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Will the Church Go Through the Tribulation?

by David Dunlap

Beyond a doubt, biblical prophecy is one of the most important subjects in the Bible. The sheer weight of its biblical references attest to this fact. The return of the Lord is mentioned in every book of the New Testament except two. The return of the Lord is mentioned in 211 chapters of the New Testament, and prophecies connected to the return of the Lord are mentioned over 500 times in the Bible. Nevertheless, many believers shy away from the study of prophecy and are confused as to what the Bible teaches on the subject. Satan loves to confuse and distract believers from the most important aspects of biblical truth. This is clear concerning prophecy. There are more competing views of prophecy than almost any other aspect of Bible study. One of the most neglected, and yet important, subjects of endtimes prophecy is whether the church will go through the tribulation. Many believers have never considered this topic, yet our view concerning it will determine our understanding of salvation, the security of the believer, and the finished work of Christ.

The Calvinist View the Tribulation

Most Calvinist, Amillennial, and Postmillennial authors and Bible teachers argue that the church will go through the tribulation period. Older writers such as George Eldon Ladd and Robert Gundry have taught this view. Millard Erickson, professor at Truitt Seminary, TX, espouses this view in his book *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, a book that is a standard text in many evangelical Bible colleges. Popular reformed author Keith Mathison argues for this view in his recent book *Postmillennialism- Eschatology of Hope*. Recently, Calvinist radio personality Harold Camping has espoused this view in his radio broadcasts. Despite the considerable education of these men, these writers, in arguing their view, weaken the statements of Scripture concerning the severity of the tribulation, the wrath of God during the tribulation, and teach that tribulation suffering is needed to purify the church.

Suffering as Christians & Suffering the Tribulation

Although the church has gone through periods of great persecution and undoubtedly may go through even more intense suffering before Christ's return, we must assert that the Church of Jesus Christ will not go through the tribulation. We base our convictions on the divine Word of God. We must be clear that there is a difference between suffering as Christians and suffering during the tribulation period. All Christians will

*“God delivers
believers from
wrath
designed for
judgment
upon
unbelievers*

(Sodom, Noah-Flood).

*So too, God
will deliver
the church
before the time
of
tribulation.”*

John Walvoord
(1910-2002)

suffer affliction, trial, and tribulation in this world. It is a fact of life and it is a truth of Scripture. The Lord Jesus Christ said, "In this world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world"(John 16:33). Later in the New Testament, the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "All those who live godly for Christ Jesus will suffer persecution"(2 Tim. 3:12). However, this is a very different thing than suggesting that true believers will be subject to seven years of intense, severe, divine judgment of God during the tribulation period.

The Tribulation and the Wrath of God

The severity of tribulation is mentioned frequently in both the Old and New Testaments. Matthew 24 tells us that the suffering during the tribulation will be the most intense the world has ever known. "There will be great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall" (Matt. 24:21 NASV). There will be dreadful persecution, earthquakes, famine, wars, disease; but the most severe judgment will be the wrath of God that is brought to bear upon the whole earth. The wrath of God is poured out at the beginning and throughout the whole tribulation period. In Revelation chapter 6, at the start of the tribulation, we read, "The kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men,...hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of His wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand? (Rev. 6:15-17) The divine wrath of God is mentioned twelve times between chapters 6 and 16 of Revelation. We read that the wrath of God will be poured out without reservation," "...the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture" (Rev. 14:10).

The Wrath of God and the Church

The book of Revelation shows us in graphic detail that the tribulation will be a time when the divine wrath of God is felt by the entire world. This aspect alone is a proof that the Christians will not go through the tribulation period. Why might we say this? The Bible teaches that once a person has been saved by faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ, he will never again suffer judgment for his sins in this age of grace or in the future tribulation period. Romans comforts us, "Having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him"(Rom. 5:9). We read a little later in Romans, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus"(8:1). In 1 Thessalonians, the apostle Paul encourages believers, "Who raised his Son from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come"(1:10). This is an extremely important point, for it touches on our eternal salvation and the eternal security of the believer. If Christians are to bear in, some way, judgment and divine punishment for our sins, then the death of Christ on the cross was in some way insufficient and inadequate. The finished work of Christ is not finished after all. Such a notion we must reject completely out of hand. The Lord Jesus Christ bore the full wrath of God for us once for all on the cross. It has been rightly said, "Christ bore the wrath of God without mercy that we might enjoy the mercy of God without wrath." Respected leader and

*"Now this
promise
(Revelation 3:10)
expressly
declares that
real believers
of this
dispensation,
that is, the
true church,
will be kept
from this
coming hour
of trial."*

H. A. Ironside

(1876-1951)

former pastor of Park Street Street Church, in Boston Harold J. Ockenga (1905-1985), correctly states the case:

The church will endure the wrath of men, but will not suffer the wrath of God...Pretribulation rapturists identify the tribulation with the wrath of God. If this can be proved, we must believe that the church will be taken out of the world before the tribulation, for there is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.¹

The Tribulation and Revelation 3:10

The most important single passage concerning the tribulation and the church is Revelation 3:10. The Lord in His letter to the church of Philadelphia promises that He will remove the church before the tribulation period. He states: "Because you have kept the Word of my patience, I will keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. The phrase "keep you from" is a very important. It means I will "keep you out of" — the Lord will keep believers in Christ from the tribulation period which will test the whole world. The Lord does not merely say "I will keep you from or through the *testing* which will try the whole earth." The Lord says specifically "they will be kept from *the hour*" that shall try the whole world. This promises that the church will be removed from the event of the tribulation period that shall come upon the whole earth. It is one thing to be kept through the trial, violence, and suffering of war and it is another thing to be kept out of the time of war itself. This is what the Lord Jesus Christ is telling His church: "I will keep you from the *time* of the tribulation period."

The Tribulation and the Bride of Christ

A number of Calvinist leaders insist that it is important for the church to go through the tribulation period because this time of judgment and testing will purify the bride of Christ. Indeed, the Lord has used testing to chasten and purify His people in the past. Israel was tested for 400 years in Egypt. He also used the forty years of wilderness wandering to test His people. However, is there any indication that the Lord will use the future 7-year tribulation period to purify the church, the bride of Christ? Ephesians chapter 5 tells us, "Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having a spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27). The purification of the bride of Christ will be done by the Lord in this age before the rapture of the church. When the rapture takes place the church will be sanctified, purified, and made glorious by the ministry of Christ alone. The tribulation will not be needed for this work; the purification will already be complete.

Harry Ironside once remarked, "Will the Lord have His bride endure famine, persecution, beatings, imprisonment, earthquakes, torture and then usher her to heaven for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, in a bruised, broken and soiled condition — her veil torn and wedding garment soiled?" Never. The bride of Christ will already be in a spotless and blameless condition, ready for her Savior at His coming!

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James M. Boice
(1939-2000)



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The Tribulation and Imminency

The writers of the New Testament stress the "any-moment" coming of the Lord Jesus. Theologians call that doctrine "Imminency." The apostle Paul writes, "Looking for that blessed hope and appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). James says, "Be patient, strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (James 5:8). The implication is that the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ would be soon and that this coming would deliver suffering believers from their oppressors. This coming of the Lord would also deliver believers from the wrath to come (1 Thess 5:9), the Great Tribulation. The Lord Jesus says in Luke 21:36, "...that you may escape all these things and stand before the Son of Man." Respected author James Montgomery Boice (1939-2000) writes:

According to the Postmillennial view, the church of Jesus Christ will go through the great tribulation. Nevertheless, this view is impossible for the simple reason that it makes meaningless the arguments of the apostle Paul. Paul was arguing for the soon return of Christ. This is to be the major source of comfort for suffering believers. If Christ was not to come until after the great tribulation, then there is little comfort in the Lord's return.²

Conclusion

The Bible sets forth the seven-year tribulation period as a time of divine judgment upon Israel, Gentiles, and Christendom. Yet, the church will be delivered from this time of judgment because she is the redeemed, sanctified, and purified bride of Christ. During the interim, the church awaits the shout of the Savior, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God. "Behold, I come quickly" (Rev. 3:11). Perhaps today!

Endnotes

1. Harold J. Ockenga, "Will the Church go Through the Tribulation? Yes.", *Christian Life*, February, 1955
2. James Montgomery Boice, *The Last and Future World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), pp. 41-42