

The Meaning and Uses of Tribulations

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[0 : 00] Our scripture lessons today, from the revelation of St. John the Divine and from St. Luke's Gospel, speak to us of Christian hope and expectation, of the assurance of salvation in the midst of trouble and distress, when these things begin to come to pass, says Jesus.

Then look up and lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh. The signs of tribulation are the harbingers of glory.

Behold the fig tree and all the trees, when they now shoot forth. Ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when you see these things come to pass. Know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. Hope and expectation and the assurance of salvation.

But just what is this hope that arises somehow out of tribulation? What precisely is our Christian expectation?

[1 : 30] Our gospel lesson today offers us a dramatic invitation to examine and clarify our thinking on that subject.

Thank you. What is this hope that is? No doubt, all of us have many hopes of various kinds. Hopes for ourselves, for our families and friends.

Hopes for the church in which we serve, and for the world in which we live. Who does not hope for peace, reasonable prosperity, and the resolution of crippling conflicts?

Who does not hope for health of mind and body, for comfort and security and opportunity, all such things?

Who does not hope for sane and stable government in church and in the nations of the world? But all these are surely reasonable hopes, and surely there is nothing wrong in hoping for such things.

[2 : 48] All of them have a legitimate place in our Christian life and in our prayers. But our gospel lesson today urges us to think more deeply about the substance of our hope and the meaning of our tribulations and the relation between hope and tribulation.

Jesus, in that gospel lesson, reminds us that our worldly hopes, however good, are not enough. And can never be enough.

Because the things of the world are in their very nature passing things. Jesus speaks to us dramatically and urgently about the end, about the end of earthly things.

There shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars, and upon earth distress of nations with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring, men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after the things that are coming on the earth.

For the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then, and then shall they see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

[4 : 10] No doubt, when we hear that speech of Jesus, it strikes us as a prophecy about the end of time, about some future, almost unimaginable crisis, catastrophe.

Powers of heaven shall be shaken. And all down the Christian centuries, there have been preachers who have detected the signs of such a crisis in their own day.

And you know, from time to time, multitudes have gathered on mountaintops to await the end. But what is Jesus really saying there?

What does it mean? Well, it is, of course, a prophecy about the future, about the end of time. But I think it would be a mistake, and a grave mistake, to read it only in a futuristic way.

Surely it has reference also to the present. And speaks of the transitory character of all worldly things, here and now.

[5 : 31] You see, now, now is the crisis. Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled.

For all of us, for each one of us individually, the world must pass away. Not just in some vague and unimaginable future, but right now. Because worldly things are passing things, and they are passing, even as we grasp them in our hands. Pantaleon said the ancient Greek poet Heraclitus. All things flow. All things are in flux. And no cleverness, no wishful thinking, no advanced technology can ever make them other than passing things. But it is only through much trouble and distress that we learn the folly of putting our trust in such things. [6 : 44] It's only through trouble and distress that we learn the folly of putting our trust in worldly expectations. And it's only through trouble and distress that we learn to find our treasure elsewhere. When these things begin to come to pass, says Jesus, then look up. Then look up. And find new confidence in the word of God, which does not pass away. Heaven and earth shall pass away, says Jesus, but my words shall not pass away. Our lesson from the book of Revelation powerfully affirms that gospel exhortation to otherworldliness. Behind St. John's vision there lies an experience of tribulation more severe, I suppose, than any of us has ever known or is ever likely to know. And it is out of the depths of that experience that he speaks. Then look up, says the gospel, and lift up your heads. And that's exactly what St. John is doing there. [8 : 11] And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away, and there was no more sea. And I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. See, it's in the midst of tribulation and distress, in the midst of the devastation of heaven and earth, that the holy city, the new Jerusalem, the gift of God, descends from God. And I heard a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. You see, the holy city descends from God, who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the living God. within whose eternal providence, the whole dialectic of hope and tribulation is totally embraced. [9 : 35] See, he is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, containing, embracing all things in his knowledge and love. Not the least iota of reality, falls outside. Not a sparrow falleth. In that eternal knowing and that eternal loving, which we call providence, even our confusions and stupidities, dare one say, even our sins have a place. For where sin abounded, grace did the more abound. In God's good providence, our trials, you see, are never without meaning. The trial of your faith worketh patience, says James in his epistle. Let patience have her perfect work, that he may be perfect and entire. all is within the providence of God. And therefore, in the most fundamental sense, all is well and all will be well. [11 : 01] But if all is within God's providence, if all is indeed well, what is the sense of all our struggles and our labors for God's kingdom, surely it comes as gift of God, not from our labors. Remember how St. Paul admonishes the Philippians. Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, he says. Then he goes on, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do his good pleasure. See the two sides of that. On the one hand, the fearful choices of the human will undertaken with the utmost seriousness in fear and trembling. On the other hand, the sure inner workings of the providence of God. It is God that worketh in you both to will and to do his good pleasure. [12 : 12] It's important to see these two sides and to see that they are not alternatives. The religious mind chooses both, so said Augustine in the City of God, chooses both, confesses both, maintains both. At that point in the City of God, in the fifth book, he is debating the position of Cicero, the pagan Cicero, who had argued that to hold a doctrine of providence is surely to evacuate all human initiative and responsibility.

Therefore, says Cicero, one must deny the doctrine of providence. You see, he sees providence and human initiative as opposed, as somehow alternatives, as though human action were outside God's providence.

But the point is that all is contained within the providence of God. All our knowings and all our doings are within and not outside.

Within God's providence, we have the profound duty of living uncompromisingly in terms of what truth we know, in terms of what we know of God's truth.

[13 : 40] And we can do that, and I think we can only do that in the sure confidence of God's providential care.

our sure knowledge of God's providence is our assurance that our labors are not in vain and our tribulations are not without meaning.

One of our familiar hymns puts it this way, when through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, his grace all sufficient shall be thy supply, the flame shall not hurt thee, his only design, thy dross to consume, thy gold to refine.

May God bless you all and keep you in his grace. Amen.