

Martyrs of the Great Tribulation

Revelation 7:9-17, part 1

By Phillip G. Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2016-05-01

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Text - Revelation 7:9-17

9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from all ethnic nations and tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the Throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes and palm branches in their hands. 10 And they shouted with a loud voice saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

11 And all the angels stood around the Throne, and the elders and the four living beings, and they fell down before the Throne, on their faces, and worshipped God, 12 saying: "Amen! The blessing and the glory and the wisdom and the thanksgiving and the honor and the power and the strength to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

13 And one of the elders reacted, saying to me, "Who are these that are clothed in the white robes, and where did they come from?" 14 So I said to him, "My lord, you know." So he said to me: "These are those who come out of the Great Tribulation – they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore they are before the throne of God, and they serve Him day and night in His sanctuary. And He who sits on the throne will shelter them. 16 They shall not hunger anymore, nor thirst anymore; the sun will absolutely not strike them, nor any heat; 17 because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to springs of waters of life. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."[^16]

I. Why was the church so hated and why God allowed the Great Tribulation

One of the perplexing questions that Christians frequently ask is, "Why does God allow believers to be persecuted and martyred?" Some Christian apologists have tried to answer that question by looking at the outcome - the good results of martyrdom, such as purity, and the growth of the church. And it is true that in many cases, church growth *does* explode as a result of persecution and God frequently uses it to purify the church.

But that is not always the case. There have been persecutions in history that have completely wiped out the church from a region. And sometimes persecution has made the church compromise. The epistle to the Hebrews was very concerned about that church compromising and even apostatizing as a result of persecution. So a good outcome is not a forgone conclusion. We should never welcome persecution. I have heard Christians pray for persecution, but I don't think that is right. Not even Jeremiah welcomed persecution. He preached the message that it was coming, but he still prayed

that God might spare. I think we should pray that God would spare us persecution by bringing repentance without it. But certainly we should never idealize persecution. This describes a persecution where the church was almost extinguished - almost.

And Jesus prophesied that that would happen within that generation. Matthew 24 describes the Great Tribulation as being so great that if God had not cut it short, not a single believer would have survived. For the sake of the elect He did cut it short. But even though the Great Tribulation had been cut short by two years, there were still regions of the world where the church was completely extinguished and did not regain its foothold for centuries. And the question is, "Why? Why would God allow that?" Almost no writings survive from AD 70-100. We just have a tiny handful. And the reason is because the Greatest Tribulation to ever happen, happened with a vengeance.

Futurists deny that the tribulation under Nero could have been the Great Tribulation. They put it off in our future. So today I will have to deal with the *eschatology* of the Great Tribulation and perhaps next week I can deal with some of the other glorious lessons that are in this passage - such as the honor of dying as a martyr in God's army. It truly is an honor. Next week's sermon will explain why there is so much joy in this passage. So we will be looking at the subject of dedication, joy, vision, death, heaven, rewards, and other issues. Both groups of people in chapter 7 represent the kind of Christians that have the potential of turning the world upside down. Those are the kind of people Satan hates.

Some Christians get nervous at that point. But it is important to understand that God can protect us during a time of persecution. We revel in the awesome protection that God gave to the 144,000 in verses 1-8. With persecution all around them, they escaped. Not a hair of their head was hurt. God preserved them. So God is able to protect people from persecution if it will better serve His purposes. That's what makes verses 9-17 all the more a puzzle. Jay Adams says this about the contrast between the two groups:

However, across the Roman Empire a greater multitude of believers will soon suffer martyrdom. Having seen so many others escape, they must now die. Is God fair; is He truly in charge? "Lest they question the wisdom or equity of God, the problem is anticipated and answered. They are shown that it is just as much God's will for some to be slain as for others to be sealed..."¹

Did you get that? It is just as much God's will for some to be slain as for

¹ Jay E. Adams, *The Time Is At Hand*, (Greenville, SC: A Press, 1987), p. 65.

others to be sealed. God had many purposes for this tribulation. I will just anticipate a few. It vividly shows Christ's kingdom arising out of darkness and moving to the end of the book into glorious light. It starts with war and ends with peace. It gives hope that if the church has survived the greatest onslaught of Satan ever, we can survive any other onslaught if we will live by the principles of warfare given in this book. It gives us hope by showing that Satan gave his absolute best effort to destroy Christ's kingdom and was not successful. It gives us hope by showing that the most ferocious opposition that Satan has ever been able to muster against the church is in our past, not our future. I'm glad I don't need to look forward to the Great Tribulation. But it also shows the great honor and privilege of dying as a spiritual soldier in Christ's army and knowing that your life was not lost in vain. Another thing that the Great Tribulation did was to make crystal clear the enmity that always exists between the world and Christ. Sometimes it is hidden, but when given the opportunity it will always result in tribulation. This is why Christians must maintain an antithesis. When Christians willingly send their children to be disciplined by the world, they are denying the war that exists and the antipathy that exists. James 4:4 says,

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

There is nothing neutral in life. Everything must be placed under the feet of Christ. And of course, Satan wants the opposite - he wants everything placed under his own feet. So there is a warfare, and too many believers are AWOL in this great battle.

The way the passage is written, it describes the victory that these martyrs had by not compromising. The Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius and the Roman governor Pliny all wrote about how ridiculous it was for Christians to not compromise by calling Caesar "lord." "It's such a simple thing. What is wrong with them! They are obstinate!" The Romans thought the Christians were being petty when they refused to acknowledge Rome as *soter* - savior; welfare giver. In fact, many commentaries point out that verse 10 is a slap in the face of Rome's claims to be the source of salvation.

The Roman coins declare Caesar to be Savior, and verse 10 says, "No." Salvation belongs to God alone. Mark Anthony said of Julius Caesar that his "only work was to save where anyone needed to be saved,"² and the Christians were not willing to acknowledge Caesar as Savior. That's what offended Rome. And the Romans couldn't understand it. They thought they were being far more tolerant than previous empires had been. After all, they

² David Chilton, [*Days of Vengeance*](#), (Forth Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 218.

allowed full freedom of religion - so long as those religions acknowledge the Lordship of Caesar. You see, that's the catch. You can fly your Christian flag in your church so long as you also fly the flag of Caesar a little higher. And the early church was not willing to do that, and it sealed their death warrant. I think Chilton's comments are right on the mark when he said,

In direct contradiction to the State-worshipping blasphemies of Rome and Israel, the Church declares that salvation is the province of God and His Son alone. In every age, this has been a basic issue. Who is the Owner and Determiner of reality? Whose word is law? Is the State the provider of salvation? For us, as for the early Church, there is no safe middle ground between faith and apostasy.

II. The timing ("after these things" v. 9a)

So let's try to dig a little ways into this passage. We are actually only going to get through verse 9. Verse 9 starts by saying, "After these things I looked." So that indicates (as I have mentioned before) that there is a sequence in these chapters. The heavenly party in verses 9-17 comes after the sealing of the 144,000 in verses 1-8. But verse 1 says that the sealing of the 144,000 took place after the events of chapter 6:12-17.

Some weeks ago I showed that 6:12-17 occurred in May of AD 66. And if you want a precise date, it was Artemisius 21. That's a Macedonian date. I no longer have been able to open up my ancient DOS Calendar program which has proved so useful in the past, so my date comes from an Internet program. And that means I am not 100% dogmatic on the modern Gregorian dates I have been giving the last few weeks. They could be off by just a small number of days. If Tobias can get my DOS to work I can double check the dates. But in the meantime, I've been using a cool online calculator, and using that, let me give you the Gregorian dates for some of these sections. If the online calculator is correct, chapter 6:12-17 occurs on May 2 (or the Ancient calendar, Aremesius 21). Revelation 8:1 begins on May 16, (or the Hebrew date of Sivan 6). Revelation 8:7 takes place on September 6 (or the Hebrew date of Tisri 1, which is the first day of the Festival of Trumpets). And it's interesting that that's when the trumpets begin to blow.

Josephus dates the start of the War in April (that would be chapter 6) because of the Roman Procurator's attacks on Jerusalem, swiping gold from the temple, and killing 3000 Jews and turning a blind eye to the three groups of Jewish rebels that were plundering villages and cities. Already in the last section of chapter 6 we are seeing tense times.³ Others see the war proper as

³ These were incredibly tense times in Israel. Starting in April of that year, three armed groups were roaming the countryside pillaging the villages and cities, and the Roman Procurator turned a blind eye

starting in chapter 8:7, when Cestius invades with his Roman Legion. A case could be made for either position. But at least this lets you know approximately when the events of chapter 7 take place - somewhere between May 2 and May 16.

So when verse 9 says, "After these things," it doesn't mean 2000 years later. It means immediately after. What had initially confused me about the time sequence is that I had thought our passage dealt with *all* the saints who were martyred during the Great Tribulation - which would take it all the way up to AD 68. But that didn't make sense in terms of the time sequence. But when I looked up the Greek of verse 14, where it speaks of "those who come out of the Great Tribulation," I realized that it is an ongoing present participle, indicating that they haven't finished coming out yet. There are more to come out and there are still two more years of tribulation according to this book. So once I saw that, I saw how it all fit together. As one commentator worded it (and, by the way, me is not a Preterist; he is a futurist, but he sees the Greek grammar clearly),

The present tense, "those coming," contrasts with the two aorists that follow, have washed and made them white, and stresses that they are continuously coming out of the great ordeal. The tribulation is clearly conceived as a prolonged process.⁴

They are still coming out, and each new martyr is welcomed with joy. But as we will see next week their focus is not on their joy, but on pleasing their beautiful Savior. And there is also special joy in heaven because God has begun to avenge the blood of the saints. At least the machinery is clearly being put into place.

to this, refusing to help. In fact, far from helping, Florus did everything he could to provoke the Jews to violence. The Jews of Caesarea gave Florus 8 talents to intervene on their behalf, but he took the money and did nothing. He then ordered the temple to give him 17 talents of temple gold. They did that, but several youths mocked Florus by taking up a collection for him in the marketplace pretending that he was a poor man. That enraged him and he ordered the Jewish leadership to deliver up the youths that had mocked him. When the leadership refused, he ordered his soldiers to indiscriminately kill anyone in the marketplace - male, females, babies, and old. 3600 Jews were killed that day. And if you are keeping track, that was six days before the events of chapter 6:12-17. He then tried to forcibly take all the gold from the temple and to force the Jews to use Roman coinage, which the Jews considered blasphemous, since it had images of gods and goddesses and declared Rome to be Savior. Josephus understood his actions as an attempt to force the image of the Emperor as god into the temple and therefore was probably a deliberate religious provocation. Not surprisingly, the priesthood responded by stopping all sacrifices on behalf of the emperor. And that was a virtual declaration of war. Some preterists take these actions of the Roman army in late April as the sign that Christ had given in Matthew 24, that when they would see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, it is time to flee. So when the events of chapter 6:12-17 happened six days later and the angelic armies led by Christ were seen surrounding the city as well, it was time to leave.

4 John R. Yeatts, *Revelation, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), p. 145. Likewise, Robertson says, > Present middle participle with the idea of continued repetition. "The martyrs are still arriving from the scene of the great tribulation" (Charles).

A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Re 7:14.

But that brings a huge problem into the minds of some people. They think that there can be no way that the multiplied millions listed in verse 9 could possibly have been saved and martyred in the first century. You all like a good puzzle, don't you? Well, that's what we've got this morning, and I want to focus on that puzzle during the remainder of the sermon - proving that there was indeed a glorious harvest of multiplied millions from every nation, tribe, people, and language by AD 66, and secondly that there was indeed a slaughter of those multiplied millions that justifies us calling this the greatest tribulation faced by the church in all of human history. When you put those two points together you have resolved a major issue in eschatology.

III. The good news - millions had already come to Christ from around the world (vv. 9-10)

Verse 9 says,

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from all ethnic nations and tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the Throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes and palm branches in their hands.

This is an astonishing fact - the church had grown from 120 in the upper room to unnumbered millions around the world within the space of 40 years. The number of Christian Jews who survived was 144,000. Now here is the thing - if 144,000 is a *small* number that is quite easy to count, then how big is the multitude that no one can number? It can't be simply in the hundreds of thousands as some people claim. It must be on the level of multiplied millions. The Greek indicates that it is such a large number that it is incalculable. So you can see why some people feel the need to place this in the future. They are not sure that they can back up such numbers from history.

Now there is debate on whether this is a reference to every nation, tribe, people, and language within the Roman Empire, or whether it refers to every nation, tribe, people, and language within the whole world. I'm open to either position and will present both. Most partial preterists believe that it is only referring to all nations within the Roman empire. And that's possible. But either way it is astonishing, and there is actually evidence for either interpretation.

A. Note that the end of the temple and of the Old Covenant could not happen until this transitional stage was completed (Matt. 24:14 followed by verse 15)

But before we look at that external evidence, I want to look at what the infallible Bible says. Jesus said that before the temple and the Old Covenant could begin to be destroyed, the Gospel must reach every nation. This is the way Matthew 24 words it.

Matt. 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

The end of what? Well in context He is answering the question of when the end of the temple and the end of the Old Covenant age will happen. Before the Old Covenant age could come to an end, the Gospel had to reach every nation. Many people are skeptical that this could have possibly happened in the first century, but Jesus guaranteed that it would happen within that generation. He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (v. 34). So that ought to settle it; Jesus does not make mistakes. So let me read Matthew 24:14 again and include the next two verses that come after it.

Matt. 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come. Matt. 24:15 "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand), Matt. 24:16 "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

At the Second Coming there will be no opportunity to flee to the mountains. It is clearly talking about the destruction of Jerusalem. In fact, the Luke parallel specifies that it would be when they saw Jerusalem encircled with armies. So Jesus prophesied that the Gospel must reach all nations before the Great Wrath could be poured out upon Jerusalem. And the question is, "Did that happen?"

B. Note that the Gospel had gone into all the world (v. 9 with Col. 1:6,23; Rom. 1:5,8; 10:18; 16:25-26)

Obviously I have read in Revelation 7 verse 9 that it *did* happen. But just so that you can see that my interpretation is correct, I want to look at other Scriptures and the testimonies of the early church that this did indeed happen. But first of all, let's go back to Revelation 7, and let me define each of the terms in verse 9.

Ethnic nations is the Greek word *ethnos* and refers to a nation or race ruled by a common ruler. The word tribes refers to socially and genetically related

groups within a nation - like the twelve tribes of Israel, or the 80 plus tribes of Greece.⁵ So Greece would be a nation and then there are 80 tribes within that nation. You've probably heard of the Dorian, Cretan, Spartan, and Macedonian tribes. Well, they were just four of the over 80 Greek tribes. The word for "peoples" probably refers to even smaller people groups - perhaps clans within those tribes. And the word "language" is literally "tongue" and refers not just to distinct languages, but also to dialects. Now don't worry; I'm not digging a hole for myself that I can't get out of. The Gospel really did reach that far.

But I think you can see why I say that this is an astonishing Scripture. And if you do not understand the fact that there were millions of believers by AD 66, you will not understand why the Great Tribulation's attempted genocide was the worst tribulation against true believers that the world has ever known or ever will know. So even though I am only preaching on one verse today, I hope it will give you the needed background to understand the rest of the passage next week.

So how many people are in this great multitude? To give you a little bit of a feel for numbers, let me give you some modern statistics. They may not apply in the first century, but it will at least give you a good idea. According to Ralph Winter there are around 24,000 *ethnoi* - racial groups.⁶ And there were many more in the first century. Now, just imagine a church in every racial group. It's hard to imagine.

What about languages? If we don't count the tens of thousands of distinct dialects in the world today, there are 7,097 distinct languages.⁷ If you add the dialects, there are 39,491 dialects today. Apparently a lot of languages have died out since the first century, so there were probably even more back then. But if there was a church from every group that spoke those 40,000 dialects, that would be not only a miraculous feat, but a ton of people.

And just as a side note, you can see why the gift of tongues was an absolute essential gift in the first century if the church was to achieve this goal in less than 40 years. Remember? Jesus said that the Gospel had to be preached to every nation (every *ethnos*) before Jerusalem could be destroyed. Tongues is not about jabbering something that nobody knows. For example, the apostle Matthew had the gift of tongues, and history tells us that he went to Ethiopia, and because he had the gift of tongues he was instantly able to preach the Gospel in all 70 plus languages that are found in that country.

⁵ For a partial listing, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ancient_Greek_tribes

⁶ https://joshuaproject.net/resources/articles/how_many_people_groups_are_there

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That would be an inconceivable task apart from the gift of tongues. He didn't have to spend weeks and months learning the language. In 1 Corinthians 14:18-19, Paul said that he spoke in tongues outside the church far more than the Corinthians did. He wasn't against the gift of tongues. He was against using that gift inappropriately; pridefully; showing off when it wasn't needed. But Paul needed that gift if he was going to achieve his goal of reaching the tribes and clans that He had been called to. He was constantly preaching in other tongues.

Now, I have already mentioned that there is debate over whether this is a reference to every nation, tribe, people, and language within the Roman Empire, or whether it is referring to whole world. I'll be giving you evidence that it could have been the whole world. But let's assume for now that it is just a reference to the Roman Empire. If this was literally fulfilled, it still represents a massive number of converts.

How many *nations* existed in the first century? If you just count the Roman Empire, it was around 130. It's not that hard to imagine a church planted in every nation. But it gets hairier when you look at tribes. How many tribes existed within the Roman Empire? That is hard to calculate, but it is definitely in the tens of thousands. The Greek word for tribe was applied to the 80 plus tribes in Greece. It was also applied to the 35 tribes of Rome proper. But let's look at a few of the tribes that Rome conquered. The Celtic peoples had (according to the Wikipedia listing of tribal names) around 600 tribes. That's just the Celts - they had 600 tribes. Illyria had 61 tribes. Wikipedia lists Thrace and Dacia as having over 100 tribes. Wikipedia lists an enormous number of Germanic tribes. The ancient writer Pliny claims that the Roman province of Asia had 282 communities we would call tribes, and Galatia had 195 ruled by chieftains. Anyway, I think you get the point. If you were to add up all the tribes in the Roman Empire it would amount to tens of thousands.

But here's where it really blows your mind. It appears that a church was planted not only in every tribe, but in every sub-group called "peoples," which probably refers to clans. If a church was planted within each of those, you are forced to believe that there were multiplied millions of Christians by AD 66. That's just in the Roman Empire (which may be all that is referred to here).

Could that have happened? Yes. This is exactly what the Scripture affirms. Look at Romans 1. I want you to turn to Romans and to read it for yourself because this is really important information. Romans 1, beginning to read at

verse 5.

Rom. 1:5 Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name,

So there is the word "nation," and Paul affirms that whatever it means, there were people who had the obedience of faith in all nations. Look at verse 8.

Rom. 1:8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.

And the word "world" there is *cosmos*. It could refer to the Roman Empire, but it could refer to the planet earth as well. So by AD 55, when Paul wrote Romans, the Gospel had already founded churches throughout the whole world (however you define that). That is long before AD 66, the year of our chapter - eleven years before

Look at Romans 10:14-18. Before Paul talks about the destruction of Israel in verses 19-21, he says that the Gospel must *first* go into all the world. So Romans 10 does exactly the same thing that Matthew 24 does and that Revelation 7 does: it indicates that before Jerusalem can be destroyed, the Gospel has to successfully go into all the world. I'll begin reading at verse 14.

Rom. 10:14 ¶ How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? Rom. 10:15 And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!" Rom. 10:16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "LORD, who has believed our report?" Rom. 10:17 So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Rom. 10:18 ¶ But I say, have they not heard? Yes indeed: "Their sound has gone out to all the earth, And their words to the ends of the world."

Turn over to Romans 16:25.

Rom. 16:25 ¶ Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began Rom. 16:26 but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith—

Premillennialists insist that Matthew 24:15 can't be first century because all nations had not yet heard the Gospel. Yet we have looked at several Scriptures that say all nations had the Gospel made known to them in the first century. In fact, Colossians is even stronger. Turn to Colossians 1. Colossians 1, beginning to read at verse 5.

Col. 1:5 because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, Col. 1:6 which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth;

So throughout the whole world there was fruit of conversions happening similar to what had been happening in Colossae. Skip down to verse 23.

Col. 1:23 if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Most translations translate it the same way as the NKJV, but some translations have, "in all creation under heaven" or "in the whole creation under heaven." But that doesn't soften it much at all. All three ways of translating the verse make it seem like it is going far beyond and to the whole globe. And people say, "Really? Was the Gospel preached in China? Was it preached in India? Was it preached throughout Europe? What about Africa?" Well, if you are going to take Colossians 1:23 seriously, then no matter how you interpret that verse, I don't see how you can insist that it is impossible for Revelation 7:9 to have been fulfilled in the first century. Paul says it was. Paul's verses use language that is just as universal and say that it had already happened. Colossians was written in AD 58, and that is long before the date of our chapter. The inspired Scriptures say that all nations, in the whole creation under heaven, throughout the whole world had already heard the Gospel. That's astonishing.

And there are two reasons there are skeptics despite Paul's clear language. The first reason is that they don't see entire tribes coming to Christ in one generation today, so they don't believe it can happen in the past. But that is really ridiculous. There *are* entire tribes that have become 100% Christian within one generation in Irian Jaya, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Asia, Africa. In my generation, the two tribes my parents worked with have become over 93% and 95% Christian. But skeptics look at those tribes and say that they couldn't be genuine conversions. They are so individualistic that they don't think it can happen. But Jesus says that the conversion of Nineveh under the preaching of Jonah was a genuine conversion. And isn't that exactly what the Great Commission mandates? Make disciples of all nations. That is talking about Christianized nations. So this passage can give us faith that God can do a mighty work of conversion in our day - yes, even within one generation. Have faith.

But the second reason people are skeptical is that they either haven't read history, or like some modern evangelical authors, they say that the early

church fathers must have been exaggerating when they use the same language. History records the phenomenal spread of the Gospel around the world, but modern scholars just can't believe Justin Martyr, Tertullian, or others can be taken at face value. So they say, "It's got to be hyperbole. It just has to be." But I believe it was not.

And part of the reason that the church was able to spread so quickly was that there were Jewish communities in virtually every village and hamlet of the Roman Empire, and God was using a remnant from those synagogues to spread the Gospel. And it actually started at Pentecost. Acts 2:5 says of the Jews who had come to the festival in Jerusalem - "And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven." They got converted, got disciplined over the next few months, and were sent as missionaries back to every nation under heaven. So it wasn't just up the twelve apostles. There was a multitude of Jewish converts who took the Gospel back to their nations. And they came from all nations of the world under heaven - however you want to interpret that phrase.

Now, concerning just the nations that the apostles themselves reached, Philip Doddridge summarizes the evidence. He says,

The accomplishment of this extraordinary prophecy is admirably illustrated by Dr. Arthur Young, *On Idolatry*, vol ii, p. 216–234. It appears from the most credible records, that the gospel was preached in Idumea, Syria, and Mesopotamia, by Jude; in Egypt, Marmorica, Mauritania, and other parts of Africa, by Mark, Simon, and Jude; in Ethiopia, by Candace's Eunuch, and Matthias; in Pontus, Galatia, and the neighbouring parts of Asia, by Peter; in the territories of the Seven Asiatic Churches by John; in Parthia, by Matthew; in Scythia, by Philip and Andrew; in the northern and western parts of Asia, by Bartholomew; in Persia, by Simon and Jude; in Media, Carmania, and several eastern parts, by Thomas; through the vast tract of Jerusalem round about unto Illyricum, by Paul; as also in Italy, and probably in Spain, Gaul, and Britain; in most of which places Christian churches were planted in less than thirty years after the death of Christ, which was before the destruction of Jerusalem."⁸

Now that's incredible - history tells us that the apostles themselves reached all those regions. If you add to the apostles numerous other missionaries who also had the gift of tongues, it is quite believable that it wasn't just every region of the Roman Empire that was reached, but every region of the world itself. Now, I'm not dogmatic on how to interpret this. It may very well be just a reference to all people groups in the Roman Empire. But I am just saying that history itself shows that the Gospel went way beyond the Roman Empire. And history also shows that persecution happened way beyond the

⁸ Philip Doddridge, *The Family Expositor*, volume II, (London: J. Waugh, M.DCC.XLV), pp. 379-380

Roman Empire.

I have read archaeological evidence that indicates a first century Christian presence in China. That was discovered in the 1980's, and confirms the claim that the church of India has always had that the apostle Thomas came first to India in the early 60s, then went to China and preached through China, and then went back to India where he died.⁹ And I already mentioned that Ethiopian history says that Matthew preached the Gospel in all 70 languages of Ethiopia.

What about the Americas? Interestingly, there is some archaeological evidence of Jews in various parts of America that goes back to the first century, and some of these sites seem to indicate that they may have been Christian Jews. You can think of the boulder in Las Lunas, New Mexico that has the ten commandments written in a Hebrew dialect. Cyrus Gordon of Brandeis University near Boston, has vouched for its authenticity. Or you can think of the Yuchi Indians who know the Hebrew names for God and say that these have been passed down from as long as they can remember. Or you can think of the beautiful Keystone artifact found in Ohio that has Christian Hebrew written on all four sides. Other evidences of early Hebrew Christians in America are the Ohio Decalogue, the Los Lunas Decalogue, the Bat Creek Stone.¹⁰ And there are similar evidences cropping up in many parts of the world.

Now, do we have to settle the question? I don't think so. If we take this universal language as a reference only to the Roman Empire, then it still means that millions of Christians had been converted by AD 66. If we take the various Scriptures literally, then multiplied millions of people had come to Christ around the world. That's the good news. That's the good news - the power of the Gospel to spread like wild fire.

IV. The bad news - millions of those believers were martyred (vv. 13-15)

The bad news is that the church was almost wiped out as a result of the Great Tribulation. Verse 14 says that the millions who were saved from every nation were martyred and are now in heaven. And by calling it "*the*" Great Tribulation, most commentaries believe that it is referring back to Matthew 24. In Matthew 24 Jesus describes the Great Tribulation in these words (from verse 9):

⁹ For a discussion of this, see Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), chapter 1.

¹⁰ <http://nazarenespace.com/profiles/blogs/hebrews-in-ancient-america-not>

Matt. 24:9 ¶ “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake...

So it's not just the Gospel that goes to all nations, but they will be hated by all nations. Jesus goes on:

Matt. 24:21 For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. Matt. 24:22 And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.

If it wasn't for God's mercies, there wouldn't be any Christians left in the world. That's how severe the Tribulation would be, and Christ insisted that it would happen within that generation. A generation is 40 years. Jesus spoke those words in AD 30. The Great Tribulation was supposed to have ended in AD 70 (at least according to the plans and covenant of Israel with Rome). But God had other plans. He cut it short and ended it in AD 68. So yes, it happened within one generation.

Have you wondered why there is almost no information from the church between the years AD 70 and AD 100? It's because very little of the church survived. The hostile Jews used civil authorities everywhere in order to exterminate the church. And they were a formidable force. Neil Faulkner's research shows that Jews made up 20% of the population of the eastern provinces of Rome,¹¹ and both Gentry and Barrett show how Jews made up 15% of the overall population of the Empire.¹²

But history makes it quite clear that multiplied millions of Christians were tortured in the most hideous ways and killed for their faith between the years 62 and 68. B. H. Warmington examined the secular evidence of persecution of Christians in Rome and believed that "almost the entire Christian community at Rome was destroyed."¹³ The Right Honorable Charles Kendall Bushe said that Tacitus and Seutonius show how "...Christians, were persecuted, and almost exterminated, by Nero...".¹⁴ One of the earliest church fathers, Justin Martyr, debated with Trypho the Jew, and complained that Jews were responsible for the extermination of the church in the first century. He says,

11 Neil Faulkner, *Apocalypse: The Great Jewish Revolt Against Rome AD 66-73*, (Gloucestershire, Eng: Tempus, 2002), p. 38; *Seven Cities of the Apocalypse and Roman Culture*, Roland H. Worth, Jr., (New York: Paulist, 1999), p. 72.

12 Paul Barnett, *BEhind the Scenes of the New Testament*, (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Inter-varsity, 1990), p. 158.

13 B. H. Warmington, *Nero: Reality and Legend* (W. W. Norton, 1969), p. 127.

14 Charles Kendall Bushe, *A Summary View of the Evidences of Christianity*, (Dublin: William Curry, Jun. and Company, 1845), p. 12.

so far as you and all other men have it in your power, each Christian has been driven out not only from his own property, but even from the world world; for you do permit no Christian to live...

Trypho the Jew responds by saying that the Jews were almost exterminated by Rome as well. And Justin responds that Israel deserved the judgment that came upon it because of their wicked acts against God and against Christianity, but that Christianity had engaged in no crimes to deserve such mistreatment from the Jews, yet "we are taken away out of the earth." (*Dialogue*, 36.) And I won't get into the Jewish/Roman connection at this point, but Justin Martyr says that the church was virtually exterminated in the first century. It went from multiplied millions down to next to nothing. He was born in AD 100 and would have been very familiar with the history of the church of the first century.

And of course, Jesus predicted this, saying,

Matt. 10:17 But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. 22 And you will be hated by all for My name's sake...

He told the Jewish leaders,

Matt. 23:34 Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify [and crucifixion was only done by Romans, so this shows how the Jewish leaders controlled the Romans. But it say, "some of them you will kill and crucify"], and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city,

This was the greatest tribulation against the church ever not only because of the heinousness of Nero's tortures, or the millions that were slain, but also because of the *percentage* of the church that was wiped out. If anyone claims that greater tribulations have happened since then, ask him if the worldwide church was almost extinguished. Obviously not. It has grown non-stop since AD 70 just as God prophesied that it would. In some regions it has diminished, yes, but world wide? it has never stopped growing.

But that brings up another question. If the church was almost obliterated in AD 66, how could it grow sufficiently to once again invade almost every level of society by the second century? In a letter to Trajan in AD 112 (which is just 36 years after our chapter), governor Pliny complains that Christianity has invaded every level of society and was spreading like a contagion; like a disease. He blamed Christianity for the fact that some Roman temples were now almost entirely deserted, that religious ceremonies were neglected, and that people selling meat that had been offered to idols were now going out of business because they couldn't find buyers. That kind

of language speaks of a massive growth of Christianity after AD 70. Ninety years later (in AD 200) Tertullian wrote a letter to the Roman magistrates defending Christianity and claimed, "nearly all the citizens of all the cities are Christians" (Aplogeticus 37.8). That was in his region of the world. The church *can* grow fast if it is dedicated like the church of the first three centuries was. They were driven by a vision of victory. They were driven by the principles of this book. And as a result, church fathers indicate that by the time the emperor Constantine was converted, half of the population of the entire empire was Christian. How could that happen?

And that is where the 144,000 come in. They were sealed and protected by God *so that they could once again spread the Gospel to the far reaches of the empire*. And when we get to chapter 14, we will see that they were indeed effective. They didn't get married - they were totally devoted to evangelism.

One atheist organization that I visited had done a study trying to figure out how the church grew to 34 million people by AD 350. That's his figure. It's pretty conservative actually. And this atheist organization came to the conclusion that it actually wouldn't be hard. If the church simply grew at the same rate that Mormonism has grown since its inception (40% per year), then if there were only 2,744 Christians in AD 70 (that's their figure, not mine), there would be 33,882,008 in AD 350.¹⁵ So you don't even need national conversions like Nineveh. You just need a grass roots movement of dedicated Christians who are so sold out to Jesus that they are willing to lay down their lives (if need be) in order to see their neighbors and others coming to Christ. One thing that is obvious about both groups in this chapter is that they are more focused on Christ than they are on themselves, and they are more passionate about Christ than they are about themselves. It would be awesome to have the church reawakened to the passions that drove the protected group in the first eight verses or the martyred group in the last half of the chapter. This nation would be turned upside down if the church would once again embrace their priorities and passions.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, we have had a wimpy Christianity that has been spread through missions. It doesn't believe that the Great Commissions is even possible. You talk to your average missionary and ask him if Christ has all authority over politics, and if all nations will become Christian nations, and

¹⁵ <http://commonsenseatheism.com/?p=95#sthash.OrtPyTSL.dpuf> Their figures are as follows: Year
Number of Christians, given 40% growth per decade 40 1,000 50 1,400 60 1,960 70 2,744 80 3,842 90
5,378 100 7,530 150 40,496 200 217,795 250 1,171,356 300 6,299,832 350 33,882,008

if there is coming a time when those Christian civilizations will be so godly that they will live out all that Christ commanded in every of life. He will probably look at you like he doesn't know what you are talking about.

Satan doesn't persecute those kinds of Christians that much. But they won't make that much of an impact either. Without faith it is impossible to please God. And without a proper eschatology it is impossible to have an adequate to conquer the world. And without faith in the future our hope is robbed. And when hope is robbed the church is demotivated and settles for something less than the Great Commission. We need to get back to the eschatology of hope and faith that drove the Puritans and Pilgrims to make our early nation a city set on a hill. May it be so Lord Jesus. Amen.