

Neronic Persecution and Great Tribulation (AD 64)

By Ed Stevens -- Then and Now Podcast -- March 24, 2013

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Thank you for joining us on this historical podcast. We will be continuing our look at the Neronic persecution which began in the summer of AD 64 and lasted almost two years until the war broke out in the summer of AD 66.
- B. **Before we begin I want to mention the Lesson Outlines for These Podcasts:** There is a PDF available for each podcast. Many listeners find it helpful to have that open in front of them as they listen. If you would like to get that PDF, simply email me and request it. If you are planning on being a regular listener to this program, and would like to automatically receive the PDF as soon as it is ready, without having to request each one separately, simply email me and ask to be put on the **PDF list**. It is free for the asking. My email address is: <preterist1@preterist.org>
- C. Let's ask God for His presence and blessing on our study here --
Dear Heavenly Father, we exalt Your High and Holy Name above all other names. We come before you asking for your forgiveness of our sins and your providential guidance in our lives. We pray for the leaders of this nation and of all the nations, that they will humble themselves, and pray, and seek Your Face, and turn from their wicked ways. Help us all to turn back to the Bible and reapply its absolute truths to our lives, so that we can help others find your truth. Use these historical studies to teach us the mistakes of the past, so we can avoid them in the future. We again praise Your Holy Name for the first century saints who suffered unspeakable horrors in the Neronic persecution in order to be salt and light in their generation. They deserved the great reward that You gave them at the Coming of Your Son Jesus. By looking at their amazing examples of faithfulness in the face of terrifying persecution and overwhelming hardship, may we all be inspired to "deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly" like they did. (Tit. 2:12) It is in the Name of our precious Savior, and Your Glorious Son, that we pray. Amen.
- D. I get emails every week from listeners all over the country and around the world, thanking us for these historical studies which have helped them understand the Bible better. If you have benefited from these podcasts, we would encourage you to become partners with us in this teaching and publishing ministry, to enable us to share it with many others, and so that you will share in all the good fruit that comes from it. Those who contribute to International Preterist Association will receive some of our latest and greatest resources as our gift to you. Simply go to our website and click on the left sidebar button entitled "Make a Donation to IPA" where you can make a one-time donation or contribute monthly. Our website address is <www.preterist.org> You can also make donations through PayPal. Our PayPal address is: <preterist1@preterist.org>
- E. Last time we looked at the Great Fire that swept through Rome in the Summer of 64, and the horrendous persecution of Christians by Nero shortly afterwards.
- F. This time we want to look a little further at the Neronic persecution and the intense Tribulation it brought upon the Church in AD 64.

Neronic Persecution (The Great Tribulation)

The Neronic persecution was one of the most significant factors in the history of the church just before the Parousia. But as significant as it is for our understanding, it has been almost totally ignored by futurists. Too many of us preterists have likewise underestimated its impact upon the pre-70 church. So, it is appropriate for us to spend some significant time looking at it, if for no other reason than to memorialize the horrific deaths of so many of our dear first century brothers and sisters.

The Jews wanted to wipe out the Church, but instead got wiped out by the Romans. This is similar to what happened in the Babylonian captivity for the Jews. Haman the Amalekite tried to wipe out the Jews, but ended up being hung on his own gallows, with his Amalekite kinsmen being wiped out also. It is therefore not surprising to find that the *Epistle of Barnabas* (12:9) referred to the Jewish enemies of the church as Amalekites. This was a very dark time for the Church, and even though it was short-lived, for only two years from 64 to 66, it was extremely intense and killed the majority of the remaining Christians.

The apostate Jewish Christians, like Demas, who had lapsed back into Judaism (and therefore missed the rapture) would have been destroyed along with the Diaspora Jewish communities in the Summer and early Fall of AD 66, since they would be under suspicion of being sympathetic to the Jewish revolt in Judea. The Gentile citizens rose up against their Jewish inhabitants and either killed them or expelled them from their cities and forced them to flee for refuge in Judea.

What is not well understood by most of us is that there are at least three phases of tribulation mentioned in our New Testament. As we will see, the second of these is the *Neronic persecution*. We will look at those texts in the New Testament which mention a Great Tribulation, and try to identify which tribulation they are referring to, and where it fits into the overall sequence of endtime events.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for *tribulation* (Gk. *thlipsis*) is used 45 times in 43 verses in our New Testament:

Matt 13:21; 24:9, 21, 29; Mark 4:17; 13:19, 24; John 16:21, 33; Acts 7:10–11; 11:19; 14:22; 20:23; Rom 2:9; 5:3 (twice); 8:35; 12:12; 1 Cor 7:28; 2 Cor 1:4 (twice), 8; 2:4; 4:17; 6:4; 7:4; 8:2, 13; Eph 3:13; Phil 1:16; 4:14; Col 1:24; 1 Th 1:6; 3:3, 7; 2 Th 1:4, 6; Heb 10:33; James 1:27; Rev 1:9; 2:9–10, 22; **7:14**.

This Greek word THLIPSIS as used in the New Testament refers to at least three different periods of persecution or distress:

1. *General Persecution on the Church (AD 30-64)*: Matt 13:21 (Mk 4:17); Matt 24:9-13; Jn 16:33; Acts 11:19; 14:22; 20:23; Rom 5:3; 8:35; 12:12; 1 Cor 7:28; 2 Cor 1:4; 1:8; 2:4; 4:17; 6:4; 7:4; 8:2; Eph. 3:13; Phil 1:16; 4:14; Col. 1:24; 1 Thess 1:6; 3:3; 3:7; 2 Thess 1:4; Heb 10:33; Rev 2:9-10; cf. Matt 10:16-42. These verses talk about the persecution the Church suffered throughout the period from Pentecost to the Neronic Persecution.

2. *Great Tribulation on the Church (AD 64-66)*: Matt 24:21-29; Rev 1:9; 2:22; Rev 7:14. Comparing all three accounts of the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21), we can see that the Great Tribulation was that intensification of trouble (the Neronic persecution in AD 64-66) right before the Parousia. Matt 24:29 states that the Parousia occurred "immediately after the [Great] Tribulation." It did not last long (two years or less), but it was extremely intense, and it was cut short by the outbreak of the war with Rome in AD 66. Then the wrath began to be poured out upon the Jews.
3. *Wrath Poured Out Upon the Jews (AD 66-70)*: Matt 3:7 (Lk 3:7); Lk 21:22-23; Rom 2:5-10; Rom 5:9 (saints saved from wrath); Rom 9:22; Eph 5:6 (Col 3:6); 1 Thess 1:10 (saints saved from wrath, cf. 1 Thess 5:9); 1 Thess 2:16; 2 Thess 1:6-10; Rev 6:16-17; 11:18; 12:12; 14:8-10; 14:19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 18:3; 19:15; cf. Matt. 23:29-39. These passages show that the wrath outpouring began with the Parousia, which occurred "immediately after the tribulation." The Parousia was a three and a half years presence of Christ to judge. It was not just a one-day event.

Great Tribulation

In spite of the fact that the word "thlipsis" is used 45 times in the New Testament, only four of those occurrences have the word "great" attached to them. The Greek phrase "great tribulation" (THLIPSIS MEGAS) occurs only in these four texts:

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.

Acts 7:11 Now a famine and **great trouble** came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance.

Rev. 2:22 Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into **great tribulation**, unless they repent of their deeds.

Rev. 7:14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the **great tribulation**, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

This last reference in Rev. 7:14 is very interesting, since it is obviously referring to Christians, a great multitude of whom were killed in some "great tribulation" and were "standing before the throne of God" in heaven (Rev 7:15). Notice in Rev. 7:9-17 that this "great multitude which no one could count" came "from every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues." They were from all the Gentile nations, standing before the throne in heaven, after being killed on earth in the great tribulation. How does this text define the "great tribulation"? It is obviously NOT referring to the wrath outpouring upon the Jews during their war with Rome. Instead, it is referring to some great persecution upon the Church which killed countless numbers of Gentiles who were there in heaven before the throne praising God. So we see that at least one of these occurrences of the phrase "great tribulation" clearly refers to a great persecution upon the Church.

Most futurists and even some preterists think that the troubles encountered by the Jews in their war with Rome was the Great Tribulation. While it is true that the Jews did

have great tribulation during their war with Rome, the New Testament writers also refer to that as “wrath” or “vengeance.” As we have seen from the list of verses we just looked at, the word “tribulation” predominantly refers to persecution upon the Church. The troubles and distresses that the Jews encountered during their war with Rome should more appropriately be referred to as “wrath.” The Tribulation that is spoken of as occurring before the Jewish war was upon the Church.

In his discourses, Jesus explained that the disciples would suffer much tribulation in order to get the gospel out to the whole Roman world (Luke 21:8-28) “and then the End will come” (Matt 24:14). Some of them would be killed, and then afterwards their persecutors would be judged (cf. Matt. 23:29-39 and Luke 12:46). At the end of that process of fulfilling the Great Commission under hardship and persecution, there would be a short, but very intense, period of *Great Tribulation* (Matt 24:21-22). This was the Neronic persecution, which began soon after the fire in Rome (July 19, 64). Because Nero was blamed for ordering the fires to be started, he shifted the blame to the Christians (Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44). Tacitus is the main source for information about the Neronic persecution, although Suetonius hints at it (*Nero* 16). The most surprising silence about it comes from Josephus who was in Rome at the very time the fire broke out, and for over a year afterwards during the Neronic persecution, yet not a peep out of him about the fire or the persecution. B. H. Warmington was puzzled by this silence, and supposed it meant that “almost the entire Christian community at Rome was destroyed” (*Nero: Reality and Legend*, p. 127).

This intense persecution saw many Christians fall away from the faith, and many of the faithful killed (as we can see alluded to in Rev 7:9-17). The Neronic persecution drastically reduced the number of Christians left alive on earth (cf. Matt 24:21-22; Luke 18:6-8). Jesus said the Church would go through the tribulation (Matt 24:21-28, cf. Rev 7:14), but Paul repeatedly reminded them that they would not have to go through the wrath (1 Thess 1:10; Rom 5:9; Matt 3:7; Rom 2:5-8; 1 Thess 5:9). Instead, they would be relieved of their persecution, rescued out of it, and rewarded in Christ's presence (2 Cor 4:17; cf. Mt 5:12; Rom 8:18) while their enemies were being destroyed.

The Neronic persecution (or Great Tribulation) was a time of testing and purification for Christians. It removed the insincere, lukewarm, sleepers, and false brethren from the Church. Those who kept the faith (in life or in death) were rewarded at the Parousia (by the resurrection and rapture). Those who failed the test (by lapsing back into Judaism) were destroyed with their fellow unbelieving Jews in AD 70. This short period of intense persecution (late 64 until early 66) was “cut short” by the revolt of the Jews against Rome. When the war broke out in late 66, that was the turning point in the Great Tribulation. The Jews and Romans both had to turn their attention to the war effort. The Great Tribulation was cut off, and the time arrived for the wrath to be poured out upon those who had persecuted the Church.

Below is the sequence of events that we need to start fixing in our memory. This will help us tremendously when we start looking at all of the historical fulfillments of Matthew 24 and the book of Revelation:

Spring 61 - Paul in prison in Rome

Spring 62 - James killed in Judea

Spring 62 - John exiled to Patmos where he wrote the Apocalypse

Summer 62 - The Apocalypse warned Christians to get out of Judea before the Neronic persecution (great tribulation) began.

Spring 63 - Paul wrote Hebrews warning Christians to leave Jerusalem before the Neronic persecution (great tribulation) began.

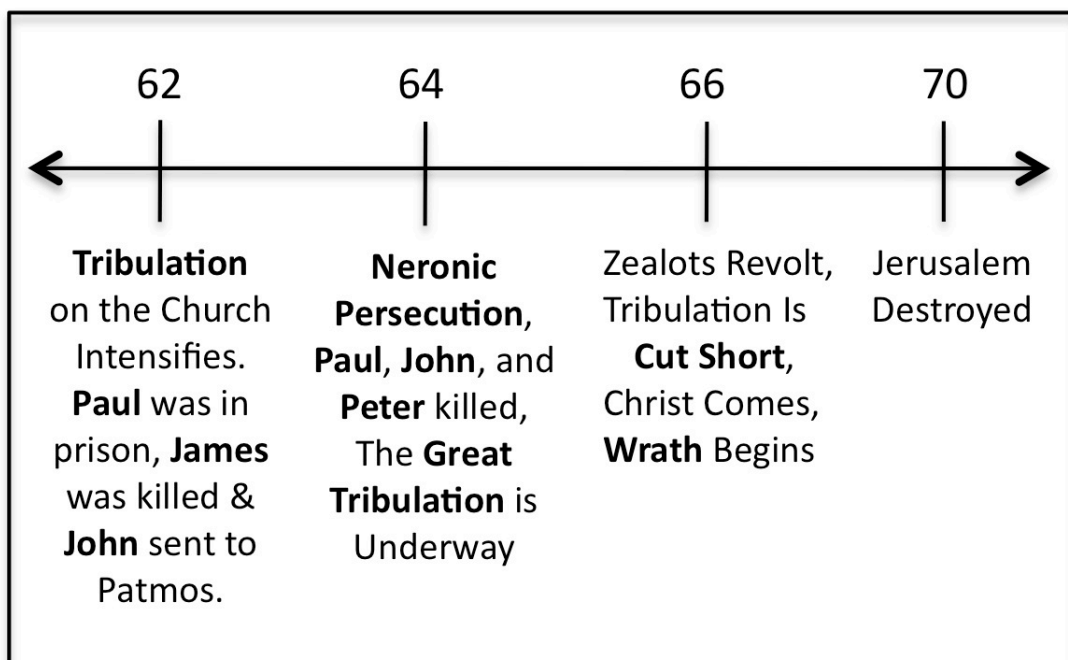
Summer 64 - Fire in Rome and Neronic Persecution began

Fall 64--Spring 66 - Neronic persecution decimated the Church

April 66 - Angelic Armies seen in the sky, signaling the Parousia

June 66 - Pentecost - dead were raised and living were changed

August 66 - The Zealot rebellion began



All of this is listed with a lot of details and documentation in my book, **FIRST CENTURY EVENTS**. We will be using a lot of that material in our next few months of studies. I would highly recommend that everyone get a copy of that, if you don't already have it. You can get it from our website: www.preterist.org -- the title of the book again, is: **FIRST CENTURY EVENTS**.

During the Neronic persecution, the saints were under extreme hardship just to stay alive. Their days of sharing the gospel were over. No one would listen. No one wanted to join a hated religion that would only get them killed. So the Christians had to stop preaching the gospel and go into hiding to stay alive. No one who was not a Christian already would dare associate with them for fear of persecution and death. This is also when the **great apostasy** occurred. Not only were the majority of Christians killed in the Neronic persecution, but a bunch more of them fell away from the faith and denied that they were Christians in order to escape death. It was only a small remnant of "elect" saints who "lived and remained" until the Parousia.

So, there were not a lot of true Christians left alive after the Neronic persecution and its related great apostasy. Those few true saints (the "elect") who did remain alive until the Parousia, were raptured at the Parousia in June AD 66. The beginning of Christ's Parousia presence was clearly signaled when they saw the angelic armies in the sky above Palestine (April 66). Christ came with his angels to raise the dead, rescue his living and remaining saints, and to reward and punish -- just a few months before the Jewish war started in August 66.

During the three and a half years of his visitation (AD 66-70), he poured out God's wrath upon those who had persecuted His saints. The Zealots were successful in repulsing Cestius Gallus from Judea, who suffered heavy losses of men and equipment. This was reported to Nero, who was in Greece at the time (Nov. AD 66). Nero dispatched Vespasian and Titus to Antioch and Alexandria to begin gathering the troops for the war. Vespasian came through Turkey on his way to Antioch (Dec. AD 66).

Chronological Arrangement of the Olivet Discourse (PDF chart)

If we define the Great Tribulation as only being the wrath that was poured out on Jerusalem, then it means that Christ did not come in judgment upon the Jews until after the Romans had destroyed the Jews (Matt 24:29). However, Christ was supposed to come *before* the wrath was poured out to give relief to his elect who were already suffering in the Neronic persecution. This means that the wrath upon the Jews and the tribulation upon the church cannot be the same thing. The tribulation has to be first, before the wrath outpouring.

We know from studying the Olivet Discourse in all three synoptic accounts (Matthew-Mark-Luke) that none of the three gospels have a consecutive-sequential list of the events, especially when it is compared with the historical data in the book of Acts and Josephus. All three accounts have a group of events mixed together in a somewhat chronological framework, with a few flash-backs and flash-forwards. It is easy to see that all three accounts were written BEFORE the Neronic persecution and Jewish war, since if they were written afterwards they would not be so jumbled and out of order.

And there is a very good reason why Jesus stated these things in this confusing way. He was making it practically impossible for anyone, including his disciples, to know "the day and the hour" in advance. He gave them enough information to know what to look for and what to expect, but not enough to know the timing or exact sequence. We can only imagine how hard it must have been for those first century saints to analyze the Olivet Discourse, trying to understand the time and nature of fulfillment of all these things.

Sorting all that out and arranging it in the chronological order in which it actually happened historically is a real challenge, even for us today. A quick glance at all the various arrangements that have been developed just within the Premillennial camp would suffice to show this. But the Amils, Postmils, Partial Preterists, and Full Preterists have different arrangements as well.

The only way this puzzle will ever be solved is by lifting all the individual sections out of the text and laying them down beside the historical events to which they belong. That is one of the reasons why our historical studies here are so important. We are constructing that chronological list of actual events that we can eventually use to match

up perfectly with all the predicted events in the Olivet Discourse. That is what we have attempted to do here with this chronological chart that we just looked at.

Well, that will just about wrap it up for this time. If any of our listeners have questions or comments about what we looked at here in this session, do not hesitate to email me. My email address is: **preterist1@preterist.org**

Thanks so much for listening.

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There are a lot of great supplementary articles posted on our website,
plus books and audio/video media for purchase. Go there and browse all you want.
Here is the link: **<http://preterist.org>**

If you would like a couple of great books which detail all of these events, I would recommend **ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS** by F. F. Bruce, which is available for order at our website (www.preterist.org), and **JEWISH BACKGROUNDS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT** by J. Julius Scott, which is available from Amazon.com. Be sure to get a copy of my book, **First Century Events**, which deals with the Roman, Jewish, and Christian events of the first century. We will be using it as a resource here in our studies of the first century. You can purchase it from our website: www.preterist.org

Some further recommended reading:

Josephus *Antiquities* and *Wars* (sections which deal with the Herodian rulers)