

What and When is the Tribulation?

What does tribulation mean? Is it a term used for all afflictions that a human being experiences? Does it occur in phases? Is it occurring now or does it apply only in the future?

The Greek noun “thlipsis” is translated as “tribulation” or “affliction” and is found in 45 instances in the New Testament. Examining how Jesus and His apostles use the term will provide a clear understanding of its meaning and especially its usage in the book of Revelation.

The first use of “thlipsis” is seen when Jesus teaches the Parable of the Sower.

The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction (**thlipsis**) or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. (Matt 13:20-21; Mark 4:16-17)

Here Jesus indicates that “affliction” or “tribulation” occurs as the result of one’s faith in God. Exclusively applying the term “thlipsis” to Believers, Jesus also limits the use of the term to the persecution of one’s faith in God; there is a distinction from other causes of persecution (i.e. racism, socio-economic class, etc.).

Speaking to His disciples, Jesus presents “thlipsis” as occurring very soon and with certain fatality.

Then they will deliver you to tribulation (**thlipsis**), and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. (Matt 24:9-13; John 16:33)

With His crucifixion and ascension coming soon, Jesus prepares the disciples, aware that they will be His representatives of the gospel to a world ruled by Satan, that they will be recipients of the world’s hate. Despite this, no amount of “thlipsis” will separate a genuine Believer from God’s agape love and Jesus’ work of atonement.

Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish (**thlipsis**) because of the joy that a child has been born into the world. Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you. (John 16:21-22)

Drawing a comparison to a mother’s pain in labor, Jesus reassures the disciples that while “thlipsis” is painful, the experience will be temporary and will be supplanted with the everlasting joy of seeing each other again.

Anticipating the persecution awaiting His disciples after He is crucified, Jesus warns Believers of the tribulation they will experience then (and now) for those who live by God’s word and claim salvation in His name. This form of tribulation is occurring now.

In contrast to Jesus’ use of the Greek noun “thlipsis”, the apostles use the term, in some instances, with a more generic sense of affliction from any cause and not limited to one with a faith in God (Acts 7:10-11; Rom 2:9-10). But when addressing the church, the apostles use “thlipsis” with the same exclusive application to Believers as Jesus did.

Believers should expect “thlipsis;” and it is a shared experience.

After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, “Through many tribulations (**thlipsis**) we must enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:21-22)

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I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation (**thlipsis**) and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (Rev 1:9)

For Believers, “thlipsis” is necessary for the process of sanctification. The implication is that without it, one is not living righteously for Jesus Christ in a manner that draws others to Him.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations (**thlipsis**), knowing that tribulation (**thlipsis**) brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Rom 5:3-5)

When personally experiencing “thlipsis,” it is confirmation that one is living for Jesus Christ which should provide joy to the Believer.

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions (**thlipsis**). Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col 1:24-27)

Through “thlipsis,” a Believer can identify with Jesus Christ on the cross even unto death. Just as Jesus was being persecuted for being the Messiah, Believers are being persecuted, because of His name.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction (**thlipsis**) so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction (**thlipsis**) with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. (2 Cor 1:3-5)

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation (**thlipsis**), or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written,

“For Your sake we are being put to death all day long;
We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” (Rom 8:35-36)

When Jesus speaks of tribulation, the persecution for one’s faith can occur now.

But when referring to tribulation in the context of the end time, when “the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place,” Jesus speaks of the “great tribulation” as an extreme and lethal persecution of Believers (Matt 24:21; Mark 13:14-19) and a test for those who may be marginal Believers (Rev 2:22). Angels appear to understand this distinction of “great tribulation” as well (Rev 7:14).

When the apostles speak of tribulation in the context of Believers, they inform that it should be expected for all who identify with Jesus Christ and is part of the process of sanctification. Moreover, the suffering is temporary, shared, and yet rewarding for all who persevere. Like Jesus, the apostles use tribulation, the persecution because of one’s faith, with the sense that it is not limited to the end times and occurs right now (Rev 1:9).

While persecution of one’s faith is one matter, the Bible makes special note of those who died from that persecution.

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Revelation, the last book of the Bible, indicates that those Believers, who were martyred for their faith during the Great Tribulation, reside underneath the altar in the Temple of God and emerge later, when Jesus breaks the fifth seal, to receive their white robe and serve God Himself.

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also. (Rev 6:9-11)

Revelation also makes special mention of those who were martyred during the Great Tribulation as well including the 144,000 sealed bond servants.

Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "**These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation**, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. (Rev 7:13-15)

Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and **with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads**. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one could learn the song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who had been purchased from the earth. (Rev 14:1-3)

It appears that Believers do live through the tribulation which implies that the tribulation ends with the demise of the last Believer who would be persecuted for their faith and martyred. There is another important implication here - Believers may continue to exist after the great tribulation; but, they were not persecuted for their faith nor martyred (Matt 13:20-21; 24:9-13; Mark 4:16-17; John 16:33)!!

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).
2. Walvoord JF, Zuck RB eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, Wheaton: Victor Books, (1983).