

WHY MUST THE TIME OF TROUBLE COME

By Pastor Paul Penno, Jr.

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On March 5, Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmailabad and Maryam Rustampoor were arrested by Iranian security forces and labeled “anti-government activists,” according to Farsi Christian News Network (FCNN).

Thirty year-old Marzieh and 27-year-old Maryam are being held at Evin Prison, which is notorious for treating women badly. “Both women are allowed just a one minute telephone call everyday to their immediate families. Both are unwell and in need of urgent medical attention,” FCNN reported.

Marzieh and Maryam’s apartment was searched and their belongings were confiscated. “Their only crime is that they are committed Christians who follow the teachings of Jesus,” FCNN added. “They are being unfairly labeled as ‘anti government activists’ because of the hostility of the government towards practicing Christians.”

The women have reportedly been interrogated numerous times and were held in three different police detention centers before being sent to Evin Prison. FCNN reported an exorbitant bail amount of US\$ 400,000 has been set.

Marzieh and Maryam’s arrest is the latest incident highlighting increased government intimidation of Christians in Iran. Believers are subjected to surveillance, arrests, imprisonment, and sometimes torture.

Is the time of trouble an effort on the part of God to weed out as many of us as possible? Is it He who creates an obstacle course? Or is the time of trouble an opportunity for God’s people to learn first-hand how faithful He is to them?

The magnitude of this trial, which takes place before the whole universe, is portrayed graphically by the prophet Daniel: “At that time [the time of the end] shall Michael [another name for Christ] stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book” (Daniel 12:1).

Here is a pledge straight from heaven—even though a “time of trouble, such as never was” engulfs the world God’s people will have nothing to fear for they “shall be delivered” because they are “found written in the book.” Clearly, in this time of judgment, this “book” is of supreme importance. To be written in it means eternal life. To be blotted from it means eternal death or as the record states: “Whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15).

If the time of trouble is Satan’s effort to discourage and deflect the faith of God’s people, that would make sense. But there is no way that we can read the Bible and conclude that God is trying to keep people out of His kingdom. Christ “gave Himself as a ransom for all.” 1 Timothy 2:6, RSV. The idea is not that Christ merely made a provision for ransoming “all,” a provision that means nothing

unless they do something first. The original word for ransom here means that He actually did redeem “all.” “The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men.” Titus 2:11, RSV. Christ has tasted “death for every one,” so that no one need suffer it himself. Hebrews 2:9, RSV. He “did not come to judge the world but to save the world.” John 12:47, RSV. He gave Himself “for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” 1 John 2:2, RSV. He is “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” 2 Peter 3:9, RSV.

The picture of God that the Bible gives shows Him as concerned when even a sparrow falls to the ground. He opens His hand to satisfy “the desire of every living thing.” Psalm 145:16. Do you enjoy feeding chipmunks out of your hand? Picture God down on His hands and knees, inviting “every living thing” to eat out of His hand! Obviously, His overwhelming concern must be to save everyone possible in His kingdom.

How then does one understand why He must blot some people’s names “out of the book of life”? Revelation 3:5. How can one’s name not only be enrolled there, but how can it be retained at the time of judgment?

The word books is obviously a euphemism. Recent technology in processing and storing data helps us understand how God can have all the information about us accurately recorded, including data impossible for any man-made computer to catch—our thoughts and motives. Any act or motive that conflicts with God’s pure “law that gives

freedom” (James 1:25, RSV.) puts us at odds with Him and becomes a part of our life record—the “books” by which we will be judged.

God’s Hope Chest—His Book of Life

The book of life indicates that the individual personalities of those who respond to God’s love are precious to Him. Paul speaks of his “fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.” They “labored side by side with me in the gospel.” Philippians 4:3. No one earns an entry there, for salvation is solely by faith. The gospel is the good news of how “God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:15. Everyone who believes, whose heart appreciates that good news, has his name enrolled in the book of life.

Since faith in the Redeemer is the only requirement for having one’s name enrolled there, it follows that the only way it can be “blotted out” is for the believer to renounce his faith, that is, become an unbeliever. God is not trigger-happy at the prospect of erasing anyone’s name. He is extremely reluctant to do so. In fact, the Bible teaching about the judgment reveals good news. Anyone who at any time in his life begins to respond to the drawing of the Holy Spirit not only has his name enrolled in the book of life, but his name remains there until the very end of the judgment process—until the very last moment possible.

Take Judas Iscariot for example. As one of Christ’s disciples, his name was written in the book of life, for Jesus told all of His disciples “that your

names are written in heaven.” Luke 11:20. Since all sins, even those against the Son of man, can be forgiven if they are confessed and forsaken, (Matthew 12:32) there was no need for Judas to be lost except that he hardened his heart, committed suicide, and therefore cut off his last opportunity to repent. But his name remains in the book of life up until the time of the pre-advent or investigative judgment that takes place just before the coming of Jesus. Speaking of that time, the Lord says, “He who conquers, . . . I will not blot out his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before His angels.” Revelation 3:5. Sadly, Jesus must recognize reality: Judas took the initiative and cut himself off from that faith which alone could make eternal life possible for him. Only then does the heavenly computer erase his name.

This “book of life” was in existence long before Gutenberg changed history as he began printing books and reason proclaims that the heavenly court doesn’t need computers to log the records of the human race. But the Bible is clear; there was a “book of life from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 17:8). Equally clear, we are told that the true worshippers of God are written in this “book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (13:8). This book is the Lamb’s book and the Lamb is none other than Christ Himself. This means that the life of God’s people is written in Jesus. This is explained by Paul: “For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

John provides in his epistle a further description of how Christ is the book of life: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14). Unmistakably this “Word” that was from the beginning is Christ Himself and He is the One God gave to the world and He is God’s message to the human race. Paul in Hebrews sharpens this truth by proclaiming that God has specifically “spoken unto us by His Son” (1:1, 2). This was heaven’s mutual plan. The text states: “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19). God does not hold our trespasses against us for they are written in Christ, God’s book of instruction to the human family. This is His gift to the world, which is none other than the “book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” Revelation 13:8.

All of this makes sense. We are written in Christ the Lamb that was slain before we knew our lost condition—before we existed, before the foundation of the world. This is because “in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). The way we are written in this book defies forgery. Thomas, the disciple who had doubts, was deeply concerned with only the genuine and so he demanded to see the print of the nails in Christ’s hands which would confirm the crucifixion and the resurrection (John 20:25). Here was a record

beyond question that would last for eternity. The scars in His hands could never be erased and this Word, this “book of life” would forever declare the justice of God and enable every sinner to stand before the judgment without fear. Indeed, the redeemed will gladly acknowledge they made these marks in His hands. The nails were their writing instruments that as sinners they used when they wrote the record. But this dare not engender fear for the promise is beyond question: “There is therefore no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Romans 8:1).

The Persistence of God’s Salvation Efforts

God has a tremendous vested interest in getting us into heaven. He exhausts every possible avenue by which any human soul can be prepared for entrance therein. The key element of preparation is reconciliation with Him. Obviously, no one who is mad at God could possibly be happy in His eternal presence. You would hardly want to attend a party where you feel that the host or hostess is your enemy. This is why God’s efforts are directed toward helping everyone to understand what Christ has done: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” 2 Corinthians 5:20, 21.

In every way possible God has taken the grand initiative in seeking to get that message across to

every person. If anyone is saved at last, it will be because of what God has done. If anyone is lost, it will be because the unbeliever has taken the initiative in continually and persistently rejecting what God has already accomplished for him. Since he has programmed himself to be alienated forever from God, he could not be happy in heaven even if God’s computer records made a mistake (unthinkable!) and processed his entrance therein. Anyone who rejects this reconciliation would be miserable in the New Jerusalem and would head for the nearest exit immediately.

God respects every person’s sovereign freedom of choice. It must make Him cry to see so many deliberately follow Judas Iscariot in hardening their hearts against the only possible way of eternal life—heartfelt faith.

The time of trouble is not a torture course for the righteous. Rather, it is a time for their deliverance. As a bridegroom loves his bride and wants her to be as secure and comfortable as possible, so the Lord is concerned for His people in this time. “Thus said the Lord of hosts, . . . he who touches you touches the apple of His eye.” Zechariah 2:8. All through their lifetimes He has felt that same concern for them. “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.” Isaiah 63:9. How could He forget them now? Jesus makes clear that any wrong done “to one of the least of these my brethren” He counts as done to

Him. Matthew 25:40, 45. That close identification will not cease during the time of trouble.

When Christ's people suffer persecution, He suffers it with them. When they are hungry, He feels the pangs as well. When they are beaten, abused, or imprisoned, He feels it too. We must appreciate how close Christ is to us! His name is Immanuel, which means God with us.

Why There Must Be a Time of Trouble

The reason why God must permit the final time of trouble is that there is no other way to break Satan's death-grip on the human race. He must let him have enough rope to hang himself. Satan did a good job of hanging himself when he crucified Christ in the sight of the world and the unfallen universe. He exposed himself for what he really is. That is why Jesus said of His approaching crucifixion, "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." John 12:32. To a superficial observer, Christ's death on the cross meant that He was defeated; but the very opposite took place. In murdering the Son of God, Satan uprooted himself once and for all from any sympathy in God's unfallen universe. "The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan. . . . And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down.'" Revelation 12:9, 10. But Satan is in for another defeat, one that he dreads terribly.

Now comes the final battle: the fallen world must also get sick and tired of him.

A child watching Christ die at Calvary might think He was defeated; he could not see how His murderers were the ones who lost the battle. The same child, watching human history ever since, could make the same superficial judgment. He would see the world almost completely given to sin and cruelty. He would watch countless martyrs of Christ die at the stake during the Dark Ages and since, apparently forsaken of heaven as Christ was apparently forsaken on His cross.

Though the cause of evil prosper,
yet 'tis truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold,
and upon the throne be wrong;

Yet that scaffold sways the future,
and behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow,
keeping watch above His own.¹

If all Volkswagens collapsed after 1000 miles of travel the factory could never win the confidence of the public again by merely building more new ones. Everyone would ask, "What is to prevent these new VWs from collapsing in the same manner as all previous ones did?" If all SDA's "collapse" after some years of trial, how would Satan be defeated if the Lord merely raised up more new ones in response to the preaching of Seventh-day Adventism? He would say it is not fair unless he

¹ James Russell Lowell.

were allowed to test the new ones precisely as the old ones were tested. Let us remember that prosperity and “social security” are more severe tests spiritually than persecution and poverty. Therefore, to raise up new SDAs on the eve of the close of probation and subject them to the comparatively easy tests of exciting persecution would be tantamount to excusing them from really difficult temptation. We are *now* going through the most severe trial; if we all fail now, it’s going to look bad for the work of the High Priest. Hence my insistence that if “Christ is truly come in the flesh” Seventh-day Adventism must produce faithful Seventh-day Adventists, and do it now. The Lord must have a people who voluntarily renounce the world and its selfish pleasures and luxuries and securities *before* these things are forcibly removed from us. A mother who is to teaching a child to obey fails if she forcefully digs an object out of the child’s hand after she has asked him to give it up. Will the Lord be honored if He has to do the same with His people?

Satan is like people whom he inspires with his own evil spirit: he can’t control his temper. The time of trouble is when he hangs himself finally with the rope that God passes out to him.

God’s people who have escaped his grasp alone of earth’s billions have demonstrated their total involvement with Christ and their total rejection of everything that Satan stands for. The basic thesis of Satan’s six thousand year legal spree on earth has been his contention that it is impossible for fallen sons and daughters of Adam to lives totally in

harmony with God’s holy law. He has gleefully welcomed all the evidence that has tarnished the record of God’s professed people all through the ages.

You can imagine for example how he has capitalized on the foibles and failures of one of the noblest saints of the Christian era—Martin Luther. The Reformer’s impatience with his brethren, his stubbornness, his bitter contempt of the Jews, his persecuting spirit, all have haunted his posthumous influence. Even Hitler’s Nazis have cited Luther as their patron saint.² Luther’s weaknesses are a crude illustration of the problem that God has had to wrestle with all these many centuries: His professed people have far too often embarrassed Him and given Satan an excuse to gloat. (This doesn’t mean that these saints will be lost. The point is that God must at last be vindicated by a people who completely overcome, or He will be eternally embarrassed.)

The time of trouble cannot come until God’s people experience a finally effective revival and reformation. Satan doesn’t want that blessing ever to come, for it would make him angry. If he could have his way, the reformation and the end also would never come. He wants to postpone his final defeat permanently. It is not in his interest for the coming of Christ to be anywhere near soon. (This should shake us up. If we also don’t want the Lord to come soon, look whose side we’re standing on!)

What Will trigger the Final Showdown

² See *Time*, March 25, 1985, p. 83.

True to form, the “dragon” will lose his cool once he sees a genuine demonstration of complete loyalty to Christ. Once let a people learn to overcome “even as” Christ “overcame,” so that God can truthfully say of them, “Here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus,” and Satan will explode. “Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest [the remnant] of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God.” Revelation 12:17. The time of trouble will be his final temper tantrum.

But it will be his final undoing, as well. Again, as at Calvary, he will expose himself. Christ will accept the gauntlet flung down before Him. He will consider Satan’s enmity against God’s people as personally directed against Himself. The mark of the beast will be an overt attempt to rid the earth of God’s people, Satan’s “final solution” for what is to him the righteousness “problem.” This “remnant” who truly keep God’s commandments are a threat to him, a demonstration that his entire program has been wrong from the beginning.

A child looking on might think that God’s people are doomed. They will be tempted to think so themselves; but they risk everything in their devotion to Christ. They draw out the sting of the dragon’s murderous onslaught, and give God the chance to catch the enemy and all who stand with him red-handed, convicted in the act of murderous high treason against the righteous government of God, and of attempted murder of Christ in the person of His saints. Thus the time of trouble will

finally make possible an end to the great controversy between Christ and Satan that has raged ever since the Fall.

The time of trouble is therefore not something to dread. It is an exciting time of intimacy with Christ. The wicked “will make war on the Lamb,” but He will conquer, “for He is Lord of lords and King of kings.” He will have a people who are “with Him” all the way, a people “called and chosen and faithful.” Revelation 17:14.

Remember, getting ready for the time of trouble is not a legalistic works program. It’s a matter of being finally reconciled to God through Christ’s sacrifice, receiving “the final atonement.”³ It’s the complete devotion to Him that is involved in a bride submitting to a husband whom she dearly loves.

Wouldn’t it be supremely selfish of us to say “No” to His invitation? And wouldn’t it imply a pretty serious lack of trust in Him for us to be afraid of the future with Him?

³ Cf. *Early Writings*, pp. 244, 254; *Great Controversy*, p. 480.