from God, directly caused or at least permitted for some wise and good end. Nothing can come by chance.

Nothing can befall the children of God which is not suffered by God for their good. Whatever it be, God means it as an instrument for their greater sanctification and higher usefulness.

Hence it follows that God is just as good to his people in the afflictions he sends, as in those things which we are pleased to call mercies. They are all mercies. The only difference among them is that the one class seem for the present to be not joyous but grievous, though afterwards they yield the same peaceable fruits of righteousness. The other class may be a less unpleasant medicine. All alike tend to health, and God is just as benevolent in giving the bitter portion as the sweet.

Our experience meetings on Friday afternoons are exceedingly rich and instructive. In one of these meetings a few days since a brother rose and said, "Rejoice, my friends, with me, for God has been peculiarly good to me of late." I wanted to reply at once, "Brother, you are mistaken --it is not merely of late that God has been good to you; he has always been as good to you as he could be; always doing the very best thing he could do, and the pleasantest thing for your present enjoyment that the nature of your case would admit. Think not that God is fitful, capricious,--benevolent only now and then; peculiarly good by turns; no mistake can be greater than this."

You think perhaps that God is sometimes particularly attentive to your case and to your welfare. No so; he is always attentive to you, as much so as if you were the only Christian who needed his care in the whole universe, and the benevolent sympathy and regards of the Deity were all concentrated upon yourself.

It is like the case of that fond mother who has only one child in the world--a darling son. See how she watches over him day and night; she joins him in his little plays and keeps her eye out against all harm; she kisses away his little pains; if he is sick, O, how she watches over his pale frame. But God watches over every one of his children with an eye as fixed, with love as strong, with assiduity as unwearied as the fondest mother ever had--nay with love infinitely surpassing that of the best of mothers.

Christian mother, God gave you one only son. It was a precious gift, and you thanked the Giver for his love. You watched over that dear boy with the buoyancy of hope till he could run about his play alone; and what then? Oh, you say, he seemed well--till one morning he was sick. His little hand was hot, his cheek flushed; he rolled his wild eye in agony. --Ah me, I saw him die--and die too in so much suffering that I almost felt relief when his little bosom heaved for the last time. And do you suppose, afflicted mother, that God was any less good in taking away than in giving your dear boy? Nay, God has no fitful spasms of goodness; all alike is infinite love--the best thing for you that he can possibly do.

But the Lord hid his face from you, did he? But even then, he did not forsake his throne of love, nor revoke his promises, nor dismiss our great Advocate; so you might still have a God to seek and find. Nay, Christian, in those seasons of your bitterest agony, your Father was none the less kind and sympathizing. He chastens only for your "profit;" and not from his caprice. You will then (will you not?) learn to praise him for both--for the affliction and the gift. O you must learn this, else the law of gratitude cannot be written deeply on your very soul. You cannot praise God as you ought till you learn to praise him for every thing and see his own kind hand in afflictions not less than in his gifts of providence. "In every thing give thanks," is the inspired precept.