



# Let's Get Ready to Rapture

First Thessalonians 2:13-20

## "Your Next Stop: the Tribulation Zone"

*The Twilight Zone* used to freak me out. Not the show itself, but my feeling that, at any moment, I could without warning enter the Twilight Zone – “Another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound, but of mind, a journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination. That’s the signpost up ahead: Your next stop: The Twilight Zone.”

I hate to admit it... But I sometimes get a similar feeling as a Christian. It's not the Twilight Zone I'm concerned about; it's the Tribulation Zone! It's that strange dimension you enter without warning in which your world turns upside down with difficulties and dilemmas, troubles and tragedies, problems and pain. That's the signpost up ahead – and it says "suffering."

Our text would be a great monologue to describe the Tribulation Zone. Paul used several words to describe what you can expect as a Christian in this world:

1. In verse fourteen of chapter two, "suffered" is the same word the writers of the Gospels use to describe the sufferings of Jesus.

2. In verse fifteen, "persecuted" is a word that means *driven out* and *rejected*. "Contrary" is used to describe winds that blow against a ship to hinder its progress.
3. In verse eighteen, "hindered" describes a road broken up before you, rendering it impassable.
4. In verse three of chapter three, "afflictions" is *pressure from circumstances*.

You're going to enter this zone a lot. One of the first things the apostle Paul explained to new believers was that "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

We should follow his example and let people know that "in the world you will have tribulation."

Now understand we are talking about tribulation in general, not the Great Tribulation that is coming upon the entire planet at the end of the age.

You receive aid in your tribulations – spiritual aid from at least three sources: the empowering of the Scriptures, the example of the saints, and the expectation of the Savior.

You have the **empowering of the Scriptures** as an aid:

1 Thessalonians 2:13 For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.

The Thessalonians both "received" and "welcomed" God's Word.

- "Received" means that they heard it preached.
  - "Welcomed" means that they accepted it into their hearts.
- There was a transfer from the hearing to the heart.

Have you done that? Have you transferred God's Word from hearing to heart? You're told how in the last word of the verse: "believe."

If you believe then God's Word will "effectively work" in you. God's Word has within it the power to accomplish what it commands.

Jesus once commanded a crippled man to stretch out his hand – the very thing the man could not do. He believed the Word of God and was empowered to do it and was made whole (Mark 3:1-5).

The Word of God has within it the empowering you need to remain steady rather than be shaken.

You have the **example of the saints** as an aid:

1 Thessalonians 2:14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans,

1 Thessalonians 2:15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men,

1 Thessalonians 2:16 forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost.

The "Judean" "countrymen" Paul referred to were the Jews. Most of the "persecution" that dogged Paul's missionary journeys came either directly or indirectly from the Jews.

Sadly, the Jews had a long history of religious persecution: They had for centuries "killed... their own prophets" and had recently "killed... the Lord Jesus."

Paul is not being anti-Semitic; he was not bigoted or prejudiced. This was a simple statement of the facts. When he said the Jews "killed... the Lord Jesus," it is not to exclude the Romans who put Him to death... Nor is it to exclude the entire human race who put Him to death and for whom He died on the Cross.

Paul said the Jews were filling up "the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost." There is a lot of end-times prophecy in that statement! Having rejected Jesus as their promised Messiah, God temporarily set-aside the nation of Israel for discipline. Their discipline included the destruction of their Temple and Jerusalem in 70AD; it continues today; it will culminate in the future seven-year Tribulation on the earth.

When Jesus returns to earth at the end of the Tribulation, "all Israel will be saved" as they "look upon Him Whom they pierced" and accept Jesus as their Messiah.

In the mean time: Jews who became Christians were persecuted by "their own countrymen," their fellow Jews.

Most of the believers in Thessalonica were Gentiles and they were being persecuted by their own countrymen, fellow Gentiles.

The point of all this is that the Thessalonians were "imitators" of the example of saints before them – the example of suffering persecution for the sake of the Gospel.

It may sound weird but believers are to rejoice when persecuted because they are being treated just like the saints that preceded them and just like their Lord, Jesus Christ. At one point in the Book of Acts, after having been beaten and warned never to speak again about Jesus, the disciples are described as "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41).

Your afflictions – especially persecutions because you are a believer – put you in the best company, among the greatest people the world has ever seen. They are described in the Book of Hebrews by saying "of whom the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:38).

Kirk Douglas starred as Spartacus, the gladiator who led other gladiators in a revolt against Rome, in the movie of the same name. You might remember the film's ending. All the gladiators are captured and are being put to death. The Romans will stop if Spartacus simply identifies himself, so they can kill him. As he is about to reveal himself, all the gladiators, one-by-one, stand and shout, "*I'm Spartacus!*" They gladly identify with him as their suffering leader.

In a sense, we do that when we suffer affliction like the saints who have preceded us; and like our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

You have the **expectation of the Savior** as an aid:

1 Thessalonians 2:17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire.

1 Thessalonians 2:18 Therefore we wanted to come to you - even I, Paul, time and again - but Satan hindered us.

"Hindered" means *to break up* or *to cut-in*. You hinder the progress of an army by breaking-up the road ahead of them; you hinder the pace of a runner by cutting-in front of him. Paul had a sense that some of his afflictions were satanic interference.

Satan is called "the god of this world." He is "the prince of the power of the air" who goes about "as a roaring lion, seeking whom he might devour." Nonbelievers are said to be taken captive by him to do his will. He is a liar; a thief; a murderer.

He's not alone in his nefarious work. One-third of a vast number of angels joined him in rebelling against God and are now organized in hierarchies of principalities and powers to spread chaos on the earth. They are the rulers of the darkness of this age. They are the hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

The Gospels describe many of the afflictions and sufferings people faced as directly connected to the devil or his demons. Jesus spent a great deal of time exorcizing demons from people or healing them of demonically caused diseases.

There is most definitely a war going on. It's ultimate end is the elimination of Satan and his demons.

1. First, at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to the earth, the devil and his demons will be cast into the Abyss, incarcerated for one thousand years.

2. Then, after the one thousand years, the devil (and presumably his demons) will be released, lead a failed rebellion and be cast alive in the Lake of Fire created especially for their punishment.

In the mean time God allows Satan a limited influence to "hinder" us. In our minds, God's limits and permission are too liberal. I freely admit the suffering in our world bothers me.

Why does God permit some things but prohibit other things? I usually frame it as the James & Peter problem. James was arrested and beheaded. Immediately afterwards, Peter was arrested and miraculously freed from prison by an angel before he could be beheaded.

Why? There's no way to answer that question this side of eternity.

In a sense it doesn't matter why. Paul would later explain that it was better to die, to be absent from the body and to be present with The Lord. But if you didn't die, then you were to be dedicated to serving The Lord as His soldier.

A few weeks ago I used the illustration of the Normandy Invasion of World War Two. Everyone understands it was an absolutely brilliant strategy and that it was necessary in order for the Allied Forces to win the war.

But the commanders knew going in that there would be heavy casualties - both military and civilian. They proceeded from the position of acceptable losses.

Since we are in a very real spiritual warfare, we can expect losses. But in our case all losses are gains because we are always more than conquerors through Jesus Christ.

Remember, too, that the weapons and strategies of our warfare are not fleshly but are spiritual. We 'win' by exhibiting things like meekness, gentleness, kindness, forgiveness and the like. We 'win' the way Jesus won - by being crucified daily, by bearing His Cross and following Him.

Do we not consider martyrdom a great victory? We do.

1 Thessalonians 2:19 For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?

1 Thessalonians 2:20 For you are our glory and joy.

The Thessalonians were aided in their afflictions by the expectation of seeing Jesus. The "presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming" is a reference to the resurrection and rapture of the Church. The believers of the Church Age will be caught-up to heaven – resurrected if dead, raptured if still alive; then rewarded by Jesus and reunited with their believing loved ones. It will be a scene of incredible rejoicing.

Sometimes your afflictions are so severe that the expectation of seeing your Savior is all you have left. **It is enough!**

Stephen epitomizes this for us. The first martyr of the Christian era, as his body was being stoned to death he saw Jesus. He had the face of an angel.

It was enough.