

PART TWO: SUFFERING – A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Prologue: How Long?

(This prayer was written on Monday, 3rd September 1990. It expresses the need to call upon God when in a state of despair.)

How long?
How long?
How long oh God
Must I await your deliverance
From my situation?

Why do you hold back your blessing
Are you renegeing on your promises
Will there be no good news at all?¹
Is there nothing constructive planned?

Lord, Lord, Lord
Do something!
If you don't act
My whole vocation will be finished
Don't let me fall at the final hurdle –
Don't cause it to collapse at the last minute –
Oh God, don't allow me to be hounded by defeat

Lord how long must this agonizing wait continue
Before you provide a definite answer to my prayers?
Are you not faithful to your Word?
Are you not to be trusted?
Are you not able to honour your promises?

Of course you are more than able Lord
Because you say so –
And because your Bible says so –
And because I have seen your acts of mighty intervention
At certain times in my life
But how long is it before you will keep faith with me
And clear the way to reform your Church?

Lord! Don't you see
That after knowledge of you
And desire to reform your church
Represents the deepest desire of my heart
Please hurry and begin to fulfil my desire

Father, Abba Father
I can't take any more.
In your sovereign grace
Please bring to an end
This trial of faith

¹ At the time I was awaiting replies to job applications which never seemed to come

2.1 Exposition of Deuteronomy 4:30

'When thou art in tribulation and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the Lord thy God and shalt be obedient to his voice...'

Forming part of God's covenant promise with His people, these words assume that tribulation is simply one of the many constituents of godly life. This is apparent in the opening word *'When'* as opposed to *if 'thou art in tribulation.'* The tribulation itself is can be manifested in a variety of ways, as the words *'all these things'* indicate, whilst the latter part of the sentence *'are come upon thee'* emphasises its dogged inevitability. The word *'may'* does not come into it at all. The godly life is indeed like a bed of roses - beneath the flowers are many thorns!

Puzzlement is created by the words *'in the latter days.'* What do they mean? Moses most probably had the latter course of Israelite history in mind. However, the Holy Spirit (who inspired these words) had the whole of the future course of God's people in mind - right until the end of the world. Here it is appropriate to recall that Christ's return will be preceded by a great tribulation.

For every Christian, tribulation provokes either one of two responses; firstly to turn to God in heartfelt repentance and to continue in devoted obedience to Him. The second more negative response can be found in such passages as Hosea 6:1-7 where repentance, which does not bear fruit in a fairly consistent loyalty to God is clearly not true repentance at all. These two very different responses to tribulation are seen in the words *'If thou turn to the Lord thy God and SHALL be obedient.'* The fact that such a choice is real is shown by the word *'if.'* The Christian is faced with a choice to repent or not to repent.

Interestingly, the last three words of the verse *'unto his voice'* contain the reassuring implication that every believer has the privilege of hearing God speak to them, as long as they are receptive and do not harbour any serious sin. It is possible to have first hand knowledge of God's will, His voice being heard through any number of channels including the Scriptures, inner witness, the gifts of the Spirit, the advice of mature Christians, the witness of the local church, the general flow of circumstances and last, but not least, the heaven-sent faculty of commonsense and wisdom.

From this study, it is firmly established that TRIBULATION IS THE PROVOKER OF REPENTANCE AND THE TEACHER OF OBEDIENCE.

2.2 Exposition of Judges 10:14

'Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your tribulation.'

This challenge was made after hostile Ammonite invaders had just crossed the River Jordan and were threatening the panic stricken Israelites when. It reflects God's angry response to Israel's repeated backsliding into idolatry. He knew full well that their man-made gods offered them no hope at a time like this.

The opening word *'Go'* strikes the appropriate tone of confrontation, having in it a real note of rebuke. In its amplified sense it would mean *'Go away from me.'* Of even less comfort are the next few words which read *'and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen.'* Here *'cry'* is equivalent to *'go and cry for help and deliverance from your useless self-chosen gods.'* The use of the description *'gods'* shows how polytheistic the Israelite religion had become (where many different deities were worshipped); moreover, these false gods were closely associated with the forces of nature, their festivals often characterised by licentious debauchery. Significantly, these words deny them any divine reality. They can wield no authority and are utterly powerless.

The words *'ye have chosen'*, reveal that idol worship stems from human initiative – the real God having been replaced by man-made fabrications and satanic counterfeits. However in the genuine faith of Christianity it is always God who takes the lead. He is the head of the

body the Church. These others 'gods' have become a convenient replacement for the real God. They meet the needs of a selfish humanity.

'*Let them deliver you*' is a sarcastic rebuff, these 'gods' total inability to meet real human needs. Their power is non-existent and lies only in the minds of their slavish followers. The words '*in the time of your tribulation*' refer to this particular historical setting where the Israelites are suffering due to the Ammonite incursion into their land. Their ordeal holds a timeless lesson in that it often takes some form of tribulation to pinpoint the uselessness of man-made idols. False opinions, which have hitherto been fervently clung to, are demolished and a much-needed change in character produced.

The final outcome for the Israelites turns out to be a favourable one. God does, in the end, save them through a new leader, Jephthah the Gileadite, who successfully defeats the Ammonites. However, this passage still firmly stands as a warning that should a person foolishly persist in worshipping a false god – whatever it may be – with no willingness to repent, then a point is reached where the Lord says '*If you love your idols so much, go to them for help and don't come grovelling to me.*' Wilful idolaters may try and turn to God to bale them out of the consequences of their sin, only to find that it is too late, He is no longer with them. In some ways the Book of Lamentations is a running commentary on such a position.

From this study, it is firmly established that TRIBULATION IS A MEANS WHEREBY GOD DESTROYS ANY IDOLATRY AMONGST HIS PEOPLE.

2.3 Exposition of Matthew 13:21

'*Yet hath he not root in himself, but endureth for a little while; for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.*'

Responding to his disciples' request, (recorded two verses previously) Jesus is now engaged in interpreting the parable of the sower to them. These words constitute part of that response. Evidently our Lord's intention was to encourage his followers to be so deeply grounded in their faith they could then go on to firmly withstand any future troubles.

The opening '*Yet hath he not root*' refers to the person who makes only a shallow profession of trust in Jesus. Their willingness to become a Christian may have been prompted by the desire to gain respectability, emotional relief or social acceptance within a church group. (The latter being especially the case with young people.) Whether they ever had a real saving relationship with God at the outset is debatable. Such superficial profession are a bane of modern Christianity, especially those initially showing great enthusiasm for Godly things. Sadly however, the novelty soon wears off the enthusiasm wanes and vanishes and other life events become more of a priority. This sequence of events definitely shows that any initial love for God or his people was indeed shallow and fleeting.

More specifically, the use of the word '*root*' means to be '*rooted in obedience*' and '*fully committed*' to growing in the faith through such visible aids as Bible reading, the Sacraments, private prayer and fellowship in the local church. '*In himself*' further underlines that such commitment to Jesus must be directly first-hand; a second-hand faith relying upon the godliness of others is never sufficient. Hence, the chief characteristic of a person, '*lacking root*' is that, although they may be willing to make a verbal profession of Christianity they are, in the long-term, unwilling to be totally committed to it.

'*But endureth for a while*' starkly illustrates the '*fair weather*' nature of those content to drift along with Christianity – as long as it affords obvious comfort. They want a religion of all joy and no discipline. These people may appear to be devout but their subsequent desertion shows the shallowness of their faith.

The next portion of the passage, '*for WHEN tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word*' refers mainly to persecution suffering which is regarded as an unavoidable consequence of following Jesus. Note once again the use of the definite '*when*' rather than

the more problematic *‘if.’* The latter part of the sentence *‘because of the word’* may refer not only to Jesus himself (because *‘Word’* is one of his titles recorded in John 1:1) but could also include the active preaching of the Gospel from the *‘word’* of God, the Holy Scriptures.

The next portion of this verse, *‘by and by he is offended’* delineates the true nature of the problem. The nominal believer really has embraced a totally incorrect impression of Christianity and has therefore entered the faith for the wrong reasons. This has inevitably led to unrealistic expectations, which become dashed, provoking a sense of anger and the desire to give up on this faith, which obviously *‘doesn’t work.’* Here the word *‘offended’* conjures up the picture of someone being hurt, taking umbrage with the Almighty and then withdrawing from His presence in a bitter, furious sulk.

Many things may be deduced from the statement, *‘by and by he is offended.’* However, only two will be further enlarged upon. Firstly, lies the inherent warning that followers of Jesus must be deeply imbedded in their faith through regular obedience to His will. During any future upheavals those Christians most likely to give up on their faith will be those having always insisted on THEIR own way rather than His. Secondly, it is the responsibility of local churches to faithfully witness to Jesus in their evangelism, to ensure a correct presentation of the whole Gospel. A realistic account of what the Christian life involves in both blessings and hardships must be given to prospective converts. Should a profession of faith be made it will then have been made for the right reasons, with a full knowledge of what real discipleship means. Subsequently, those looking mainly for their own gain will, on the whole, be pruned out right at the beginning.

From this study, it is firmly established that TRIBULATION TESTS THE SINCERITY OF A PERSON’S CHRISTIAN PROFESSION.

2.4 Exposition of John 16:33

‘These things I have spoken to you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.’

Dark shadows are looming over Jesus as He utters these final comforting words to His disciples just before the traumatic events of His arrest and crucifixion. With wonderful graciousness, our Lord was not only preparing them for that terrible ordeal but for all of the future sufferings through which they would pass during the course of their lives.

‘These things’ refer to the contents of this last speech before his crucifixion, but they also cover the totality of his teachings from the commencement of his ministry onwards. For its part, the phrase *‘I have spoken to you’* focuses upon Christ’s absolute authority. Unlike other rabbis of his day he did not feel the need to buttress his message with learned quotes from respected authorities. *‘That in me’* refers to the disciples’ marvellous union with Christ. This is the same union, which constitutes the source of well being experienced by all obedient Christians.

The word *‘might’* in *‘ye might have peace’* seems almost too vague or uncertain until one realises that it is a conditional promise dependent upon persistent faithfulness to Christ. Those Christians who choose to continually disobey God know little of this peace. They seem always to be at strife within themselves and with others. Their inner disposition is one of being bitterly critical and argumentative about silly issues. So the word *‘might’* only ever turns into *‘will’* when there is a genuine desire to follow the will of God.

Peace itself is not simply a lack of inner conflict but rather the wholeness or spiritual well-being experienced through yielding completely to Christ. Through this peace the accusations of conscience are quietened, distracting thoughts reduced and faith given to gradually know Jesus in the silent, reflective stillness of the human heart.

For the remainder of this verse, Jesus displays his supreme realism when He states *‘In the world ye SHALL have tribulation.’* There are no *‘ifs’* or *‘buts’* about it. In scripture the term *‘world’* is defined in a number of ways. At one level it refers to God’s created world, the planet

earth; but a more likely definition of 'world' in this context is the society of fallen people with whom we all have to do. Certainly, the world of the early Roman Empire was very foreboding, as any number of historical sources would testify. With incredible courage the early Christians were to confront this world with all of its vested interests.

Yet Jesus is far too positive a person to end on a note of solemn warning without offering any trace of hope. With buoyant exaltation He makes the astonishing claim '*but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*' He is right there amidst all of the tribulations of his people, giving them the strength to cope, because He conquered the world through his perfect sacrifice at Calvary. In a mysterious way tribulation is pictured as a means of reinforcing the faith of believers as they endeavour to tackle it by drawing upon divine resources. In Christ's hands it is possible for suffering to act as a stimulant to spiritual growth.

From this study, it is firmly established that CHRISTIANS MAY HAVE PEACE AMIDST TRIBULATION.

2.5 Exposition of Acts 14:22

'Confirming the souls of the disciples and exhorting them to continue in the faith and that we must go through much tribulation to enter the Kingdom of God.'

Once again tribulation is assumed to be an inherent part of the Christian life. Here the Apostles are consolidating the faith of a number of new churches by preparing them to face persecution. Indeed a mood of tension and impending trouble seems to pervade this whole verse. This contrasts starkly with the Prosperity Gospel of today, which in its more crude forms, seems to teach '*We must accumulate bank balances and shiny new cars to enter the Kingdom of God.*'

'Confirming the souls of the disciples' means psychologically reinforcing the faith of those believers who are totally committed to Christ – the emphasis being not so much on preaching the Gospel to unbelievers but upon maintaining the faith of those already having made a profession. They are to be taught in a way that is both fervent and realistic - the enthusiasm being portrayed by the phrase '*and exhorting them.*'

To '*continue in the faith*' seems to indicate that the Apostles feared the possibility of desertion, either through the pressures of direct persecution or the misleading enticement of false teaching. They are repeating the work Jesus did with His early disciples; preparing a group of believers to confront tribulation. This too is a work badly needed in the church today.

No attempt whatsoever is made to present a one-sided favourable aspect of Christianity, as the verse explicitly proclaims '*we MUST go through much tribulation to enter the Kingdom of God.*' Outbreaks of tribulation are viewed as being both doggedly persistent and varied in expression. Advancement in the Christian life is nearly always through the storm.

The term '*Kingdom of God*' is best defined in its narrow sense as pointing to the Christian's future glorious state in heaven. In the earthly sphere Christians already belong to that Kingdom which has its visible revelation in the Church. Their context confirms that they were only being addressed to believers. Unbelievers were not being considered.

Influenced by this passage it is possible to conclude that an essential hallmark of authentic Christian preaching is that it prepares God's people for hardship. Any preaching which fails to do this is simply irresponsible because it leaves Christians with only a very shallow grounding in the faith. Such shallowness has disastrous consequences (as mentioned in the exposition on Matthew 12:21). At the risk of being repetitive, great care must be taken not to misrepresent the Gospel message in any way. Its true and stark message should be clear and unambiguous. People are to enter the Kingdom of God with eyes wide open. Any misrepresentation of the Gospel message leads only to a shallow, unsatisfactory faith. Truly, the ministry of Gospel preaching entails awesome responsibilities.

From this study, it is firmly established that TRIBULATION IS AN INEVITABLE FEATURE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AND IS BEST ADEQUATELY PREPARED FOR.

2.6 Exposition of Romans 5:3

'And not only so but we glory in tribulations also, knowing that tribulation worketh patience.'

With his colossal knowledge of suffering in all of its many forms, Paul is stressing its positive aspects to those Christians who, within as short a time span as a decade (in AD 64) would suffer cruel persecution under the Emperor Nero.

'And not only so' links this verse with the previous two verses, where Paul had stressed the concept of justification by faith and of free access to God's unlimited grace. Christians can endure tribulations because they are God-reliant and not self-reliant.

'But we glory in tribulations also' seems at first sight to be rather a strange affirmation – *'glorious'* would surely be the last thing to feel during a time of trial. Had Paul fallen victim to some weird martyr's complex, borne out of an unhealthy masochistic desire for self-mortification? The answer is a resounding *'No'*, especially given Paul's own warnings against such false teaching and behaviour (Philippians 3:3-4 and Colossians 2:16-18). What does appear to be the case is that Paul, with great insight, has discerned that Christ is actively at work amidst tribulation. It was a sure sign that his faith was real and that Jesus was approving it by purifying it through redemptive suffering.

'Knowing that tribulation worketh patience': the word *'knowing'* conveys the sense of being absolutely certain that tribulation teaches patience. Moreover, alongside *'patience,'* it also teaches *'experience,' 'hope'* and all of the other positive qualities of the Christian life. Undeniably tribulation acts as a teacher, expanding the mind and developing the character far more effectively than any artificial stimulant could ever do. Refined by their sufferings Christians learn to both desire and do the right thing.

By drawing upon the resources of heaven, followers of Jesus need to cultivate a vision of the work God is doing both IN and THROUGH tribulation. If the problems themselves become the focal point this inevitably leads to a collapse into self-pitying despair and negativity. The Christian concerned becomes emotionally drained, which then has a negative effect upon those within their sphere of influence. Clear vision is necessary to encourage people to stand firm in all of their problems. In Paul's case his tribulations included beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, famines, false teachers, unstable churches and, in the end, martyrdom. A review of some portions of his letters to the Corinthians would make for sobering reading. If by divine grace, Paul could stand in tribulation, then so can any Christian. We have the same heavenly resources to draw upon.

From this study, it is firmly established that TRIBULATION CAN - UNDER GOD'S HAND - BE THE AUTHOR OF PATIENT RESILIENCE.

2.7 Exposition of Revelation 2:10

'Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer. Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison that ye may be tried and ye SHALL have tribulation for ten days. Be thou faithful until death and I will give thee a crown of life.'

This sombre prediction is not at first sight guaranteed to bring joy to a church. In fact, it is questionable how acceptable such a prophecy would be in most western Pentecostal churches of today. Written around AD 95, when the author was banished to the Isle of Patmos, this prediction was addressed to one particular local church at Smyrna, which was being afflicted by persecution and suffering from a number of quarters.

'Fear none of these things' brings out the writer's concern that the Smyrna congregation should take care not to respond to trouble in a panic-stricken manner. Fretting over suffering is always worse than useless. Once more the inevitability of tribulation is presupposed in the

words; *'in which thou shalt suffer.'* The word used is the imperative *'shalt'* and not the more hesitant *'may.'* In this particular case, their sufferings would involve many of the brutalities, which the Roman Empire was prone to inflict upon its dissidents.

A demonic element is pointed out in *'behold the devil shalt cast come of you into prison that ye may be tried.'* Angered by their faithful witness, Satan wanted to utterly destroy this Christian presence in that region. Also contained in these words is a sad comment upon the social conditions of the early Roman Empire, which felt the need to pick on scapegoats from defenceless segments of the population. So system suffering played a part in Smyrna's ordeal too. The word *'tried'* shows that these Christians were to be tested by persecution to see if their faithfulness to Jesus was genuine. Hence this suffering was to be redemptive - God intended to bring good out of it. Both Satan and the Roman Empire were being used by God to work out His purposes.

'And ye SHALL have tribulation for ten days' demonstrates that the writer was keen to emphasise that all tribulation is under God's control. No tribulation ever takes place without divine permission. God sets restraints upon it in that the suffering was to be contained within a very short time period. This parallels with the first two chapters of the Book of Job, where Satan is portrayed as being on a very tight leash, just like a ferocious, snarling but restrained guard dog.

Imagine the furore created in many modern churches if someone with a proved and recognised prophetic ministry wrote to his or her pastor saying, *'Some of your congregation are going to be murdered horribly along with yourself, but the remainder will be expected to retain an effective Christian witness throughout.'* That, in effect, is what was said in *'be thou faithful unto death.'* *'Faithful'* meant maintaining a persistent, firm and loving Christian witness in total obedience to Jesus; whilst death in the Roman Empire could mean anything from simple beheading to being burnt alive or fed to wild animals. Those having read Paul's words would have known his intention was to warn the Smyrna Church against giving up in despair - always the temptation when pressure increases. If it becomes habitual then backsliding is inevitable. One wonders what he and the believers of Smyrna would have thought of wealthy Christians today who give up at the slightest trial, retreating into a brooding shell of self-destructive isolationism.

Thankfully, at the end of the tribulation comes the good news, *'and I will give you the crown of life.'* These words promise a definite reward for continuing faithfulness and act as an incentive to perseverance. What this reward actually constituted is open to question. It may have referred to some gift or blessing, which in itself would distinguish those in heaven who had been called to martyrdom when on earth. However, it could also have a wider application and be a guarantee to Smyrna that this suffering would bear fruit in renewed life and vigour amongst the congregation. Opportunities for further service would arise and a harvest of converts drawn in. The word *'crown'* implies that Christians enjoy a kingly status both here and with Christ in heavenly glory. Like Romans 5:3 this passage shows how necessary it is to retain a clear idea of the work God is doing through suffering.

There is much about the prophetic ministry in these words. The common task of a prophet is to prepare God's people for tribulation by revealing what is going on in the spiritual realm and to provide guidance on how best to cope with that tribulation. Here the saying *'to be forewarned is to be forearmed'* is most apt. Of equal significance is that the role of the prophet is to actively identify with the sufferings of the people. Neither John, the author of Revelation, Jesus, nor any of the great prophets in the Old Testament sought to avoid the identifying with those whom they ministered. They were there right in the thick of the battle, sometimes giving their lives as a result. A greater contrast with most present day armchair critics of Church affairs could not be imagined. A true prophet never allows himself to be placed upon an unapproachable pedestal and neither does he offer wordy, pompous criticisms from lofty, academic perches.

From this study, it is firmly established that TRIBULATION CAN LEAD TO RENEWED LIFE BEING ENJOYED BY WHOLE CHURCHES AS WELL AS BY INDIVIDUAL CHRISTAINS.

2:8 Other References

1 Samuel 10:19, 26:24; Matthew 24:21-29; Mark 13:24; Romans 2:9, 8:35, 12:12; II Corinthians 1:4; Ephesians 3:13; I Thessalonians 3:4; II Thessalonians 1:4-6, Revelation 1:9, 7:14

2.9 Where now the Prosperity Gospel?

Nothing could be more hostile to the teachings of the Prosperity Gospel than the seven aforementioned passages. By showing how closely tribulation is interwoven with the Christian life, they completely undercut the Prosperity Gospel's case that believers in Jesus have an automatic right to continued health, wealth and happiness. Associated with this error is the '*Name it and claim it*' teaching (often called Positive Confession or more colloquially '*Blab it and grab it*') which promises that if an individual names anything they want in prayer, they can claim it in the name of Jesus and then they will subsequently get it, be that object a shining new car, a mansion by the sea or deliverance from a fatal disease. A digression into this subject is required because by promising '*peace, peace, when there is no peace*' the Prosperity Gospel shows certain similarities to particular false teachings condemned in Jeremiah 6:14 and 8:11. Even worse, it undermines the capacity of many churches to cope with any future tribulation most likely to befall them. How it does this will now be examined.

To begin with, the Prosperity Gospel woefully misrepresents the Christian faith by appealing to selfish motives. The Kingdom of God is presented in only glowing terms and the Christian life as a happy '*joyride*'. It does not portray a true picture and fails to tell people that God promises to provide for '*needs*' and not '*wants*.' It simply appeals to basic human greed and the desire for personal status. Prosperity preaching bypasses the claims of Jesus to total obedience and concentrates only upon what can be materially gained from paying him lip service. This blasphemous superficiality is presented as an insurance policy against all ills. Should the policy fail (and of course it will and does) many professing Christians give up in bitter disillusionment and leave the Church. This is the exact situation Jesus warned against in Matthew 13:21. The Prosperity Gospel presents new converts with the shallowest of roots in the faith. Is it any wonder they so quickly backslide?

In a way, the Prosperity Gospel is symptomatic of a relapse into the Old Testament view of wealth, where divine blessings were seen largely in terms of material abundance. If for some reason this abundance was not forthcoming, then it was solely attributed to personal sin. However, even in the Old Testament it wasn't as well defined as that. Take Job's suffering for example – his personal sin was definitely not a causal factor and his friends were severely rebuked by God for arguing that it was. It is with a horrified sense of credulity that today one sees fellowships (that are supposedly based on God's word) repeating exactly the same error. In the realm of pastoral care, the most serious charge to be made against the Prosperity Gospel is that it brings into needless condemnation those Christians who are seen as somehow failing to gain the necessary material '*blessings*' (whatever these maybe). In the field of healing this is especially damaging, when its non-occurrence is attributed to personal sin or lack of faith.

Moreover, to those Christians of impoverished nations who are praying just to have enough to eat the Prosperity Gospel is not only absurd, it is obscene! It implies that somehow two-thirds of the have missed out on God's blessings. The ridiculous nature of such a view need hardly be commented upon. Pity the famine-stricken peasant in the Sahel region of Africa who hears the message of one of America's prosperity teachers.

Contrasting with all of these tragic blunders the New Testament makes explicit the theme which remains implicit in Job; that real prosperity is not to be measured solely in terms of material acquisitions but far more in terms of faithfulness to God's will and fruitfulness in personal character. Both may occur in times of poverty, hardship and poor health. Consequently, the only promise to be unreservedly claimed by every Christian is that should they choose to persevere in following God's will then, in time, spiritual fruitfulness will result. This means that ultimate reliance must never be placed upon physical treasures, which according to Matthew 6:20, '*the moths do corrupt and the thieves steal*', but upon divine

grace. Under the Old Covenant, a certain degree of affluence may have been a necessary prop. This is far less the case now because Jesus has outpoured his Spirit to give an abundance of inner blessings.

The Prosperity Gospel is idolatrous. It exalts the twin gods of western civilisation - material well-being and personal status. With blasphemous presumption, affluence is confused with spiritual fruitfulness. Overall it offers a self-loving message to those who accept it. Even though Christians may be legitimately thankful for any physical blessings, it is to their gravest peril that they make those blessings the centre of their lives. As the expositions on Judges 10:14 warn, God is the great debunker of idols.

The origins of the Prosperity Gospel are not particularly healthy. Its ultimate roots appear to lie in some occult based positive thinking techniques in which an attempt is made to directly control physical reality through the exercise of mental powers. Present is a form of Christianised magic. This is really shown through attempts to '*name and claim*' material possessions in the name of Jesus; hardly surprisingly, this ridiculous practice is commonly known as '*blab it and grab it.*' Also present is too much reliance upon slick marketing techniques (having emanated from certain quarters of the United States.) Hence, the Prosperity Gospel stands exposed as a human contrivance. Its leaders are greedy for success and wish to lure as many people as possible into their tin pot empires whilst they themselves live in the height of luxury. Many local churches are diverted from their fundamental task of preaching the gospel and strengthening their walk with Jesus so they can be prepared for tribulation. In the last resort the Prosperity Gospel simply acts as the preposterous gospel. It does not speak the truth about Jesus.

An added complication of the Prosperity Gospel (and any other error) is the temptation to over-react and lurch to the opposite extreme. There is a real risk of a return to a legalistic Catholic notion, which asserts that the only way to lead the full Christian life is to crawl around in rags, beg for alms and indulge in ugly acts of self-mutilation. Here the Prosperity Gospel has been exchanged for the poverty gospel, which also contains many evils. It inflicts pointless and unnecessary suffering upon its followers. It also fails to see that tribulation, when it comes, is not to be courted, but simply handed over to God to be dealt with in His way and time. In the Lord's prayer recorded in Luke 11:4, Christians are explicitly taught '*lead us not into temptation.*' In other words, '*don't put us through tribulation in life. Sufficient suffering comes anyway, so why add to it needlessly?*' The type of self-mortification indulged in by particular sections of Roman Catholicism may appear to be extremely pious, but in reality it is just a very religious manifestation of folly suffering.

In conclusion, the total picture is that a few Christians will be called to gladly manifest extreme forms of self-sacrifice through the gift of voluntary poverty. (Francis of Assisi c.1181-1226 was definitely a strong example of this.) Others, however, perhaps even fewer, are called to be stewards of vast amounts of wealth. But for the vast majority the aim should be for a healthy '*middle way*' enshrined in the prayer of Proverbs 30: 7-9, '*Two things have I required of thee. Deny me them not before I die. Remove far from me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food; convenient for me lest I be full and deny Thee and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or lest I be poor and steal and take the name of my God vain.*'

It is the attitude expressed in these words, which contains the purest antidote to either the prosperity or poverty gospel. Let Christians have nothing more to do with these erroneous caricatures of the faith. Instead, may they continue to walk with Jesus so that they will be able to remain loyal to Him during any period of tribulation.

2.10 Summary

- 1) From the above Bible studies, it is firmly established that tribulation: -**
 - 1.1** can provoke repentance and teach obedience
 - 1.2** Is a means whereby God destroys any idolatry amongst his people
 - 1.3** Tests the sincerity of one's Christian profession
 - 1.4** Can strengthen faith in Jesus
 - 1.5** Is an inevitable feature of the Christian life, which must be adequately prepared for
 - 1.6** Can, under Gods hand, nurture a patient resilience
 - 1.7** Can lead to a new life being enjoyed by whole churches as well as by individual Christians

- 2) The above seven passages totally deny the Prosperity Gospels claims that Christians have an automatic right to health, wealth and happiness.**

- 3) The Prosperity Gospel is a false gospel because it: -**
 - 3.1** Is contrary to the whole tenor of scripture
 - 3.2** Undermines the Church's ability to withstand tribulation
 - 3.3** Misrepresents the Christian faith by overemphasising material, personal gain
 - 3.4** Fails to see that God promises to provide for *'needs'* and not *'wants'*
 - 3.5** Manipulates and panders to the basic human motives of greed and personal status
 - 3.6** Leads to an absurd over-inflation of expectations
 - 3.7** Marks a relapse into an Old Testament view of blessing
 - 3.8** Brings into condemnation those not materially prosperous
 - 3.9** Admits to only one cause of suffering (personal sin)
 - 3.10** Acts as an obscenity to Christians in impoverished parts of the world
 - 3.11** Is fundamentally idolatrous
 - 3.12** Has very dubious origins
 - 3.13** Is led by unscrupulous, moneymaking leaders, using slick American sales techniques
 - 3.14** Diverts Christians from their walk with God
 - 3.15** Could foster an over-reaction into the poverty gospel

- 4) Churches are to repudiate the Prosperity Gospel where it is present, so that the real Gospel can be clearly taught.**

- 4) Real Christian prosperity is best assessed in terms of personal faithfulness and fruitfulness rather than by material gain or physical well-being.**

- 5) Tribulation when it comes is neither to be avoided nor courted but handed over to God.**

- 6) Most Christians should aim to steer a middle way between the two extremes of wealth and poverty.**

- 7) The Gospel is to be taught in a truthful and clear manner so that new Christians know exactly what they have placed their faith in.**