

Why God's Purpose for the Tribulation excludes the Church

"And the LORD your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you. And you shall again obey the Lord, and observe all His commandments which I command you today."

-Deuteronomy 30:7-8

God's purpose for the tribulation (i.e., the seven-year, 70th week of Daniel) revolves around His plan for Israel and does not include a earthly presence for the church. Why? Because God's plan for Israel is unfinished at this point in history. When the role of the church is completed she will be taken as a completed body to heaven in an instant - at the rapture. This will clear the way for a restoration and resumption of progress toward the completion of our Sovereign Lord's plans for His elect nation-Israel.

The Tribulation Focuses on Israel

The Bible teaches that the tribulation is a time of preparation for Israel's restoration and conversion (Deut. 4:29-30; Jer. 30:3-11; Zech. 12:10).¹ While the church will experience tribulation in general during this present age (John 15:18-25; 16:33; 2 Tim. 3:10-13), she is never mentioned as participating in Israel's time of trouble, which includes the Great Tribulation, the Day of the Lord, and the Wrath of God. Gerald Stanton explains:

The Tribulation does not deal with the Church at all, but with the purification of Israel. It is not the "time of the Church's trouble," but the "time of Jacob's trouble." The emphasis of the Tribulation is primarily Jewish. This fact is borne out by Old Testament Scriptures (Deut. 4: 30; Jer. 30: 7; Ezek. 20: 37; Dan. 12:1; Zech. 13:8-9), by the Olivet Discourse of Christ (Matt. 24:9-26), and by the book of Revelation itself (Rev. 7:4-8; 12:1-2; 17, etc.). It concerns "Daniel's people," the coming of "false Messiah," the preaching of the "gospel of the kingdom," flight on the "sabbath," the temple and the "holy place," the land of Judea, the city of Jerusalem, the twelve "tribes of the children of Israel," the "son of Moses," "signs"

in the heavens, the "covenant" with the Beast, the "sanctuary," the "sacrifice and the oblation" of the temple ritual. These all speak of Israel and clearly demonstrate that the Tribulation is largely a time when God deals with His ancient people prior to their entrance into the promised kingdom. The many Old Testament prophecies yet to be fulfilled for Israel further indicate a future time when God will deal with this nation (Deut. 30:1-6; Jer. 30:8-10, etc.)²

The Church is Absent from the Tribulation

Not one Old Testament passage on the tribulation refers to the church (Deut. 4:29-30; Jer. 30:4-11; Dan. 8:24-27; 12:1-2), nor does the New Testament ever speak of the church in relation to the tribulation (Matt. 13:30, 39-42, 48-50; 24:15-31; 1 Thess. 1:9-10, 5:4-9; 2 Thess. 2:1-11; Rev. 4-18), except as present in heaven. Such silence speaks loudly and supports the pre-trib position, especially when combined with clear, explicit statements that promise her exemption from that time (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Rev. 3:10). Note the clear promise to the church of Revelation 3:10:

Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth.

If pretribulationism is indeed the teaching of Scripture, then we would expect that passages dealing with the tribulation would consistently make *no* mention of the church. This is exactly what we find. However, Israel is mentioned often throughout these texts. Dr. Robert Gromacki has studied the New Testament book of Revelation, chapters 4-19, which gives the most detailed overview of the seven-year tribulation in all the Bible. He has shown the following:

However, there is a strange silence of the term in chapters 4-19. That fact is especially noteworthy when you contrast that absence with its frequent presence in the first three chapters. One good reason for this phenomenon is the absence of the true church and true evangelical churches in the seven years preceding the Second Coming. The true believers of the church have gone into the presence of Christ in heaven before the onset of the events of the seven year

period. The church is not mentioned during the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments because the church is not here during the outpouring of these judgments.³

Tribulation on a Christ-Rejecting World

Another purpose for the tribulation is that it is a time of God's wrath upon a Christ-rejecting world and a time of revenge for Gentile treatment of Israel.

Moreover, it is evident that the Tribulation also concerns God's judgment upon Christ-rejecting Gentile nations. Babylon, which "made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication" (Rev. 14:8), shall herself "be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her" (Rev. 18:8). The "cities of the nations" shall fall, after which Satan shall be bound "that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled" (Rev. 20:3). God's judgment falls likewise upon the individual wicked, the kings of the earth, the great, the rich, and the mighty, every bond man and every free man (Rev. 6:15-17). It falls upon all who blaspheme the name of God and repent not to give Him glory (Rev. 16:9). Wicked men, godless nations, suffering Israel--these may all be found in Revelation 6-18; but one looks in vain for the Church of Christ, which is His body, until he reaches the nineteenth chapter. There she is seen as the heavenly bride of Christ, and when He returns to earth to make His enemies His footstool, she is seen returning with Him (I Thess. 3: 13).⁴

Such a time of judgment does not require the church, who has not rejected Christ, to be present. With the church in heaven during the tribulation, it enables God's focus to be on Israel as His Divine instrument through which He acts. This program was predicted by the Lord before Joshua and Israel ever entered the Promised Land. Notice the predicted pattern:

1) then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. (Deut. 30:3)

2) And the LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it . . . (Deut. 30:5a)

3) And the LORD your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you. And you shall again obey the LORD, and observe all His commandments which I command you today. (Deut. 30:7-8)

Zechariah speaks of the Lord's retribution upon the nations as a time when "the LORD will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem . . . in that day that I will set about to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem." (Zech. 12:8-9) Once again the focus is upon Israel, in this case Jerusalem, not the church.

The book of Revelation provides a graphic depiction of God's judgment upon an unbelieving world, often called "earth dwellers." As God prosecutes His judgment upon the "earth dwellers," John records periodic pauses by our Lord as He evaluates the response of mankind to His judgment before going onto the next phase. It is as if the Lord inflicts a series of judgments and then surveys the landscape to see if, like Ninevah in the days of Jonah, there is repentance so that He can suspend prosecution of the war. Unlike Ninevah in the days of Jonah, the "earth dwellers" do not relent in the wake of "the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:16), so our Lord proceeds to the next phase of His battle. Every step of the way, the "earth dwellers" would "not repent of the works of their hands" (Rev. 9:20) Instead of worshipping Christ, "the earth and those who dwell in it . . . worship the first beast" (Rev. 13:12). Instead of repentance they "blasphemed God" (Rev. 16:21). Finally, "all the nations were deceived" (Rev. 18:23) resulting in the satanic notion that the armies of the world must march against Jerusalem-God's city- and Israel-His people. This results in the basis for the second coming of Christ, which is to rescue Israel from the world's armies who are striking out at God by invading His people. Such a scenario does not demand or require the church and so she will not be there. We can see that the purpose of the tribulation revolves around God's plan for Israel, not the church.

Conclusion

Only pretribulationism is able to give full import to tribulation terms like "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7), as a passage specifically stating that the tribulation is for Jacob (i.e., Israel). John Walvoord concludes,

Never are tribulation saints given the special and peculiar promises given to the church in the present age. The nature of the church in contrast to Israel therefore becomes an argument supporting the pretribulation viewpoint.⁵

Since God's purpose for the tribulation is to restore Israel (Jer. 30:3, 10) and judge the Gentiles (Jer. 30:11), it is clear that this purpose does not include the church. This is one of the reasons why she will be taken to heaven before this time. The church's hope is a heavenly one, not participation in the culmination and restoration of God's plan for His earthly people-Israel. Maranatha!

Endnotes

1 These arguments are adopted from John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), pp. 270-71.

2 Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept From The Hour: Biblical Evidence for the Pretribulational Return of Christ*, 4th edition (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 35-36.

3 Robert Gromacki, "Where is 'The Church' in Revelation 4-19?" in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, editors *When The Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), p. 355.

4 Stanton, *Ibid.*, p. 36.

5 Walvoord, *Ibid.*, p. 65.