



The Incredible  
Journey

# *FAITH ON TRIAL*

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Can you imagine a time when Christian believers will have to meet in secret? A time when studying the Bible will be a crime? Can you imagine it happening in Australia, the land of the “young and free”?

The Bible warns that a time is coming when faith will go on trial, and the whole world will convulse in a final conflict. It will be a time of terrible anguish for all. But in the book of Revelation, we read about a group of people who will remain faithful to God

(Revelation 15:2, 3). How can we ensure we are amongst them?

Let's set the context for this issue by examining societal, environmental, and economic trends. Then we can compare the current situation with Bible teachings and prophecies to find out what will happen next, and how we can prepare for it. We will also look at some real-life examples of people who have experienced persecution, but have come out "*more than conquerors*" through the power of Christ (Romans 8:37). Finally, we will be able to see how all this can help us to be ready for the final test of faith.

Within the space of a few short centuries, Australia has grown to be a seemingly strong and prosperous nation. With hard work, achieving a comfortable life has seemed relatively easy, a goal which most people in the "lucky country" have been able to achieve. Now, however, it seems that

much of what we have accomplished is about to slip through our fingers, as we see natural disasters like cyclones, floods, droughts, and fires taking their toll on our accumulated wealth.

Combined with natural disasters is social unrest. Almost undoubtedly the most significant turning point in social cohesion in the last few decades was the bombing of the twin towers in New York on September 11, 2001.

Since that time, there has been an exponential increase of attacks in public places. Cafes, shops, synagogues, churches: none have been immune to violent attacks. Protests and riots, with increasingly violent demonstrations, are now becoming a commonplace part of the daily news.

Although such punctuated warnings may trouble us at times, it can be easy to lose sight of them in the whirl of every-day life. Settled down among

our iPods and iPhones, we can slip into a false sense of security, thinking that disaster will never strike us. Or, if it does, it, too, can be banished with the touch of a button.

We may express, and even feel, momentary concern over the alarming trends we see. But if we were to use our everyday actions and behaviours, our attitude toward “business as usual”, as a litmus test, have we really stopped to consider the prophetic significance of these events, and where they are all leading? Have they impressed our minds so vividly that they have led to a change in our actions? Another question is, if we feel the need to respond to them, where do we turn? What, or Whom, can we trust to guide us through the coming crisis?

God’s word, the Bible, contains literally hundreds of prophecies. To date, it has never failed. Not only does it reveal coming events accurately, it points us

to a God who genuinely loves us, and has the power to protect and help us through the fearful events that are soon to take place.

The Bible does contain some parts that are difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:16). And the many different, often conflicting, interpretations of Scripture can make knowing the truth about its teachings difficult. Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to *"treasure hidden in a field"* (Matthew 13:44). Only those earnest enough to seek diligently will be able to discover the gems of truth that are often missed when we give God's word a hurried glance on our way out the door. But God's promise to those who truly value His Word is, *"You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart"* (Jeremiah 29:13). Again, He says, *"If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority"*

(John 7:17). *"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free"* (John 8:32). So, if you are one of those who really longs to know the truth, I invite you to take the time now to search out with me these points that are so vital to our eternal destiny.

The book of Revelation tells us that, just before Christ's return, there will be a global movement to enforce a system of worship that conflicts with obedience to God's law (Revelation 13:3). Almost everyone in the world will be deceived into worshipping a false power because of miracles worked through satanic agencies (Revelation 13:8, 12-14). Those who refuse to worship this power, symbolically called the "beast", will be persecuted.

While in Australia, there has been little religious persecution for over a century, Christians in other countries have, and do, face horrific torture because of their faith in God. One person who

experienced persecution in recent years was Humberto Noble Alexander. He spent 22 years in Cuban gaols under the repressive government of Fidel Castro.

For decades, those living in Cuba under Castro's communist regime were denied basic political and religious freedoms. Alexander was imprisoned because of his work as a lay preacher for a Seventh-day Adventist church in Havana. With many others, he suffered beatings, insanitary conditions, inadequate food and other inhumane treatment.

Alexander became a spiritual leader among his fellow prisoners and was an organiser of the underground church in prison. He was finally released in 1985 following the Reverend Jesse Jackson's negotiations with Castro.

Although Alexander endured hardship and deprivation, he emerged with a strong, buoyant faith. But note this: Alexander's imprisonment didn't change



his basic values. It only intensified them. Persecution didn't impart a new, more religious orientation. It only threw a spotlight on the outlook he already had.

Alexander's life centred around Christ before his arrest, and Christ was his great Sustainer after his arrest. Alexander actively shared his faith before prison; he functioned as a spiritual leader in prison. Alexander valued and studied his Bible before losing his freedom; and he cherished the Word of God after losing that freedom.

Like gold refined in the fire, Alexander's trials brought the beauty of his character to light. By developing faith in God now, we can have a similar experience in the coming conflict. Let's look at those future events in more detail now.

In Revelation Chapter 13, we find that, first, everyone will be forced to receive a mark in their right hand or

forehead (Revelation 13:16). The book of Revelation uses many symbols, so this is not a literal mark (Revelation 1:1). A hand represents actions, while the forehead represents thoughts. A person's allegiance to this power is shown by what they do or think. Those who refuse compliance to the global religious system will not be able to buy or sell (Revelation 13:17).

The pressure to conform will then intensify and laws will finally be made to "*cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed*" (Revelation 13:15). The image of the beast spoken of here is a government system that imitates that of the beast, a power that persecuted God's people for over one thousand years (Revelation 13:4-7). And those who will not obey the laws of that system, which has set itself up in opposition to God, face the threat of death.

Some may wonder, Doesn't the Bible teach that the righteous will not have to experience the time of tribulation? Won't they be raptured away? At first glance, passages like "*I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world*" (Revelation 3:10) may give the impression that God's people will be spared persecution. But the word "keep" here means "protect during", rather than "rescue from". Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, God's people will be led through the fiery trials unharmed, rather than being whisked away without any suffering (Daniel 3:8-27). This is also consistent with what Jesus said to His disciples on the night of His betrayal: "*In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33).

The coming persecution is an attack against God's faithful people by the forces of antichrist. It's Satan's final

masterpiece of deception, his last attempt to gain complete control of the world and set up his kingdom here in defiance of God's throne.

The prophet Daniel warned of the intensity of that period. He wrote, "*There shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time*" (Daniel 12:1). Jesus Himself said, "*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*" (Matthew 24:21).

All through Earth's history, since the entrance of sin, the righteous have been persecuted by the wicked (1 John 3:12, 13). These past events reveal to us different aspects of that final conflict. The Bible tells us that "*whatever things were written before*" were recorded for us: to give us warning, comfort and hope (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11). By studying the

lives of Bible characters who remained true to God, we can recognise Satan's strategies, which are the same today as they have been all through history (1 Peter 5:8; Ephesians 6:10-13). More than that, we can live a victorious Christian life as did past heroes of faith.

One of the most important Bible examples to study in preparation for the final conflict is the story of Jacob. Jacob's night of anguish, when he wrestled in prayer for deliverance from his brother Esau, symbolises what God's people will experience during the final end-time conflict. Jeremiah the prophet wrote, *"Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is the time of Jacob's trouble, but he shall be saved out of it"* (Jeremiah 30:7).

Just what was Jacob's experience? you may wonder, and what is its relevance today? Let's take a look.

The story is recorded in Genesis 25:19-34; 27:1-28; 32:1-31. In summary, Jacob defrauded his elder twin brother, Esau, of the birthright blessing. Jacob was then forced to run for his life to escape Esau's plots to murder him. Alienated from his family, most bitter of all Jacob's regrets was the realisation that he had sinned against God. Almost in despair, he wondered if God could ever forgive him. As he lay down to sleep, he dreamed of a ladder that reached all the way from earth to heaven. On the ladder, shining angels were going up and down.

When Jacob woke up, he felt so grateful. God had given this very special dream to show that He had made a way so that Jacob could be reconnected with Him. The ladder represented Jesus, the link between God and sinful human beings (John 1:51). Jacob confessed his sin, thanked God for His forgiveness and continued on his journey knowing that

God would protect and help him.

But despite God's forgiveness, Jacob was still plagued by regrets. After living in exile for twenty years, he at last set out, at God's command, to return home with his wives and children.

On reaching the borders of the land, Jacob was terrified at the news that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred armed men. Jacob and his family seemed about to become helpless victims of violence. Besides his anxiety and fear, Jacob also felt the crushing weight of self-reproach. He knew that it was his own sin that had brought this danger. His only hope was God; his only defence, prayer.

Yet, Jacob did all that he could think of to try to re-establish a positive relationship with his brother and defend his family. He sent a very generous present from his flocks and herds to Esau, with a repentant message. Then

he sent everyone else in the group over the river, while he remained alone to plead with God for deliverance.

As he bowed upon the cold earth in the darkness of the night, suddenly a hand gripped him. Thinking it was an enemy, Jacob wrestled with all of his might "until the breaking of day." But despite his almost superhuman efforts, he could not shake the grip of his assailant. As the morning began to dawn, the stranger put out his hand and touched Jacob's thigh; instantly, it went out of joint.

With tears of exhaustion and repentance, Jacob now clung with renewed intensity to his mysterious antagonist. He realised that it was God Himself he had been wrestling with, and he pleaded with Him for mercy. For years and years he had carried the burden of guilt for his sin; above safety and life itself, he longed to have the assurance of God's forgiveness.



By praying with perseverance, Jacob received from God the blessing he had so long wanted: the promise of complete forgiveness, of the final blotting out of his sin from God's record books. As a sign of his victory, his name was changed from Jacob, meaning "a deceiver", to Israel, "a prince of God."

As Satan influenced Esau to march against Jacob to kill him, so, in the final conflict, the prince of darkness will incite his followers to persecute God's people. As the righteous, those who have sincerely repented of their sins and through the power of Christ, chosen to obey God's law, see the evil forces working against them, they will wrestle with God in prayer as did Jacob. Although suffering hunger, thirst, and weariness, the anguish which the righteous experience is not over the loss of these temporary comforts. They fear that, through some fault in themselves, they may bring dishonour upon Christ

by misrepresenting Him to others. They plead earnestly with God, claiming His promises as did Jacob.

And as God stepped in to save Jacob from the murderous plots of Esau, so He will act at the very moment of crisis to deliver His faithful children. The book of Psalms tells us, "*Our God shall come, and shall not keep silent*" (Psalm 50:3). Supernatural signs and wonders will occur in quick succession; then Christ Himself, surrounded by all His holy angels, will descend from heaven with a shout (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17). The dead in Christ will rise, and with the living righteous will be "caught up" to meet the Lord in the air.

Jacob's story reveals to us the essential preparation for the time of trouble ahead. Some may wonder, Do I need to stockpile food and weapons in order to be ready? The Bible reveals that God sent ravens to feed the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 17:6). He sent angels to

protect Elisha (2 Kings 6:12-17). God's promises are for us today: "*Bread will be given him, his water will be sure.*" "*The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them*" (Isaiah 33:16; Psalm 34:7). Like Jacob, we need to seek God's forgiveness for our sins, and with His help live a changed life. This is how we are to prepare for the final conflict.

When studying Bible prophecy, it can be easy to lose sight of the big picture amid all the little details. The key focus of prophecy is Jesus. He is both the Revealer of, and the One who is revealed by, prophecy (Revelation 1:1). Knowing all the prophetic facts will achieve us nothing without a living connection with the One who gave the prophecies, and to Whom the prophecies all point.

Jesus explained how we can be united with Him. He said, "*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for*

*without Me you can do nothing... If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.*" (John 15:5,7). This is the only way we can stand through the final test. It is through God's word that we are to abide in Christ: by studying the Bible, claiming His promises, and allowing Him to transform our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:17).

By abiding in Christ, by choosing to live in harmony with His word every day, we may be amongst those "*who (have) come out of the great tribulation, and (have) washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*" (Revelation 7:14).



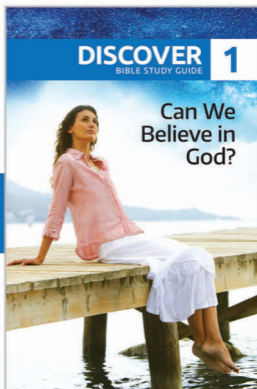
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A time is coming when faith will go on trial, and the whole world will convulse in a final conflict. It will be a time of terrible anguish for some, yet incredibly enough, a time of joy for others.



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