

# Through Many Tribulations(1) - Introduction

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[ 0 : 0 0 ] We can read verse 21 as well, which is attached to it. Acts 14 at verse 21, when 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 that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

Now, suffering of all kinds is very much part of the fabric of human life. You all know that already. It's not necessary for me to say that to you.

And that suffering takes a great variety of types in the experiences of all of us as human beings. We all have various types of sufferings to endure, sometimes to the extent that they are indeed tribulation, deep sufferings, pains, sorrows, all the types that are mentioned in the Bible that we know of in our own experience.

And I'd like to follow a series of studies for a short time, maybe, I don't know, maybe eight or nine or so studies, on the theme of through many tribulations.

Just taking the words of this text, and what we want to do, we're going to aim to do, is to shine the Bible's teachings on the various types of sorrows, tribulations, challenges, sufferings, that the Bible itself mentions, but that we know of in our own human experience, and how, as we seek to deal with them, how we are counseled in various parts of Scripture, as to the purpose, the meaningfulness of these sufferings, of these difficulties in the life of God's people, and how we must look to the Bible itself, primarily, for guidance as to how to face and overcome the many difficulties and challenges, these tribulations.

[ 2 : 1 1 ] It says here that through many tribulations, when they taught, they were teaching the disciples here, and we'll see the combination later on in the study itself, they strengthened the souls of the disciples, but what they were doing was encouraging them to continue in the faith.

But that's set alongside, or very closely joined to the fact that, teaching them as well, that through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

In other words, our perseverance, our continuance in the faith, is never separated from the fact that it's through many tribulations that we enter the kingdom of God.

And that doesn't just mean enter at the very beginning of our Christian life. What he's talking about here is the whole of our Christian life, towards the entrance to the kingdom, that's, in this instance, it means the final entry point, if you like, to heaven, or when the course of life in this world is done, entry to the kingdom in that sense.

Towards that, it's a life of going through many tribulations, until we finally enter that kingdom of God in its fullness. This is where it's important for us to, and indeed it's a privilege for us to know the Bible, and that's really all I'm intending doing.

[ 3 : 2 9 ] I'm not by any means an expert in any of these matters that will come up in the course of this study, and I'm concerned that we all know that the Bible has to deal with these matters in a way that talks in real terms about these sufferings.

That's one of the benefits that we have, is that the realism of the Bible itself brings us face to face with things which are described just as they are.

We saw that actually somewhat this morning, but when the Bible talks about suffering, when it talks about tribulation, it doesn't deceive us. It doesn't give you information that will lead you astray.

It doesn't actually tell you things that you then need to actually readjust, or go to someone else to get better advice on. The Bible is very much a book of realism.

It makes us face up to things as they are. It brings us God's answer as it is, even though that doesn't necessarily remove, of course, the difficulties.

[ 4 : 32 ] So the series is going to spend some time thinking about this. I've been intending doing it for some time, because I know for one thing, many of yourselves are experiencing difficulties, challenges, various types of things, such as what I'm going to mention, will take us in this series through these common aspects of suffering, and some that are perhaps not so common.

Things like discouragement, grief, fears, a sense of failure, depression, various things connected to that.

And you'll be aware that many of these actually overlap in our human experience. You can't just take something like discouragement and look at it as if it exists on its own.

Discouragement is very often tied to, or can lead to, depression. Discouragement is something that's often tied up with grief, with fear, with a sense of failure.

All of these things. And we're going to look at it, most of the studies will involve some of the personnel of the Bible that are described as experiencing these difficulties and these trials.

[ 5 : 43 ] People such as Elijah, for example, because when you look at the likes of Elijah, and we'll look at the passage, God willing, in our further studies, but Elijah, as he fled from Jezebel, when the threat to his life was taken to him, he fled, he took his journey into the wilderness, he threw himself under a tree there, and he asked the Lord to take away his life.

He was downcast, he was discouraged, he was tired, he was depressed, he thought that he was filled with a sense of failure, for he says, I am no better than my fathers. Now, Lord, take away my life.

Let this be the end of it. And you wouldn't have imagined that a person like Elijah, in the previous chapter in the first Kings, could have succumbed to that sort of pressure, or would have ended up in that sort of situation.

But there it is. That's what our human frailty is like, even in the best of human beings. And as we come to work our way through what the Bible has to say, on through many tribulations, we'll see the likes of Elijah, and even Moses, they were at times downcast, and discouraged, and went to the Lord with how these things were occupying their hearts.

So by way of introduction, I want just tonight to take a few points from this passage, and just by way of anticipation, God willing, of the further studies that we want to engage in.

[ 7 : 07 ] And there are two points, especially, I want to just make tonight. First of all, suffering belongs to God's purpose for his people. Suffering belongs to God's purpose for his people.

It's not outside his purpose. It's not something that God has not planned for his people. It is part of his purpose for his people. You can see that from the text here.

Now, Paul and those who are with him, when they preached the gospel, they were strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

Now, it's obvious from that itself, that suffering must be part of God's purpose, because this is the preaching, this is the teaching that Paul actually set before them. They continue in the faith, but it's through many tribulations.

It's God's purpose for them to experience the tribulations as they seek to pursue onwards, and to persevere, and to continue in the faith.

[ 8 : 10 ] That's the first point. Suffering belongs to God's purpose for his people. And secondly, that suffering is essential to Christian development.

Suffering is essential to Christian development. I'm not going to mention the Lord himself, because he is in a category of his own, and we can't just put him alongside of our suffering, so there are close relations and affinities with his sufferings.

But you remember that in the epistle to Hebrews, you find that Jesus has spoken of us, one who learned obedience through the things which he suffered.

So you could never detach the Lord's progress in his own life as a human being, as a mediator, as our savior, as he went through the various sufferings of his life.

This was the other factor that's mentioned there. He learned obedience through that. There was a corresponding learning on his part, and a corresponding giving on his part, of obedience to the Father, to the Father's will, through these sufferings that he experienced.

[ 9 : 18 ] But when we come to our sufferings as Christians, we're looking at them firstly, that God's purpose is within that. The suffering belongs to God's purpose.

Now, of course, suffering, as you well know, is something that is in consequence of our fall in Adam.

It's so important that we hold on to the fact that these early chapters of the Bible are not myth. They're not fairy tales. They're not things that are other than actual events, where God created the first human beings, and placed them in that perfect environment of Eden, until they sinned against God.

And the moment they sinned, things entered into their life which hadn't been there before. And you can see that immediately in Genesis chapter 3, where that's described. They were all of a sudden overcome with fear.

They had a sense of foreboding. They couldn't draw near to God now, as they had done before. In fact, what they did was the opposite. They wanted to hide from him if possible. They wanted to get as far away as possible.

[10:26] There's a fear there. There's a foreboding there. There's a sense of just wanting to escape. There's a guilt there that wasn't there before. All sorts of things are there, just in an instant, as Adam and Eve sinned against God, and we fell with him in that transgression.

And that's passed on to us, now human nature. So, suffering, yes, it's a consequence of the fall. And that's why you've got the statement in Job, who was a man who suffered so much, as you can see from the book, that bears his name.

Well, in chapter 14 of Job, you find him saying that man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of troubles.

It's a short span of life, he's saying, and they're full of troubles. Now, he's not just saying that of himself. That's a general statement. He says, all mankind, apart from, of course, as we know, the Lord, but he himself had his troubles, but all mankind, born of a woman, is of few days and full of troubles.

He's setting out for us a principle there that human life contains troubles, tribulations, difficulties, trials, challenges. And if you follow that through, you can see that the Lord takes the troubles of his people and uses them in their sanctification.

[11:53] This will be one of the things that we come across time and time again. This is not, I'm going to end the study this evening by an emphasis that those who are not yet in Christ, those who are not saved, don't have this through of them as yet.

But for the Lord's people, God takes the troubles that they have and sanctifies them through them or uses them in their sanctification. That's why we're saying our heading is that suffering belongs to God's purpose for his people.

It's not something that they experience and then somehow or other God leaves that behind and uses other things to teach them, to sanctify them, to cut things off their life that needs to be cut out in order to prepare them for heaven.

Suffering has its own place in that. Let me just give you a few pointers, a few examples how grace sanctifies affliction and tribulation and grief for the Lord's people as they live by faith and as they seek to do what Paul is here advising those of that city to do, to just persevere, to continue in the faith.

Think of Deuteronomy, chapter 8, and verse 3, where God reminded the people as they were about to enter the land of Canaan, the promised land, through Moses. He was teaching them that the Lord had humbled them.

[13:12] This is when they were going through the desert and suffered them or allowed them to hunger. He humbled you and allowed you to hunger and fed you with manna which you did not know neither did your fathers know.

so that you may learn that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. In other words, what God through Moses was saying to the people is God actually let you suffer.

He used affliction. He used hunger. He used that humbling of you in these circumstances to teach you something very specific to depend on himself, to realize that your strength came from him, that your resources were from him, not in yourselves.

So you learn dependence as God teaches us through affliction or suffering. Then you go to the likes of Psalm 119 and verse 71 where the psalmist is saying it was good for me that I was afflicted so that I might learn your statutes.

How do we learn the word of God? When the psalmist is saying there that I might learn your statutes, he's not thinking of learning the word of God or the statutes of God parrot fashion just so that he's able to recite them.

[14:31] When he says there it was good for me that I was afflicted that I might learn your statutes. He means that I might know the relevance of your word. That I might come to depend upon your word in my afflictions and in the face of my afflictions.

And it was good for me he says that I was afflicted so that I might then learn your word through that. that I might experience how good your word is how dependable it is through my afflictions.

Learning his statutes his precepts. Romans chapter 5 you find there Paul dealing with justification by faith and alluding to some or referring to some of the related practical issues that flow from that. He says in verse 2 of chapter 5 of Romans through him through Jesus we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

But then he says this more than that or in addition to that we rejoice in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

[15:52] Now you see a string of elements there that are closely tied together but it begins by saying we rejoice in our sufferings. That doesn't mean it feels good to suffer. Paul is not saying your suffering is just an illusion.

He's not saying you're rejoicing in your suffering in the sense you don't feel any pain. Rejoicing here means having in Christ a stability and a certainty and an inward peace and even a joy that comes even though there are sufferings to go through.

Because he says that produces endurance or perseverance. Same thing as Paul was teaching them there in Lystra and Iconium and Antioch to persevere to persevere to pursue in the Christian faith.

So suffering leads to that string of benefits to know the love of God poured into our hearts. Go to 2 Corinthians and chapter 4 verses 7 to 12 and verse 17 you'll find Paul there describing his own sufferings and those who were with him the challenges that they faced.

Let me just read these few verses for you as well. In 2 Corinthians 4 verses 7 to 12 but he says we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

[17:12] We are afflicted in every way but not crushed. We are perplexed but not driven to despair. We are persecuted but not forsaken. We are struck down but not destroyed.

Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. And he goes on like that. He is saying here are our sufferings here are afflictions.

This is the providence of God through which he is taking us but what is happening? The strength of God the life of God the glory of God the power of God is being shown through our lives as he takes us through these sufferings as his grace enables us to go through these sufferings and to continue with the Christian faith without faith in those sufferings so that it may be made evident as he goes on to say so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

Well isn't that what we would want? That it would not be ourselves that would come to the fore as we endure and experience sufferings but the life of Jesus.

There are passages you can go to Hebrews 12 deals with suffering as chastening. We went through the epistle of James in our Bible studies over the past year or so where you find in James 1 verses 2 and 4 and verse 12 where he talks about it counted all joy my brothers when you enter into sufferings temptations challenges.

[18:48] So here we are suffering as it belongs to God's purpose for his people so that we can learn dependence on God so that we can learn his statutes how meaningful his word is to all our circumstances and especially to our afflictions so that we can have that string of elements that he sets out for us in Romans 5 so that we can be prepared for glory itself in 2 Corinthians 4 verse 17 has that our light affliction which is but for a moment how can Paul say that his affliction is light look at what he is saying about it when he is describing it in that passage itself we are cast down we are afflicted we are sometimes all these sorts of different kinds of afflictions yet he is saying our light affliction which is but for a moment is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory God uses our trials our difficulties to prepare us to enable us he is saying to more and more appreciate his word the truth of his word and the afflictions themselves as God uses them are preparing us for this what he calls the succeeding weight of glory so there is the key you see as to

why Paul for all of these great afflictions that he is going through and he went through more than most of us will ever go through why is he able to call them light afflictions because he is measuring them against the weight of glory that awaits him to which these afflictions are actually bringing him and God is using these afflictions to produce finally that entrance to the kingdom as Acts 14 puts it where this weight of glory will actually be his and Paul is saying you cannot actually compare that weight of glory that far exceeds in its significance and weight the weight of any afflictions that we have on the way towards it now I know these things are passages of God's word our experiences don't necessarily fit all of these experiences all of these afflictions that are mentioned there but the principles are there and this especially that suffering belongs to God's purpose for his people secondly need to speed on suffering is essential to Christian development again the combination you have here encouraging them to continue in the faith and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God in other words continue in the faith not detached from the many tribulations through which we must go it's that teaching of the relationship between their sufferings and their final entrance to

God's kingdom that doesn't mean we actively seek suffering of course it's not something we set out to actually draw to ourselves we're talking here of God's providence God's plan for us everything that he has appointed from all eternity to be in the plan of our lives it's in the job description as Paul wrote as Jesus rather said to to the disciples in John 16 33 where he talks about his desire that they would have his peace in themselves and then he immediately says in this world you shall have tribulation on the one hand he's saying this is what I intend for you this is my purpose for you that you will have my peace in you but then in this world you shall have tribulation they're not contradictory in fact they're complementary in the way that God uses as we've said our afflictions in this world on the road to that final peace you might say that awaits us in heaven the entrance to the kingdom in that sense it's through tribulation tunnel it's there to some degree for every Christian for every believer some have more than others that's not in our hands that's in God's hand but the principle of it is there it's essential to Christian development

Spurgeon said there are no crown wearers in heaven that were not cross bearers on earth there are no crown wearers in heaven that were not cross wearers on earth by that he meant Christians taking up their cross following Jesus accepting what that meant not being put off by the fact they knew there would be difficulties in the way and you can follow that through in 1st Peter chapter 1 verses 3 and 7 and the combinations that you have there God's preparing has prepared this inheritance incorruptible undefiled unfading in heaven for you he says who are being kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation unto that final salvation though now he says if need be it is necessary you are going through a variety of temptations of tribulations you are experiencing these tribulations why?

so that the trial of your faith and by that he means the purifying of your faith like silver or gold is tried might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ you see all of that how much is woven into these passages of the tribulation that fits into God's purpose for his people that is essential to Christian development and that therefore we can look at in the Bible's teaching as essential for ourselves to see in a proper way now that takes me to think about how there is a contradiction to that in some forms of teaching you know that there is such a thing as the prosperity gospel mostly in America but it is in this country as well and it is in Africa and parts of the world where poverty is very much a feature of human life it is very attractive in those situations because the prosperity gospel or the word of faith movement as it is generally called say such things as that God intends that every Christian should pursue riches should seek to have enough money plenty money of course that is coming from many of these televangelists who are multi-millionaires some of them private jets huge mansions all over the place and this of course is what they are saying this is what one person said and of course it is not all about and the prosperity gospel is not all about just accumulating wealth and that that is actually what God intends for his people that you shouldn't feel guilty about asking

God for that no the prosperity gospel or this movement the word of faith movement also includes such ideas as that suffering and pain are actually detrimental to your progress you see that is the very opposite of what I have just said what we have just seen from the bible that suffering is actually essential in the way that God uses it towards the furthering of our experience towards our progress and Christian development but the health and wealth gospel one person has assessed it in this way in the forefront is the doctrine of the assurance of physical health and prosperity through faith in

short this means that health and wealth are the automatic divine right of all bible believing Christians and may be procreated by faith as part of this package of salvation and listen to this since the atonement of Christ includes not just the removal of sin but also the removal of sickness and poverty now they don't mean just the removal of that in heaven they mean the removal of that while you are in this life that is how you should see your right as a Christian to have these things got rid of by God's blessing so that you have no poverty left in your life so that no Christians in the world are subject to pain and distress they should seek the eradication of all that from your life that is God's intention that is God's will for you well you can see how that contradicts it's a damaging contradiction it's a destructive contradiction it's the opposite of this productive combination of afflictions and the grace of God towards our final glory it's the entire contradiction of that it's really in a sense it's just really worldliness isn't it because what is it that drives the world in its worldliness what is it that drives that godless world that world that doesn't care for god well it's pleasure driven isn't it you see you see that in people's lives it's pleasure driven that's what drives their lives and that's what's being imported into this kind of theology if it's worth calling that where it's really about pleasure it's really about happiness that's god's primary purpose for you in this life to make you happy to eradicate all pain from your life because pain is something that is bad it's unproductive it's a very sad condition a medical condition that's a very difficult condition known as [ 28 : 35 ] CIPA that's short for congenital insensitivity insensitivity to pain with anhydrosis that's a very long name for a condition that anhydrosis means the inability to sweat that's a very dangerous condition because your body overheats and those who have this condition though it's quite rare there have been many deaths through the body actually overheating and unable to cool down but the other part of it this congenital insensitivity to pain is something where those people who have that condition cannot actually feel pain they don't have the capacity to feel pain and that's why children who have this as well as adults you have to watch them very very carefully because they can't feel if a liquid is too hot to burn themselves with it they wouldn't feel that if they break their leg playing outside they wouldn't feel that they wouldn't know it was broken they would just carry on as far as they could all sorts of things that we actually know pain in relation to that tells us something is wrong or something is dangerous they don't have that

CIPA is insensitivity to pain have you apply that to the kind of afflictions pains in that sense that we need to undergo in this life the afflictions tribulations that were mentioned from the Bible just imagine if you didn't have that sensitivity to pain over sin over something wrong in your life over relationships gone bad over all sorts of things over disaster in your life over discouragement over unexpected events over things that really really hurt as our life goes on events that we would never have planned ourselves that have caused us huge distress imagine if you didn't have a sensitivity to the pain of that how difficult it would be to live with that to approach that to deal with that and sadly that's why many people instead of coming to

God with them instead of accepting help from Christians from the gospel from the church many people try to drown their sorrows they try to overcome and deaden the pain that's entered into their life sometimes it happens even through unemployment falling on hard times people turn to drugs people turn to alcohol people turn to various other means of trying to just dull that pain or maybe fill their life with all sorts of entertainment or sorts of excesses just to try and dull this pain but you know of course I'm not suggesting by that some types of pain you shouldn't take painkillers for physical pain certainly when you have things that really hurt in physical sense that doesn't mean you don't take anything for that not suggesting that for a moment or that you don't have help outside of what you have in the church for certain types of conditions mental conditions mental health issues not suggesting any of that pain but what I'm saying the point

I'm making is that pain is actually an advantage to us in this sense it tells us something is wrong and in a spiritual and moral sense that's how it works as well when something's gone wrong in your life morally or spiritually it hurts when God shows you your sin it hurts when a relationship's gone bad it hurts and the hurt that you have from that can really be a great advantage it should be a great advantage to us it tells us that something is here that needs to be fixed it can indeed be a life saver in that sense we don't have much of a choice in fact sometimes no choice at all over the events that come into our lives and God's providence in his wisdom I know we sometimes rightly say we bring many things upon ourselves and that's true but where God arranges our lives or has arranged our lives we don't control that we haven't made the arrangements we don't have that sort of control as to what events will or will not be in our lives but we do over our responses to them it's in our own

hands how we respond to them so

Hezekiah this morning where it says in 2nd Chronicles that God left him to his heart to see how it would be his reaction to these messengers from Babylon what we said there was that God had given him the information he knew enough to be able to deal with this properly and he didn't what we're saying here is that we don't have a choice over the arrangement of the events of our lives and the sovereignty of God that's fixed but then our response to it is something that needs to go by the teaching of the word of God by the help of other people and of course it is true isn't it that not everyone not even every Christian meets with pain and distress in a way that succumbs to that gives to God that reaction that's appropriate sometimes you find people turning very bitter anger coming to react against that providence of God in a way that's filled with anger with frustration with holding something against

[ 34 : 25 ] God for having done this to them all sorts of bad reactions doesn't necessarily mean that because we have affliction it's inevitably going to lead in the right direction for us or that we're going to inevitably deal with it properly what we're saying though is that when we have affliction it's really pretty much in our hands how we respond to that do we come to God with it do we lay it before God and seek his grace as Paul did as others did or do we kick against it do we rebel against it Samuel Rutherford has so many wonderful phrases in his letters and writings especially in those that deal with Christian experience one time he said this when I'm in the cellar of affliction I look for the Lord's choicest wines when I'm in the cellar of affliction I look for the Lord's choicest wines and I think he meant by that that if God has put him in the cellar of afflictions if he looks round him the best wines are available to him the grace of

Christ the strength of Christ the power of the Holy Spirit the word of God all of these things are there in the cellar of affliction to put our ourselves now we've been dealing with Christian affliction we've been dealing with how God uses affliction in the life of his people suffering belongs to God's purpose for them and secondly suffering is essential to Christian development that's Christian suffering but what about those who are not yet Christian who are not yet converted not yet given their lives over to Christ don't live by faith in him well Christian suffering ends when death begins all Christian suffering ends the moment death begins from that time on suffering is gone no more crying no pain no mourning no tears

God wipes away every tear from our eyes but if you're here tonight unsaved if you've not yet received or accepted Christ if you're not yet in Christ your death if you die like that will be the beginning of your sufferings no suffering in this world can compare with the sufferings of hell the torments of hell the agonies of hell I don't find that popular it's not something easy to say but I say it I hope with all the love and the concern and the must that I can muster for you as you listen to the gospel your number one priority is to be found in Christ to be saved because if you're not nothing of what we said in the study is yet yours that's something entirely outwith the scope of your life yet because we've been talking about

God using suffering and affliction in the life of his people if you're here and you're unsaved young people older ones doesn't matter your number one priority is to seek Christ to be found in Christ to accept Christ to trust in Christ then you can say as Paul said in his letter to the Romans for I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us let's pray gracious God help us we pray throughout the course of each day to look to you help us we pray when affliction comes our way when the challenges that you have appointed for us in this life are experienced by us help us we pray to realize that it is indeed through such tribulations that your people enter your kingdom help us to continue and to persevere in the faith but we know that there is no alternative to it that will in any way meet our need and that will in any way be finally beneficial for us bless us we pray oh lord under your word once again help us to believe it as your truth for Jesus sake amen let's conclude now our service this evening singing this time in psalm 65 66 sorry psalm 66 on page 83 and we're singing verses 10 to 17 page 83 at verse 10 you tested us oh god as silver is refined you laid sore burdens on our backs in chains we were confined you let us be oppressed we went through fire flood and fire but yet you brought us to a place which met our heart's desire verses 10 to 17 to god's praise you tested us oh god as silver is refined you missed the burden so nigh and in chains we were confined you let us be oppressed we went to flood and fire but yet you brought us to our place which men our hearts desire with all barns all fighting here can the courts

I'll tread I will fulfill my powers to you the promise yes yes yes I may I'll keep the man sighing when troubles in my way rams and rams and go I'll sacrifice and all near altar air come come all to hear I tell what he has done I cried to him with my mouth his praise was on my tongue was on my tongue [ 42 : 31 ] I'll go to the door to my right this evening now may grace mercy and peace from God the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit be our portion now and evermore amen so some so here it's as well when you I I think you I I think okay I I they they can you I can I it