Through Tribulation into the Kingdom: Rethinking the "Great Tribulation"

Introduction

Among the most debated passages in the New Testament are those that deal with tribulation and suffering. Dispensational teachers often argue that Christians will be "raptured" before a future seven-year tribulation, escaping the trials that will come upon the earth. Central to this claim is the idea that Jesus foretold a distinct period called *The Great Tribulation,* which they say is yet to come. But when we turn to Scripture itself, we find a different picture. The Bible consistently presents tribulation as the normal expectation of the Christian life, and the "great tribulation" mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 24 is best understood as a prophecy fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Tribulation in the Christian Life

Acts 14:22 records Paul and Barnabas strengthening the early disciples:
"Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God."

Here tribulation is not a unique, end-times event but the ordinary pathway into God's kingdom. The Greek word *thlipsis* refers broadly to pressure, affliction, or distress. This aligns with other New Testament passages:

- John 16:33 – *“In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”*
- Romans 8:17 – *“If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.”*
- 2 Timothy 3:12 – *“Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”*

From the apostles’ perspective, tribulation was not something to be escaped but an integral part of following Christ.

I. The Dispensational Construction of a “Great Tribulation”

So where do dispensationalists get the idea of a seven-year tribulation distinct from the normal sufferings of believers? The system is pieced together from several passages:

- Daniel 9:27 is interpreted as a future “week” (seven years) of tribulation.
- Matthew 24:21 is lifted out of its first-century context and placed into that future seven-year framework.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 is treated as proof of a pre-tribulation rapture, though the passage never says the timing is “before.”
- Revelation 6–19 is read as a chronological description of this seven-year period.

But notice: the Bible never uses the phrase “seven-year tribulation.” That language and framework belong to dispensational interpretation, not to the inspired text itself.

II. Jesus' "Great Tribulation" in Matthew 24

In Matthew 24:21 Jesus does speak of a "great tribulation":
"For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be."

The context is decisive. Jesus had just foretold the destruction of the temple (24:2). The disciples asked, "When shall these things be?" (24:3). His response, including verse 21, is tied to the judgment coming upon Jerusalem. He even set a clear time marker:
"Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" (24:34).

That generation — the one alive when Jesus spoke — saw the fulfillment in A.D. 70.

III. The Fulfillment in A.D. 70

When Rome besieged Jerusalem under Titus, the devastation was unparalleled in Jewish history. The Jewish historian Josephus records that over one million perished in the siege (*Wars of the Jews* 6.9.3). The city was torn apart by famine, civil war, and mass crucifixions. The temple itself was destroyed and left desolate, exactly as Jesus had declared.

Josephus describes the horrors in detail:

- **Starvation and Cannibalism:**
  "There was a certain woman that dwelt beyond Jordan, her name was Mary… She slew her son, and then roasted him,

and ate the one half of him, and kept the other half by her concealed.” (*Wars* 6.3.4)

- **Mass Crucifixions:**
  “So great was their number, that room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies.” (*Wars* 5.11.1)
- **Unparalleled Carnage:**
  “The miseries of all mankind from the beginning of the world, if they be compared with those of the Jews, are not so considerable as they were.” (*Wars* 1.12, preface)

These firsthand accounts show just how literally Jesus’ prophecy was fulfilled. The “great tribulation” was not a distant event in our future but the covenantal judgment on Jerusalem for rejecting her Messiah.

IV. The Kingdom Through Tribulation

The apostles and the early church did not expect escape from tribulation but endurance through it. That is why Paul said we enter the kingdom “through much tribulation.” The dispensational claim that believers will be spared tribulation by a secret rapture contradicts the entire New Testament witness.

Whether tribulation is general (daily suffering and persecution) or climactic (as in Jerusalem’s destruction), the pattern is the same: believers are called to persevere in faith, not to hope for an escape hatch.

V. Conclusion

The teaching of a pre-tribulation rapture rests on a fragile chain of assumptions that Scripture itself does not support. The New Testament consistently teaches that tribulation is the believer's path into the kingdom, not something avoided. And when Jesus spoke of a "great tribulation," He was pointing to the unique covenantal judgment that fell upon Jerusalem in A.D. 70 — an event vividly confirmed by the testimony of Josephus.

Therefore, Acts 14:22 and Matthew 24:21 stand together as a testimony against the idea of an escape from suffering. Tribulation is not a detour around God's kingdom; it is the very road that leads into it.
