

6. THE TRIBULATION SAINTS

I find it tragic that many premillennialists teach that the status of the saints who live through the seven-year tribulation period will be different from that of Christians living today. It is a necessary pre-tribulation rapture stance, since according to their teaching, the Church is raptured before the tribulation, and the door to the Church is shut (Mt 25:10). They regard tribulation saints as a different group of God's people. That is messy! The simple truth is that the Church that Jesus is building started at Pentecost and finishes at his return in glory. As a result, some interpret Revelation 7 literally as Jewish believers, Jewish evangelists in fact, who preach the gospel during the tribulation in place of the Church!

Terminology

Rapture – when the righteous are resurrected at the Lord's return, living Christians will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

Great Tribulation – the 3 ½ year period following the Abomination that causes Desolation and preceding the return of Christ, which Jesus described as great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until then (Mt 24:21). This period begins when the Antichrist takes his seat in God's temple (2 Thess 2:4).

Pre-tribulation rapture – proponents claim that the rapture occurs before the tribulation period begins and that Jesus takes them to heaven.

Post-tribulation rapture – proponents claim that the rapture occurs after the tribulation period (Rev 6-13) on the Day of the Lord when Jesus arrives, just before God's wrath is poured out on the world (Rev 16-18).

Saints – God's people in the NT, the Church that Christ is building. They are also known as God's servants, the righteous, or the elect. There is only one group of saints.

Tribulation saints – the elect during the tribulation period. Those who believe in a post-tribulation rapture don't need to treat tribulation saints as different from any other saints. The bad news is that the tribulation will be a very difficult time and there will be many martyrs. The good news is that we will have a wonderful opportunity to glorify God. God has given us an opportunity, not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for him (Php 1:29).

Israel – Israel became a nation in 1948. Except for Messianic Jews who belong to the Church, most Israelis are not believers in Jesus and are not regarded as saints or servants of God until their national conversion occurs after Jesus' return. They are rarely in focus in Revelation, a book written to churches, not Israel. Before the tribulation period a new temple will be built, and at the end of the tribulation period, the nations of the world will lay siege to Jerusalem in open rebellion against God, the Messiah, the Church, and Israel. In chapter 11 two Messianic Christians preach in Jerusalem during the final 3 ½ years. It is to the Mount of Olives that Jesus returns (Zech 14:4). The 144,000 servants of God of Revelation 7 are Christians, not Jews (Rev 14:4), purchased by Jesus for God from every tribe and language, people and nation (Rev 5:9).

Antichrist – a world ruler prophesied by Daniel who will head up the last world empire, a coalition of all nations. He is a false Christ in the sense that he will rule the whole world and claim to be divine.

Resurrection – Christ was the first to be resurrected bodily and when he returns, those who belong to him will be resurrected bodily. These are the only times given in scripture for bodily resurrection to take place (1 Cor 15:23). The resurrection of the saints at Jesus' glorious return is the first resurrection (Rev 20:4). The rest of the dead come to life after the millennium, a resurrection, but not a bodily resurrection. They don't rise from the dead; the sea, Hades, and Death give them up!

A pre-tribulation theologian, Dr. John F. Walvoord, makes the following statements in his 1959 book "The Millennial Kingdom." "The church is never found in any portion of Scripture dealing with the time of the tribulation," and "Post-tribulation adherents cannot cite a simple passage which identifies tribulation saints with the Church" (p. 249-250).

I would then ask, who are the martyrs (Rev 6:9), defined as “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and the witness they had maintained”? Who are the people whom Satan wages war against – defined as “those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus” (Rev 12:17)? Who are those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands, who came to life and ruled with Christ for a thousand years? (Rev 20:4).

Premillennial rapture adherents are forced into manufacturing a new group of people who are separate from the Church. They call them tribulation saints. Walvoord says, “Nowhere does the Church appear in these tremendous events” (p. 262). But he never gives any evidence that Christians during the tribulation period are any different from Christians today. Why are present Christians called the Church while tribulation Christians are something else? Only because according to Walvoord, the Church is raptured before the tribulation.

What abomination? What desolation?

Jesus told his disciples that the gospel of the kingdom would be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end would come. He knew that it would take around 2000 years to accomplish that, but the disciples didn’t. Then he told them that when they saw the Abomination that causes Desolation standing in the temple, those in Judea should flee because there would follow great distress unequalled from the beginning of the world. If those days weren’t reduced, no one would survive. That time hasn’t arrived yet; Jesus was warning a future generation, not the present one.

Commentaries that discuss the Abomination of Desolation in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC, or the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, are not interpreting Scripture correctly. They cannot tell us what the word desolation means in its future context. But Jesus told us! He said, if the number of those days was not reduced by God, no one would survive. That sounds like nuclear warfare. We have heard it before, nuclear war could wipe out life on Earth. We also know what will happen after the Antichrist takes his seats in God’s temple. Daniel’s prophecy mentions the surrender of the sanctuary (in Jerusalem) and the trampling underfoot of the Lord’s people. Daniel

also said that the little horn (the Antichrist) would wage war against the saints and defeat them (Dan 7:21), a prophecy repeated by John (Rev 13:7). It will be a time of desolation for Israel and the Church as Satan and the Antichrist attempt to exterminate them (Rev 12:13-17). Islam will not stand idly by when the Antichrist sets himself up as God on Mount Zion which is regarded as the second most holy place on Earth. Angels will pour out the first four bowls of God's wrath on land, sea, rivers and the sun, and festering sores will break out on people who have the Antichrist's mark and worship his image. They will be scorched by the sun and curse the name of God. The fifth bowl is poured out on the Antichrist's throne and his kingdom is plunged into darkness. When the sixth bowl of God's wrath is poured out, demonic spirits go out to the kings of the whole world and gather them for battle on the great Day of God Almighty.

Egypt and its allies are the first to rebel against the Antichrist (Dan 11:40). The Antichrist will invade many countries and sweep through them like a flood but reports from the East and the North will alarm him as Gog and his hordes head for Israel.

The saints are still there because at Christ's return, the righteous dead are resurrected, the living saints are raptured, and the last bowl of wrath is poured out into the air. A voice from the throne says: It is done! All the glory of man's proud civilization is destroyed. There are flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has occurred since mankind has been on Earth, so tremendous was the quake. The cities of the nations collapse as God remembers to punish Babylon, the great coalition of nations of the last days. Ezekiel describes the terror and destruction:

In my zeal and fiery wrath I declare that at that time there shall be a great earthquake in the land of Israel. The fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the beasts of the field, every creature that moves along the ground, and all the people on the face of the Earth will tremble at my presence. The mountains will be overturned, the cliffs will crumble and every wall will fall to the ground (Ezek 38:19-20).

The presence of the Lord refers to the moment when the Messiah's feet stand on the Mount of Olives and it splits in two from East to West. This initiates a series of worldwide earthquakes spoken of by many prophets in their end-time prophecies (Jer 4:23-28, Hag 2:6, 21-22, Zech 14:4, Heb 12:26-27, Rev 6:12-16, 16:17-21).