

# Part 23: Premillennialism and the Tribulation

by John F. Walvoord

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*The sermon argues that the church will not go through the tribulation period based on a literal interpretation of the Scriptures.*

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 4:29, Jeremiah 30:4, Daniel 9:24, Matthew 24:15, Romans 5:9, 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 2 Peter 2:6, Revelation 3:10

**Topics:** "Eschatology", "Tribulation"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the nature of the tribulation, emphasizing the importance of a literal interpretation of Scripture to understand that the church of the present age will not go through the tribulation. The Old Testament and New Testament passages clearly indicate that the tribulation is focused on Israel, Gentile powers, and saints, but not on the church. The nature of the church versus the nature of Israel further supports the pretribulation viewpoint, highlighting the distinction between the true church and the professing church, as well as the difference between the true church and true Israel.

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## Transcript

Argument from the nature of the tribulation. Just as premillennialism is founded upon a literal interpretation of millennial passages, so pretribulationism is based upon a literal interpretation of the tribulation passages. A careful and literal exegesis of the Scriptures dealing with the tribulation reveal no evidence whatever that the church of the redeemed of the present age will go through the tribulation. This is brought out particularly in the Scriptural revelation of the nature of the tribulation.

Before ascertaining whether the church will pass through the tribulation, it is of utmost importance to understand first what the Scriptures teach about this coming period. Practically all types of posttribulationism are built upon confusion of tribulation in general, which characterizes various ages, and the great tribulation, which is the predicted future time. For instance, George H. Fromow answers the question of whether the church will pass through the great tribulation by countering: "The Church is already passing through 'the Great Tribulation,' according to the sense of Rev vii, vv. 13, 14 ...Rev vii . is the only passage where we find the Tribulation called 'great.' Its use as embracing the whole of the Church's course, corresponds with the entire record of the Scriptural history of the redeemed. 'Great' thus covers the entire period of the history of the redeemed people of God, of 'Saints,' or 'Gracious Ones,' or 'Church,' however they may be described." [1] George H. Fromow, Will the Church Pass through the Tribulation?, pp. 2-3. This quotation is notable because it illustrates two leading characteristics of

posttribulationism which are essential to their conclusions: (1) confusion of the great tribulation with tribulation in general; (2) confusion of the church with saints as a whole. While posttribulationists sometimes avoid the first, they seldom avoid the second. As a study of the tribulation will bring out, "...not one syllable of Scripture affirms that the church goes through the great tribulation, or even enters that awful period." [2] C. I. Scofield, *Will the Church Pass through the Great Tribulation?*, p. 10.

The Old Testament reveals that the tribulation deals with (1) the nation Israel; (2) the pagan Gentile political powers; (3) saints who are described as either Israelites or Gentiles. It is certain that the true church cannot be equated with the Gentile political powers, though the apostate church of the tribulation period is under the control of the political ruler of that time. Only by spiritualization, characteristic of amillennialism, can the nation Israel be considered the same as the church. The Old Testament revelation which specifies the judgment of Israel and the Gentile powers as the objective of the tribulation period by so much declares that the tribulation does not concern itself with the church, the body of believers in this present age. The fact that saints are mentioned proves only that there will arise in that period some who believe and are saved. A survey of tribulation passages will demonstrate these facts.

One of the first references to the tribulation is found in Deuteronomy 4:29-30: "But from thence ye shall seek Jehovah thy God, and thou shalt find him, when thou searchest after him with all thy heart and with all thy soul. When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, in the latter days thou shalt return to Jehovah thy God, and hearken unto his voice." The tribulation here is revealed as preparatory for the restoration of the nation Israel, and therefore the preparation of Israel for the coming kingdom is an outstanding aspect of the period.

Another important Old Testament reference dealing with the tribulation is found in Jeremiah 30:4-11. In this passage the tribulation is declared to be "the time of Jacob's trouble" (v. 7 ) and as unprecedented in its severity (cf. Matt 24:21). The revelation continues, however, with the glad announcement, "he shall be saved out of it" (v. 7 ). The Gentiles are described as being judged and Israel is delivered from her oppressors. Jehovah is to be the God of Jacob and David is to be raised up to be their king (v. 9 ). Israel will be regathered from near and far and shall return to the land (v. 10 ). The destiny of Israel and the nations is contrasted in these words: "For I am with thee, saith Jehovah, to save thee: for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have scattered thee, but I will not make a full end of thee; but I will correct thee in measure, and will in no wise leave thee unpunished" (v. 11 ). Again in this passage, both Jews and Gentiles are declared to be the objects of divine dealings in the tribulation, but the church, composed of true believers, is not in view at all.

Daniel supplies much material on the tribulation which falls into the same pattern. The seventieth "week" of Daniel, [3] For a good discussion of the future character of the seventieth week, see Robert D. Culver, *Daniel and the Latter Days*, pp. 135-60. the latter part of which is the time of great tribulation, describes the coming of the "one that maketh desolate"--the evil world-ruler of the great tribulation (Dan 9:27). The period is concerned with "thy people" (Dan 9:24) which can be no other than the Jewish people in this context. In Daniel 12:1, "a time of trouble" for "the children of thy people" is described. Like Jeremiah 30:7, this period is declared to be "such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time" (Dan 12:1). It is declared to culminate in deliverance: "and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book" (Dan 12:1). The reference to "thy people" is clearly a reference to the Jewish nation which shall be delivered at the end of the tribulation period.

None of the Old Testament passages nor any of the multiplied references in the Minor Prophets includes the church of the present age in its foreview of the tribulation. It is universally presented as dealing with the nation Israel and with the Gentile nations. Only by unwarranted identification of the church with Israel and by ignoring the context can the church be drawn into the picture.

What is true of passages in the Old Testament dealing with the tribulation is also true of the New Testament. Posttribulationists tend to slide over the obvious fact that the church is never once mentioned in the New Testament as being in the tribulation period. A notable passage is Matthew 24:15-31, the context of which is definitely Jewish. The sign given is the abomination of desolation connected with desecration of the Jewish temple of that time. Instructions are given to those in Judea to flee to the mountains--another indication that Israelites are in view. Reference is made to the Sabbath, a Jewish institution (Matt 24:20) and they are told to pray that their flight be not on the Sabbath--a day in which their flight would be very obvious.

Posttribulationists, while conceding that there is no reference to the church as such, seize upon the word "elect" found in Matthew 24:22, 31. Pretribulationists concede and uniformly teach that there will be elect, that is, saved people in the tribulation time. This fact does not in the slightest prove that these mentioned in this way belong to the church, the body of Christ. All saved people of all ages as individuals are elect. Israel is also an elect nation, that is, specially chosen to fulfill divine purposes. The question is not whether there are any elect in the tribulation, but whether that portion of the elect which is called the church, the body of Christ, is ever found. As far as this passage is concerned, there is no evidence whatever for the presence of the church in this period. heaven" (Mark 13:27). The point is that pretribulationism is not hindered in the slightest by the form of expression that is used here, and posttribulationists are guilty of begging the question by assuming that this passage confirms their position. The fact is that the church is not mentioned at all in this passage by any distinctive title such as the word church or the term body of Christ, or any other term peculiarly a reference to the church. It is not claimed that this passage proves pretribulationism, but it is fair to claim that it does not offer any evidence whatever against it.

The argument of Reese that the gathering of the elect is positive proof that the translation of the saints takes place at this time is another instance of reading into the passage what it does not say. Reese states: "The assertion of Kelly's in his Second Coming (p. 211) that there is no rapture at Matt. xxiv.31, is as bold as it is unfounded. Our Lord in that passage gave a perfect picture of the assembling of the saved of this Dispensation by means of a rapture; St. Mark even used for 'gather' the verbal form of the same word used for 'gathering' in 2 Thess. ii.1, where Paul refers to the Rapture. To unbiased minds the gathering of the saved, or the Elect, in Matt. xxiv.31, is the prototype of Paul's teaching in 1 Thess. iv.16-17, and 2 Thess. ii.1." [6] Ibid., p. 208. The logical fallacy of this statement should be apparent. Reese argues because there is a gathering at the translation that therefore every mention of a gathering must be the same event. The truth is that there will be a gathering of the church, the body of Christ, at the translation, before the tribulation. There will also be a gathering after the tribulation which will be more inclusive. Matthew says nothing about a translation and the idea of translation is foreign to any passage dealing with the coming of Christ to establish His kingdom. There will be no translation then, though there will be a resurrection of righteous dead. Matthew says nothing about the resurrection either. It should be clear that Matthew's revelation deals with the gathering of the elect as an event subsequent to all that has gone before.

The major Scriptural passage on the tribulation period is the Book of Revelation, chapters 4-19. Here in fifteen chapters in the most graphic language possible the great catastrophic time of trouble is unfolded.

Any reasonably literal interpretation of this portion of Scripture will sustain the point of view that the events herein described have never been fulfilled and comprise the awful period of human history still ahead which will culminate in the "revelation of Jesus Christ," the second advent proper. It should be borne in mind that the Book of Revelation deals with the revelation of Jesus Christ to an unbelieving world as its God and Judge. The description of the tribulation time is the fitting frame to the picture, giving the events preceding the climactic day of the Lord.

It is notable that in this extended portion of Scripture there is not one mention of the church, the body of Christ. After the message to the seven churches in Asia, obviously contemporary to the first century, not one reference is found to the church or any other title peculiar to believers of this present age. To be sure, saints are mentioned both in heaven and on earth, but this general reference is not a hindrance to the pretribulational position. The church is also in view in the figure of marriage in Revelation 19 picturing the coming of the wife of the Lamb, but this is in connection with the second advent and does not constitute any problem. Like passages previously considered, the Book of Revelation presents the tribulation as having the divine purpose of purging the nation Israel and bringing them to repentance and of judging and destroying the Gentile political power of that day. The entire program as revealed in the Book of Revelation is without relevance to the present purpose of God of forming a body of believers from Jews and Gentiles to constitute the bride of Christ.

It is, of course, conceded that there are many passages which teach that even the church will have a measure of tribulation while on earth. Christ told His disciples plainly, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33). Paul preached "that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22; cf. 2 Tim 3:12). This is taken as proving beyond question that the church will go through the future tribulation by some posttribulationists.[7] George L. Rose, *Tribulation Till Translation*, pp. 76-77. It illustrates the illogical thinking which confuses Scriptural teaching on tribulation in general which abides through the age with the future distinctive period of tribulation declared to be unprecedented. The same passage cannot refer to both. The great tribulation is always presented in Scripture as a future time of trouble while the state of difficulty and persecution experienced by the early church was clearly contemporary. Posttribulationism has not proved anything until it has proved that the church, the body of Christ, will be in that prophesied period of unprecedented trouble. This is, however, impossible, as none of the passages which deal with this tribulation period mention the church.

Not only is there no mention of the church in any passage describing the future tribulation, but there are specific promises given to the church that deliverance from that period is assured. According to 1 Thessalonians 5:9, Christians are promised, "For God appointed us not unto wrath, but unto the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." The wrath of God will be poured out upon the world during the great tribulation. Revelation 6:17 states, "For the great day of their wrath is come; and who is able to stand?" The character of the judgments which will fall is such that they will affect everyone--famine, pestilence, sword, earthquake, stars falling from heaven. The only way one could be kept from that day of wrath would be to be delivered beforehand. The same context in 1 Thessalonians 5 also affirms that the believer will not be overtaken by the day of destruction like a thief in the night and that the believer is not to be included with the children of darkness who are doomed for destruction. Instead of being appointed to wrath and sudden destruction as children of darkness, believers are declared to be appointed to salvation and to living together with Him.

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 speaks in similar vein. Jesus is declared to be the one "who delivered us from the wrath to come." The possibility of escaping the coming day of trial is predicted in Luke 21:36: "But watch

ye at every season, making supplication, that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man."

The church at Philadelphia is promised: "Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth" (Rev 3:10). As the translators have made clear, the thought of the Greek is to "keep from," not to "keep in." The promise was to be kept from "the hour" of trial, not just the trials in the hour. The primary promise to the church of Philadelphia was that they would not enter this hour of trial. Historically, it meant just that. The church at Philadelphia was not to enter the tribulation period. By application, if expositors are correct who find in the seven churches a foreshadowing of the entire church age, then the Philadelphia church, representing the true and faithful church, is promised deliverance before the hour comes. While it may be debatable to what extent this constitutes absolute proof for pretribulationism, it gives no comfort whatever to posttribulationism.[8] For further discussion, cf. E. Schuyler English, *Re-Thinking the Rapture*, pp. 85-91.

The Scriptures repeatedly indicate that Christians of this age are kept from wrath. Romans 5:9 states: "Much more then, being now justified by his blood, shall we be saved from the wrath of God through him." This principle is illustrated in Scripture in such historic cases as the deliverance of Lot from Sodom, which is taken as a specific illustration of deliverance from wrath in 2 Peter 2:6-9. Noah and his family, delivered from the flood by the ark, constitute another illustration of the principle. Rahab at Jericho was also delivered from the doomed city. While illustrations cannot properly be taken as absolute proof, they support the idea that God characteristically delivers believers from wrath designed for judgment upon the unbelievers. If God delivers the church before the time of tribulation, it will be in keeping with the general principle.

The nature of the tribulation as revealed in Scripture constitutes, therefore, an important argument supporting the teaching that the church will not go through the tribulation. It has been shown that a literal interpretation of the tribulation does not produce any evidence that the church will be in this period. Important passages such as Deuteronomy 4:29-30; Jeremiah 30:4-11; Daniel 9:24-27; 12:1 ; Matthew 24:15-31; Revelation 4-19 ; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 5:4-9 do not indicate that the church will be in the tribulation period. It has been shown that the purpose of the tribulation is to purge and judge Israel and to punish and destroy Gentile power. In neither aspect is the church the object of the events of the period. In addition to these general arguments, the Scriptures also indicate that the believer in this present age will be kept from the time of wrath (1 Thess 1:9-10; 5:4-10 ; 2 Pet 2:6-9; Rev 3:10). Taken as a whole, the study of the tribulation as revealed in Scripture does not afford any support to a posttribulational translation of the saints.

Argument from the nature of the church versus the nature of Israel. Much of the background for the differing points of view on pretribulationism as opposed to posttribulationism is found in different concepts of the church. While it is difficult to make an accurate generalization, usually those who sharply distinguish Israel and the church are both premillennial and pretribulational, while those who consider Israel and the church more or less the same concept, even if premillennial, tend to be posttribulational. The concept of the church as a distinct entity, peculiar to the present age since the Day of Pentecost, usually goes along with the idea that the church will be translated before the tribulation.

If the point of view is accepted that the church of the present age is distinctive, as argued in earlier discussion, it supports the idea that the church will not go through the tribulation. This is seen, first, in the

nature of the professing church as compared to the nation of Israel. According to pretribulationism, at the time of the translation of the church all true believers are translated from earth to heaven, leaving only that portion of the professing church which was not genuinely saved. These professing but unsaved members of the organized church in the world continue on earth through the tribulation and form the nucleus of the ungodly, apostate church of the tribulation which becomes the state of religion of that time. In this sense only, the church goes through the tribulation. In like manner, the nation Israel enters the tribulation in an unsaved condition and proceeds through the purging experiences which culminate in the second advent and the separation of those in Israel who turn to Christ in that period from those who worship the Antichrist.

All points of view accept the conclusion that both Israel and the professing church go through the tribulation. The many Old Testament passages on the tribulation as well as the New Testament revelation make this clear and beyond dispute. Pretribulationism finds in these facts supporting evidence that the true church, the body of Christ, does not enter the tribulation by the very fact that the same Scriptures which frequently mention Israel and apostate Christendom never mention the true church as being in this period.

This is borne out by the contrast between the body of Christ and the professing church, both of which have a considerable body of Scripture describing their respective programs. The distinction between them, in a word, is the difference between mere profession and reality, between outward conformity and vital regeneration. The professing church moves on to its complete state of apostasy and ends in awful judgment. The true church is caught up to heaven to be the bride of the Son of God. The presence of the apostate church in the tribulation is one of its principal characteristics. The presence of the true church is wholly unnecessary. The distinctions between the true church and the professing church justify the widest difference in program and destiny.

Likewise, there is a graphic difference between the true church and true or spiritual Israel. In the present age, all who are Israelites by natural birth upon receiving Christ as Savior become members of the church, the body of Christ. By so much they are cut off from the particular promises and program of Israel and instead partake of the new program of God for the church on the same basis as Gentile believers. In other words, all who are true or spiritual Israel in the present age by this very fact are members of the church. Immediately after the translation of the church, however, Israelites who turn to God and trust in Christ have the privilege of being saved as individuals even in the tribulation period. When saved in this period Israelites lose none of their national promises. Their hope is the second advent of Christ, the coming of Christ as King and Messiah. While saved on the same basis of the death of Christ as saints in the present age, their program for the future is entirely different. Those who are martyred will be raised at the second advent (Rev 20:4-6). Those who survive the persecutions of this period will enter the millennium and become the objects of divine favor and blessing according to the kingdom promises. The contrasts herein provided in the prophetic Word serve to distinguish the future of spiritual Israel in the present age from spiritual Israel in the tribulation. The distinctions are built upon the differences between the church in the present age from saints of all preceding or succeeding periods.

In a word, prior to Pentecost there was no church, though there were saints among both Jews and Gentiles, who, while retaining their national characteristics, were nevertheless true saints of God. After Pentecost and until the translation there is no body of believers among either Gentiles or Israel except as found in the true church. After the translation of the church, there are no true believers in the professing and apostate church, but believers in that tribulation period retain their national characteristics as saved

Gentiles or saved Jews. 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. While these arguments have only relative strength, when added to preceding arguments and supported by those to follow they constitute confirming evidence.

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