



"The gem cannot be polished without friction."  
—Chinese Proverb

25-Jul-14

## Why Is Life So Hard? (Part One)

"Why is each day such a struggle?" We have all likely asked such a question during those times when it seems nothing is going right for us. And we probably already know its answer, yet it is easy for that answer—that perspective—to be crowded from our minds. As such, it is necessary to reflect periodically on struggle and hardship so we do not lose sight of what [God](#) is doing with us or begin to lose [faith](#) when our troubles mount.

In the midst of Paul's and Barnabas' evangelistic journeys, they had occasion to teach an invaluable principle:

And when they had preached [the gospel](#) to that city [Derbe] and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through *many tribulations* enter the [kingdom of God](#)." ([Acts 14:21-22](#); emphasis ours)

The disciples in Lystra and Iconium would have been young in the faith at this point, for Paul and [Barnabas](#) had only recently passed through the region. Though these disciples undoubtedly counted the cost before

committing themselves to [Jesus Christ](#) (see [Luke 14:25-33](#)), due to the turmoil the church was experiencing, the apostles thought it necessary to exhort them to "continue in the faith" that had been given to them. They spelled out to these church members in no uncertain terms that entrance into the Kingdom of God would not happen without many tribulations. The apostles, it seems, had to adjust the disciples' expectations and to reassure them that this was not something out of the ordinary but an integral part of their discipleship as they took up their metaphorical crosses and followed Christ.

The Greek word translated "tribulation" is *thlipsis*, and its basic meaning is "pressure," either literally or figuratively. It denotes the results of being squeezed or put into a narrow place. It is also translated as "trouble," "affliction," "distress," "burden," "anguish," and "persecution." The persecution the early church went through is not typical right now, at least not in the Western world. Even so, each of us has experienced pressure and felt as if we were being squeezed or put into a narrow place. We can all identify with affliction, distress, and anguish. We all have circumstances or burdens against which we struggle.

So when Paul speaks of tribulation, he refers to something that is quite common to us. It *can* mean persecution, but that is only one meaning among many. It is easy to think of tribulation only in terms of the time of "great tribulation" that Christ foretells ([Matthew 24:21](#), 29), yet *thlipsis* describes any of life's hardships.

This Greek word is used in the Parable of the Sower to describe what causes some to [fall away](#) from the truth: the pressures of life, particularly when they come as a result of living God's way ([Matthew 13:21](#); [Mark 4:17](#)). Without strong roots in the right soil, the harsh conditions—natural "pressures"—destroy the plant. The same word is used to describe the pain and labor of childbirth ([John 16:21](#)), the privations of Joseph while a slave in Egypt, and the distress caused by the famine in the land ([Acts 7:10-11](#)). It is used as a descriptor of God's wrath on those who do not obey the truth ([Romans 2:9](#)), but also to depict what Christ's followers will experience from [the world](#) ([John 16:33](#)). *Thlipsis* likewise illustrates the pitiable condition of the [widows and the fatherless](#) ([James 1:27](#)).

This is just a sampling of what can be included when Paul says, "We must through *many tribulations* enter the kingdom of God." He had to reassure these disheartened disciples that pressure, hardship, and anguish are not elements of life that suddenly disappear because of faith and God's calling. Along the same lines, Peter writes in [1 Peter 4:12](#) "not [to] think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you." In other words, affliction, distress, and various burdens are to be expected.

It is critical for us to grasp this, because an idea that comes from the spirit of this world asserts that, if we were godlier, we would have fewer hardships. It declares that God's favor because of our righteousness will result in "the good life," as it is commonly called. Yet, if this were true, the life of the Son of God would have been one of wealth, comfort, and ease, for surely His godliness would have inclined the Father to bless Him in every way! The gospel accounts support no such fantasy (see, for example, [Matthew 8:20](#)). While it is true that God blesses obedience, the idea that perfect obedience will yield a better physical lifestyle is incomplete at best, and only considers God's blessings from a very narrow perspective.

This same spirit drove Job's companions to conclude that, if Job were more righteous, he would not be suffering from his many afflictions. The truth, however, is that *God afflicted* that righteous man, and He did so, not because of disobedience, but because Job needed that tribulation in order to enter the Kingdom of God. God was not punishing Job, but rather preparing him, and that is an important distinction.

Thus, when we encounter some trouble, we should not be too quick to conclude that it is because God is against us. Perhaps it is, and we should always be ready to consider whether we are going astray. But the hardship may also have come because God is faithful to complete His work of transforming us, and that work cannot be done without great pressure.

Next time, we will consider more deeply the seeming paradox—from a human point of view—that our lives of either trials or blessings do not necessarily reflect our spiritual standing before God.

- David C. Grabbe

## **From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

### **[The Wearing Out of the Saints](#)**

by John O. Reid

Though we may feel worn out, we will ultimately prevail in the end. If the beast power succeeds in revising the calendar, it will make keeping God's laws more challenging and dangerously difficult. In modern Israel violent crime is on the rise. Abortion, pornography, same-sex marriage, secular progressivism, hopelessly corrupt government, denying God's sovereignty, are reaping a horrible crop of curses, further wearing out the saints. Satan has already captured the world, but he cannot succeed until he has compromised the Saints. We must resist the darkness, keeping our light shining at all times. As God's called out ones, we must warn or caution our brethren against danger, comforting one another, praying without ceasing, holding fast to and proving what is true, abstaining from evil, praying for the ministry, anticipating the reward at the end of the spiritual trek.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[The Other Great Tribulation](#)**

by Charles Whitaker

For centuries, Christians have anticipated the coming of the end-time Great Tribulation, prophesied by Jesus in Matthew 24. However, Charles Whitaker describes a historical great tribulation, comparing it to what has happened in the United States since the 1930s.

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