

(New Wine in New Wineskins) 22. the Church and Tribulation

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen's sermon emphasizes the church's role in enduring tribulation while maintaining faith and obedience to God's commandments in the face of trials and persecution.

Scripture: Job 1:8, Ephesians 3:10, Ephesians 6:12

Topics: "Discipleship", "Endurance in Tribulation"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the church's role in manifesting God's wisdom to both earthly and heavenly authorities, particularly in the context of tribulation. He draws parallels between the trials faced by Job and the anticipated suffering of the church, highlighting that true discipleship involves enduring criticism and hardship while maintaining faith in God's sovereignty. Poonen reassures believers that God places a protective hedge around those who are wholly devoted to Him, and that any trials they face are permitted by God for their growth and testimony. He encourages the church to embrace tribulation as a means of glorifying God, reminding them that Jesus has overcome the world and calls His followers to do the same. Ultimately, Poonen calls for a commitment to total obedience to God's commandments as a mark of true discipleship.

Transcript

We are told in Ephesians 3:10 that in the new covenant, God desires to manifest His wisdom through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. From Ephesians 6:12, we know that these rulers and authorities in the heavenly places are Satan and his hosts of wickedness who dwell in the second heaven (where they dwell ever since being cast down out of the third heaven, where God dwells - 2 Corinthians 12:2).

We know that we are to be Christ's witnesses unto all men. But here we are told that we have to have a testimony to the evil spirits too. What testimony is this? It is a testimony to the wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10). It is the joyful confession of our spirits that God has ordered everything in our lives according to His perfect wisdom. It is the testimony of lives that have partaken of the wisdom that is from above.

In the book of Job, we read of the witness that Job was to Satan, by his life. When Satan came into the presence of God, after touring the earth, God asked him if he had observed the uprightness of Job's life (Job 1:8). Satan's reply was that Job feared God because of the three hedges that God had put around

Job. Satan knew that there was a hedge around Job's person, another hedge around his family and a third hedge around Job's possessions (verse 10). Many believers do not know about this threefold hedge that God has put around the disciples of Jesus. Those who fulfil the threefold condition of discipleship mentioned in Luke 14:26-33 will find that God puts a hedge around each area surrendered to the Lord - possessions, loved ones and one's own life.

But then we read that God opened up these hedges around Job, one by one, so that Satan could go through them and attack Job's possessions, his loved ones and his body. This was in order that Job's character could be demonstrated by God to Satan.

From this we learn that Satan cannot touch a disciple of Jesus or anything that he has, without first getting God's permission. This is a very important truth for us to be established in - and we shall see the need for this even more in the days to come. The true church of Jesus Christ will be called to suffer in the coming days, as in the early centuries. Before that time comes upon us, we must be established in this truth first of all - that there is a threefold hedge around the wholehearted disciples of Jesus that no one can come through, unless God Himself opens up that hedge and permits Satan to do so.

The other lesson that we can learn from Job is that our own loved ones and religious Christians will criticise and condemn us. In Job's case, his wife and three religious leaders (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar) misunderstood and criticised him. That too was permitted by God. Our loved ones will become our foes and religious people will misunderstand and criticise us - because God has opened the hedges and allowed them to do so.

Job humbled himself and said - "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). He was a true disciple - for he possessed nothing. He recognised that everything he had belonged to the Lord rightfully and that the Lord had as much right to give them as to take them away. Those who are not disciples think of blessing only in terms of God giving them things. Those who are disciples recognise that it is just as much blessing - perhaps even more - when God takes them away. Thus we can know whether we are disciples or not.

The sad thing was that Job could not endure in this bold confession until the end. After a while, he wilted and weakened under the continued pressure of trial, and began to complain against God. From chapter 3 to chapter 31, we see the sad spectacle of Job going up and down - sometimes rising to great heights in his confession of faith and at other times sinking down to the depths of despair, grumbling and self justification. This is the experience of old covenant people.

But now God has promised us something better in the new covenant - as we read in Hebrews 11:40. That is described in the succeeding verses of Hebrews 12:1-13) that we can follow Jesus who endured until the very end triumphantly.

Today we are followers, not of Job, but of Jesus - and whatever the trial, we can be overcomers until the very end, through the power of God's grace and be a witness to Satan. We cannot criticise Job, for he lived in a time when grace had not come and the Holy Spirit had not been given, The new covenant had not been established, etc. Considering the limitations of the time he lived in, he did extremely well - so well that God commends him three times (Job 1:8; 2:3; 42:7).

We however can follow Jesus - the Author and Finisher of our faith.

Jesus passed through the university of suffering and there obtained the certificate of perfect obedience. And now He has become a Professor in the same university to teach obedience to all who are willing to enrol (Hebrews 5:8, 9). There is no compulsion here, as there was under the old covenant, with its 'Thou shalt's. No. But the Spirit and the bride say, "Come, join this university". No one can be a disciple who does not join this university - for this is the only place where disciples are trained.

Jesus told His disciples very clearly that in the world they would face tribulation. But they were not to fear this, for He had overcome the world and its ruler; and therefore they could be overcomers too (John 16:33).

Jesus has many admirers today but few followers. He never called people to admire Him but only to follow Him. And if we follow Him, then we shall no longer belong to this world. And then the world will surely hate us.

Jesus said that the world would love only those who belonged to it (John 15:19).

One clear and unmistakable mark of our being the disciples of Jesus is that the world hates us. "If they have persecuted Me", Jesus said, "then they will persecute you as well" (John 15:20).

The second clear mark of the disciples of Jesus is that they love those who hate and persecute them (Matthew 5:44-48). By these two marks all those who have ears to hear God's truth can examine their own position, and know the truth concerning themselves.

If you are popular with worldly people or with religious Christians (who are not wholehearted disciples), you can be absolutely certain that you are a compromiser. It could even be that you are not converted.

Why did the world hate Jesus? Not because He paid His taxes and washed people's feet; not even because He lived a holy life. The world hated Him because He exposed its hypocrisy. He also exposed unScriptural traditions among God's people. So those who wanted to preserve "the traditions of the elders" hated Him too. That will be our fate as well, if we speak as He spoke. If we seek the honour of men and of religious elders, we shall keep quiet and remain popular. We can each choose the way we would like to go.

In Revelation 12, we read of Satan being enraged with certain people. There we read of him first trying to devour the Man-child (Jesus Christ) that the woman (Israel) had brought forth into the world. Satan could not succeed there, and the Man-child grew up, completed His ministry and ascended up to the throne of God (Revelation 12:4, 5). Satan's fury is now directed against the younger brothers of this Man-child. These are described as those "who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:17 b). These are the disciples of Jesus whose life is characterised by total obedience to the commandments of God and who boldly hold fast to the testimony of Jesus. They open their mouths, speaking about everything that Jesus Himself testified to - for this is "the testimony of Jesus". There are very few like these on earth today, for there are very few churches in the world now preaching total obedience to God's commandments.

Revelation 12 is referring to the last days of this present age, when Satan will be cast down from the second heaven to earth for the last three and a half years just before Jesus comes again (verse 9). At that time there will be on earth those who keep God's commandments and hold boldly to the testimony of Jesus and who overcame Satan (verse 11). These are God's 'commandos' - the elite troops of His army

on earth.

It will be a tremendous privilege and honour to be among them - most of whom will have to lay down their physical lives for Jesus' sake. Revelation 13:7 makes it clear that the Antichrist will be permitted by God to kill the disciples of Jesus. But remember that it is God who opens the hedges. Otherwise no one could touch us. This is why we do not fear.

Job could say, "God knows every detail concerning me" (Job 23:10). Under the new covenant, we can go even further and say, "God plans every detail concerning me" - for this is the plain meaning of Romans 8:28. It is also true that even at such a time, God being faithful will never allow us to be tested beyond our ability. With every trial, He will make a way for us to overcome and escape from sinning and denying Him (1 Corinthians 10:13). His grace will prove to be sufficient even then (2 Corinthians 12:9); otherwise none of us could stand. It is not the naturally courageous who will stand in that day - but the naturally fearful, who trust in the Lord to strengthen them.

Those will be the days of great tribulation, when the Antichrist is ruling. But Jesus said that God has limited the duration of that period "for the sake of His elect" (Matthew 24:21, 22). God's elect (the church) will therefore obviously be here on earth at that time, witnessing for the Lord. "Immediately after the tribulation", Jesus said, "the Son of Man will appear in the sky and He will send His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect" (Matthew 24:29-31). The trumpet that Jesus referred to here is the one mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17; at which the dead in Christ will rise, and together with the living disciples of Jesus will be raptured to meet the Lord in the air.

Jesus made it clear that the church (the elect) would experience this rapture only after the great tribulation. Then we shall welcome the Lord in the air at His second coming and return with Him to earth to reign with Him for one thousand years. God's Word is clear as to who will reign with Christ for 1000 years. Those "who had not worshipped the beast or his image, and who had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand" (Revelation 20:4). This clearly shows that the overcomers (the bride of Christ) will be on earth, standing true to the Lord, during the reign of the Antichrist.

Tribulation is something that comes from men who are instigated by Satan against the church. This must be distinguished from God's wrath which is reserved for the ungodly. We shall not face the wrath of God, but we shall certainly face great tribulation from men. The blessing for God's people under the old covenant was prosperity and ease. Under the new covenant, it is adversity - suffering and tribulation.

When Jesus faced death He did not say, "Father, save Me from this hour", but, "Father, glorify Thy name" (John 12:27, 28). The song of the harlot is, "Father, save me from tribulation". The song of the bride is, "Father, glorify Thy name". "We exult in tribulations". "Through much tribulation we enter the kingdom of God" (Romans 5:3; Acts 14:22).

Jesus specifically prayed to the Father that we should not be taken out of the world, but that we should be kept from sin (John 17:15). Jesus never desired that His bride should be raptured away to escape tribulation.

About 150 years ago, a new doctrine arose in Christendom (which was not heard of in the days of the apostles) that Christ would come secretly and take away all believers so that they would not have to face the great tribulation. This doctrine made it look as though persecution from men was a punishment from God! Not surprisingly, this doctrine arose, not in countries where Christians were being persecuted, but in

a Western country that had not seen any persecution of Christians for centuries. Scripture was then twisted by many to fit this doctrine. Thus Satan succeeded in lulling Christians into a false comfort, so that they would be unprepared for the tribulation when it does come upon them.

Since the prayers of most Christians are basically of this order, "Lord, make my life more comfortable on earth", it is not at all surprising that multitudes of Christians around the world happily accepted this teaching about escaping tribulation. Those who have absorbed the teaching of Jesus however understand clearly that there is no virtue in escaping persecution or tribulation. On the contrary, Jesus constantly told His disciples that they would face tribulation and persecution in the world.

There are some who teach that Christ will take away the wholehearted, leaving the halfhearted to face the Antichrist. This seems to imply that escaping persecution is a reward that God gives to the faithful! No sensible General would send his second class troops to the battle front and keep his first class troops at home! It is unimaginable that God would take away His best soldiers from earth at a time when He needs their witness the most.

It is clear from Scripture that those who oppose the Antichrist are those "who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:17). These are certainly not the halfhearted. On the contrary, they are the overcomers, whose names are in the book of life (Revelation 13:8; 2:5). Satan is not enraged at halfhearted Christians, but at the wholehearted. Today, Satan is furious with those who preach total obedience to the commandments of God. His prime targets are those who obey all of God's commandments and who preach and teach such obedience to others. This is why Paul earnestly requested all believers to pray for him - for he knew that he was one of Satan's prime targets. We too must pray today for those who preach total obedience to God, that they may be protected.

In the first three centuries, when fierce persecution raged against the Christians, God did not take them out of their tribulations. They were eaten by lions and burnt at the stake. There was no secret rapture in those Roman arenas when the disciples of Jesus were slain. The God who shut the lions' mouths and took away the power of the fiery furnace in Daniel's day did not do such miracles for the wholehearted disciples of Jesus in the first three centuries - for these were new covenant Christians who were to glorify God in the fire. It will be the same for the disciples of Jesus in the last century, before Jesus comes. God's first class troops stood true to Him in the first century - until the very end. They did not ask for, or expect, twelve legions of angels to come and snatch them away. God watched the bride of His Son being torn to pieces by lions and being burnt at the stake, and He was glorified in their testimony - for they had followed the Lamb wherever He went, even unto a violent physical death. The only word that Jesus spoke to them was, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life".

This is what He speaks to us now too. But in order to be faithful in that future day of the Antichrist, we have to learn to be faithful in the little temptations and trials that come our way today. This is why it is essential that we learn faithfulness in the hidden life - when we are tempted in the secret places of our life, in our thoughts, attitudes, motives, in money matters, etc. These are little matters; but only if we are faithful in the little, will we be faithful in the great things, one day. If we are unfaithful in the little things, we will be unfaithful to the Lord in the day of tribulation as well. If we cannot run with men now, how will we run with horses then? If we are not faithful in a time of ease, how will we be faithful in a time of trouble? (Jeremiah 12:5). God seeks to train us today to be His commando troops in that soon coming future day.

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