

The Saints of the Great Tribulation

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon discusses the saints of the Great Tribulation, including the 144,000 Israelites and a great multitude of martyred dead in heaven, and how they will be saved and testify to God's salvation during the time of judgment.

Scripture: Exodus 12:13, Romans 5:9, Hebrews 9:22, 1 Peter 1:18, Revelation 7:4-19

Topics: "End Times", "Tribulation Saints"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches about the Saints of the Great Tribulation, highlighting the two major groups of saints during this time. The chapter directs attention to the 144,000 godly remnant of Israel on earth and a great multitude of martyred dead in heaven from all nations. The Scriptures indicate that many Jews and Gentiles will trust in the Lord after the church is caught up to glory, with the Holy Spirit continuing to work in the world even after the rapture. The chapter emphasizes the protection and sealing of the 144,000 from each tribe of Israel and the salvation of a great multitude of Gentiles who will be martyred but find eternal bliss in heaven.

Transcript

The Saints of the Great Tribulation

In contrast to chapter 6 which seems to give the chronological sequence of major events of the great tribulation, chapter 7 does not advance the narrative but directs attention to two major groups of saints in the tribulation. The opening portion of the chapter pictures the 144,000 representative of the godly remnant of Israel on earth in the great tribulation. The latter part of the chapter describes a great multitude of martyred dead in heaven, those who died as a testimony to their faith from every kindred, tongue, and nation.

The question has often been asked, Will anyone be saved after the rapture? The Scriptures clearly indicate that a great multitude of both Jews and Gentiles will trust in the Lord after the church is caught up to glory. Though the children of God living on earth at the time will be translated when Christ comes for His church, immediately a testimony will be raised up to the name of Christ through new converts among Jews and Gentiles. Though these are never described by the term "church," they are constantly called saints, that is, those set apart as holy to God and saved through the sacrifice of Christ.

The presence of saved people in the world after the rapture has puzzled some because according to 2 Thessalonians 2:7 the one who now restrains sin, often identified as the Holy Spirit, is pictured as being removed from the world. The question then is how can people be saved in the tribulation if the Holy Spirit is taken out of the world? The answer, of course, is that the Holy Spirit is removed from the world in the same sense in which He came on the day of Pentecost. People were saved before the day of Pentecost when the Spirit of God came to indwell the church, and it should be clear from other Scriptures that the Holy Spirit is always omnipresent. He has always been in the world and always will be, in keeping with the divine attribute of omnipresence. Though the special ministries which are characteristic of the present dispensation may cease, there will be the continued ministry of the Spirit in a similar way to that which existed before Pentecost.

There is a parallel in the fact of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, Christ was present in the world, but it was not His particular field of operation though He ministered as the Angel of Jehovah. In due time, according to the plan of God, Christ was born in Bethlehem and ministered as God's unique revelation of Himself to mankind. Then He ascended into heaven, yet at the same time He told His disciples, "Lo, I am with you alway" (Matt. 28:20). In other words while His special earthly work was completed with His sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection, He nevertheless continued to work in the world in His omnipresence as God.

Likewise the Holy Spirit is resident in the world now just as Christ was resident in the world between His birth and ascension. When the present age ends and the Holy Spirit is caught up with the church, the situation will return to that which was true before the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit will continue to be working in the world, but in some particulars in a different way. There is good reason to believe, however, that the Holy Spirit will lead people to Christ, and many will be saved during the tribulation time. A description of this is given in the seventh chapter of the book of Revelation, which is so plain that no one should question whether people will be saved after the rapture.

The Vision of the Four Angels (7:1-3)

7:1-3 And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.

In the order of the vision as given to John, he sees in the opening verses of chapter 7 four angels controlling the four winds of the earth. An angel which is described as ascending from the east and possessing the seal of the living God commands the four angels not to hurt the earth and the sea until the servants of God are sealed in their foreheads. The implication is that the judgment of God is impending and that prior to its infliction on the earth, God wants to set apart and protect His servants. In the verses which follow, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel are protected by the angelic seal. It is implied that these who are thus sealed have been saved in the time of trouble pictured in the book of Revelation and by this means are being set apart as a special divine remnant to be a testimony to God's grace and mercy during this time of judgment.

There are many precedents in Scripture for such a protection of God's own. When God sent the flood upon the earth, He separated Noah and his family from the rest of the human race and the flood did not

hurt them. When God destroyed Jericho, He protected Rahab and her household. Wicked though she was, she had put her trust in God, and God protected her from the judgment that fell upon Jericho. In a similar way in the time of great tribulation protection will be given to this group of 144,000 Israelites. The matter is so significant to God that the names of the tribes and the number to be saved from each are given in detail.

The Sealing of the Twelve Tribes (7:4-8)

7:4-8 And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel. Of the tribe of Juda were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Reuben were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Gad were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Aser were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Nephthalim were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Manasses were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Simeon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Levi were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Issachar were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Zabulon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Joseph were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Benjamin were sealed twelve thousand.

A number of significant details are mentioned in connection with the sealing of the 144,000 in Israel. This Scripture makes plain that there are twelve tribes in Israel still in existence, as the names of the different tribes are given. There are, however, some omissions. In some lists of the twelve tribes both of the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, are numbered as separate tribes.

In this list Manasseh is mentioned but Ephraim is not, and in place of Ephraim the name of Joseph his father is given in verse 8. No explanation is made concerning this substitution. There is also no mention of the tribe of Dan, and the Bible does not tell us why Dan should be omitted. As Alford points out, ancient interpreters accounted for this on the theory that the Antichrist would come from the tribe of Dan (cf. Gen. 49:17).¹⁶⁵ A more common explanation is that the tribe of Dan was one of the first to go into idolatry, was small in number, and probably was thereafter classified with the tribe of Naphtali, another son of Jacob born to the same mother as Dan.

In commenting on the twelve tribes, Walter Scott writes:

In the enumeration of the tribes throughout Scripture, of which there are about eighteen, the full representative number twelve is always given; but as Jacob has thirteen sons, one or other is always omitted. Levi is more generally omitted than any other. In the apocalyptic enumeration, Dan and Ephraim are omitted. Both these tribes were remarkable as being connected with idolatry in Israel, the probable reason for blotting out of their names here (Deut. 29:18-21). But in the end grace triumphs, and Dan is named first in the future distribution of the land amongst the tribe (Ezek. 48:2), but, while first named, it is the farthest removed from the temple, being situated in the extreme north.¹⁶⁶

H. B. Swete notes:

Lists of the patriarchs or of the tribes occur in Gen. 35:22 ff., 46:8 ff., 49, Exod. 1:1 ff., Num. 1, 2, 13:4 ff., 26., 34, Deut. 27:11 ff., 33:6 ff., Josh, 13-22, Judg. 5, 1 Chron. 2-8, 12:24 ff., 27:16 ff., Ezek. 48.¹⁶⁷

J. B. Smith observes,

There are no fewer than 29 lists of the tribes of Israel throughout the Scriptures, thus showing the prominence accorded them in the sacred page.¹⁶⁸

Though a full answer does not present itself for these omissions, it is most important that Israel is here divided into the twelve tribes. Though Israelites today do not normally know what tribe they belong to, in the mind of God there is no question. Here representatives for each of the twelve tribes are selected for the signal honor of being sealed by the angel.

The fact that the twelve tribes of Israel are singled out for special reference in the tribulation time is another evidence that the term "Israel" as used in the Bible is invariably a reference to the descendants of Jacob who was first given the name Israel. Galatians 6:16 is no exception. The prevalent idea that the church is the true Israel is not sustained by any explicit reference in the Bible, and the word Israel is never used of Gentiles and refers only to those who are racially descendants of Israel or Jacob.

William Kelly, in defense of the literal interpretation of the tribes of Israel, states:

On the other hand, I conceive that the specification of the tribe is inconsistent with any sense but the literal. Then again the contradistinction is as plain and positive as words can make it, between the sealed number out of Israel and the innumerable multitude from all nations and kindreds and peoples and tongues. So that the mystical theory, when closely examined, cannot escape the charge of absurdity) for it identifies the sealed Israelites with the palm-bearing Gentiles, in spite of the evident and expressed contrasts on the face of the chapter.¹⁶⁹

This literal interpretation is held not only by the premillenarians but by representative postmillenarians such as Charles Hodge,¹⁷⁰ nineteenth century theologian, and amillenarians such as Hendriksen,¹⁷¹ twentieth century expositor. The decision as to who are included in the term "Israel" should be reached on the basis of exegesis and usage.

Though the Bible distinguishes true Israelites from those who have forsaken their heritage, the term "Israel" is never used outside the descendants of Jacob himself. The remnant of Israel as portrayed here in the book of Revelation should not therefore be taken as meaning the church. It would be rather ridiculous to carry the typology of Israel representing the church to the extent of dividing them up into twelve tribes as was done here, if it was the intent of the writer to describe the church. It is rather a clear indication of God's continued purpose for the nation Israel and their preservation through this awful time of trouble.

The mention of the twelve tribes of Israel is likewise a refutation of the idea that the tribes of Israel are lost, as well as of the theory that the lost tribes are perpetuated in the English-speaking people of the world. Obviously none of the tribes are lost as far as God is concerned. Though genealogies have been lost, a modern Jew can be assured that he belongs to the seed of Abraham; and God knows into which tribe he should be classified. In the book of James there is reference to the twelve tribes of Israel as being in existence at the time our Lord was upon earth (James 1:1; cf. 1 Peter 1:1). This vision given to John, therefore, is prophetic of the fact that God has a future purpose for Israel and that in spite of satanic persecution a godly remnant will be preserved to be on earth when Christ returns.

The question has also been raised whether the "12,000" in each tribe means literally 12,000. There seems to be indication that more than 12,000 from each tribe actually will be saved. The point of this Scripture is that in any event 12,000 in each tribe are made secure. There will be other Israelites saved besides these 144,000, but many of these will die martyrs' deaths and give up their lives for their faith. The 144,000 are those who are delivered from their persecutors and brought safely through this terrible time of tribulation. In chapter 14 they are seen triumphant at the end of the tribulation when Christ returns.

The Martyred Dead Of The Great Tribulation Seen In Heaven (7:9-10)

7:9-10 After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, domed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.

The second half of chapter 7 of Revelation demonstrates that not only will many be saved in Israel but also many Gentiles will come to Christ in the great tribulation. In his vision John sees a great multitude beyond human computation coming from all nations, kindreds, people, and tongues standing before the throne, clothed with white robes, with palms in their hands, ascribing salvation to God and to the Lamb. In contrast to those coming from the twelve tribes as pictured earlier in the chapter, this throng comes from all nations. The white robes mentioned seem to refer to 6:11, and the palms indicate their triumph. This great multitude is heard by John in a great symphony of praise as they ascribe salvation to God. The fact that they are martyrs is stated later in the chapter (vv. 13-14).

The Praise of the Heavenly Host (7:11-12)

7:11-12 And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.

Joining the multitude of the saints, the angels and all those in heaven are described as falling down before the throne to worship God in a sevenfold ascription of praise similar to that in Revelation 5. The point of this introduction, however, is to identify the presence in glory of the great multitude coming from all nations.

The Martyred Dead Identified as Tribulation Saints (7:13-14)

7:13-14 And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

One of the twenty-four elders is quoted in verse 13 as asking the questions "What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?" It is clear from these questions that the twenty-four elders are representative of a group different from those who are here pictured as the great multitude in white robes. If the elders represent the church, the multitude represents a different body of saints. In answer to the elder, John confesses that he does not know; whereupon John is informed, "These are they which came out of great tribulation." In the Greek the expression is far more specific. Literally it could be translated, "These are those who came out of the tribulation, the great one." It is undoubtedly a reference to the specific period of the great tribulation of which Christ spoke (Matt. 24:21).

The common tendency to ignore the definite terminology of the prophecies in the book of Revelation is illustrated in the interpretation which would make this throng refer to all the elect of all ages and the great tribulation as "the whole sum of the trials of the saints of God, viewed by the Elder as now complete."¹⁷² One must not read into a passage something that is foreign to its express statement. The group here described is a particular group coming from a particular time.

Larkin attempts to explain away the reference to "great tribulation" (7:14) in order to place this company in the first half of Daniel's seventieth week. His explanation is beside the point as this seventh chapter is not necessarily in chronological order, and further, there is no reason why the great tribulation should not have already begun at this time.¹⁷³

Ottman, because of his opposition to the view that the saints of all ages are in view here, also insists that the prophetic narrative is a projection forward to the time of the millennium itself. He bases his conclusion largely on the fact that neither death nor resurrection is mentioned regarding the Gentile multitude. He does not explain, however, the reference to the throne (7:9-13) that is clearly parallel to the throne in heaven in chapters 4-5. His objection is unnecessary, as the throng are not saints of all ages but only saints of the tribulation time who are martyred.¹⁷⁴ The saints, then, who are before the throne coming from every kindred, tongue, and nation, are those who have come out of the great tribulation.

This passage clearly teaches that many Gentiles will be saved during the tribulation. The command to preach the gospel to every nation throughout the world (Matt. 24:14; 28:19-20) will have its ultimate fulfillment in this way before Christ comes back to establish His millennial kingdom. The concept sometimes advanced that the rapture cannot occur because all the world has not heard the gospel is a faulty conclusion. The requirement that all the world hear the gospel pertains not to the rapture but to the coming of Christ to set up His kingdom. Though the church should press on with all zeal in presenting the gospel to every creature, it is not necessary for the rapture to wait until this task be completed. In spite of the difficulties, there will be worldwide preaching of the gospel during the tribulation time.

The question has been raised concerning the time pictured in this vision. Two explanations are possible; the first is that this chapter is a preview of the beginning of the millennium. Under this interpretation John is considered to be carried beyond the coming of Christ to establish His kingdom and is chronologically already in the millennial kingdom. Jennings considers this chapter a foreview of the millennial earth rather than a picture of heaven, with the passage teaching that in the millennium both Jews and Gentiles will be blessed. The difficulty with this view, however, is that the only throne and temple introduced thus far are those in heaven, seen in chapters 4 and 5; and there is little justification for arbitrarily putting this chapter in the millennium.¹⁷⁵ The scene here obviously is in heaven, rather than on earth, and the living tribulation saints are not caught up to heaven.

Another interpretation is therefore preferred. This view understands the passage to teach that those here described are martyrs who have sealed their testimony with their own blood. Some believe that the majority of saints in the tribulation will die as martyrs. Many will be killed by earthquakes, war, and pestilence. Others will be the object of special persecution by the world ruler. They will be hounded to death much as the Jews were in World War II. Because they will not worship the beast, they will be under a death sentence (Rev. 13:15). Those who accept Christ in that time may be faced with the solemn alternative of either renouncing their faith in Christ and worshiping the beast or being slain. The result will be multiplied thousands of martyrs.

The scene before us, then, is not earth but heaven, not the millennium but the time of the tribulation. The martyrs are before the throne and before the Lamb. The picture is similar to chapters 5 and 6. The "great multitude" represents an important portion of those mentioned in 6:9-11 who are given white robes as faithful witnesses to the Word of God and to the testimony of the Lamb. The main facts in the case are clear regardless of which interpretation is followed. During the tribulation, countless people of all nations will come to know Christ. It will be a time of salvation for them in spite of persecution and even martyrdom.

In verse 14 the significant detail is given that the martyrs have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Normally one cannot make anything white with blood. The passage is talking, however, of spiritual purity. The only way sins can be washed away is through the precious blood of Christ and because of His death and sacrifice.

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments speak often of blood as the symbol of life, as in Leviticus 17:14: "The life of all flesh is the blood thereof." The spiritual significance of shed blood is given prominence in both the Old and New Testaments with hundreds of references to it. According to Hebrews 9:22, "without shedding of blood is no remission." According to Acts 20:28, the church has been purchased by the blood of Christ. In Romans 3:25 Christ is declared to be the propitiation for our sins through "faith in his blood." In Romans 5:9 we are "justified by his blood," and therefore "shall be saved from wrath through him." Ephesians 1:7 states that "we have redemption through his blood." According to Colossians 1:20, Christ has "made peace through the blood of his cross."

The Apostle Peter adds his testimony in I Peter 1:18-19 when he writes, "Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." The frequent references to blood in the book of Revelation itself begin in chapter 1:5: "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood." In the second advent itself in Revelation 19:13, Christ is described as "clothed with a vesture dipped in blood."

The emphasis in the Scripture upon the shed blood of sacrifice whether in the Mosaic law of the Old Testament or the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament points to the necessity of His substitutionary death for the believer's redemption. Though a modern world is offended by substitutionary sacrifice and especially by the reference to sacrificial blood, from God's viewpoint, like the children of Israel in Egypt, there is no safety except for those under the blood. God promised Israel in Exodus 12:13, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt."

Accordingly, though not suited to the sophistication of twentieth century aesthetics, the blood of Christ is exceedingly precious in the sight of the Lord and is the only cleansing agent for sin. The blood of the Lamb is the assurance of cleansing and forgiveness for these who have been martyred for their faith in Christ. Even their own sacrificial death could not atone for their sins. They, like all others, must rest alone in that sacrifice which Christ provided for them. What is true for them is true for the saints of all ages; only the blood of Christ avails to wash away sin.

The Heavenly Bliss of the Martyred Saints (7:15-17)

7:15-17 Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

The wonderful blessing of the martyred saints in the presence of the Lord is spelled out in these verses. They are described as being before the throne of God, that is, in a place of prominence and honor. Their special privilege is further defined as serving the Lord day and night in His temple. This expression is highly significant, for it indicates that heaven is not only a place of rest from earthly toil but also a place of

privileged service. Those who have served well on earth will have a ministry in heaven. The fact that they are declared to serve "day and night" has been taken by some as an indication that this is a millennial scene rather than heaven since there is never any night in the temple of God in heaven. The expression, however, can be understood as meaning simply that they will continually serve the Lord, that is, they will not need sleep or restoration as is necessary in earthly toil. They are delivered from the limitations of this life. Their service is said to occur in the temple of God, a reference to the immediate presence of the Lord, not to any earthly temple. Further, they shall be honored by the fact that the One sitting on the throne will dwell among them; that is, they will be in wonderful fellowship with their blessed Lord.

Verse 16 reveals that they will be delivered from the afflictions of life such as hunger, thirst, and the heat of the sun. This may be an oblique reference to some of their sufferings which they endured in the tribulation. According to Revelation 13:17 it may be that they had gone hungry rather than buying food and submitting to the worship of the beast. Thirst is another form of suffering common in times of persecution. The glaring sun and burning heat and the trials which may have attended them as they fled from their enemies are far behind them in glory. Instead of such severe trials, verse 17 pictures the Lamb of God as feeding them and leading them to living fountains of water. The abundant provision of the heavenly scene is evident in this description.

The concluding statement in the chapter is that "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." In other words they will have the tender comfort and care of the Saviour, and the tears that once were theirs shall be wiped away. Some have attempted to draw from this passage that there will be actual tears in heaven and have implied that saints will be shedding tears because of grief over wasted lives and unconfessed sin while on earth. This passage, however, does not even suggest such a situation. The point is that the grief and tears of the past, speaking of their trials in the tribulation, will be over when they get to heaven. The saints in glory will be occupied with the beauty and wonder of heaven and the worship of the Saviour. They will not have time for repentance of that which can no longer be changed. Instead, God will wipe away all tears resulting from their suffering on earth. In the glory of heaven whatever burdens and cares may have been laid upon the saints in earthly life, there will be no sorrow, no tears, and no death.

The juxtaposition of the 144,000 in the first half of this chapter immediately preceding the description of the multitude of martyred dead from among the Gentiles would seem to imply that there is a causal relationship between these two groups. The 144,000 on earth are preserved in safety through the tribulation, as a testimony to the power and grace of God and as a channel through which the gospel could come to the earth. The result of their ministry had its fruit among the Gentiles even as was true in the apostolic age with the result that great multitudes of the Gentiles were saved from whom the martyred throng in heaven were separated by death. The use of the 144,000 of Israel as a channel of witness to the earth is in keeping with the general purposes of God in relation to the Jewish nation.

Chapter 7 of the book of Revelation serves as a review of the situation described in the previous chapters and emphasizes two important facts. First, God is going to judge Israel in the period of great trial, and 12,000 from each tribe, totaling 144,000, will be protected and sealed from the judgments which will fall upon the world in general. Second, a great multitude of Gentiles will also be saved, but many of these will be martyred, and a multitude of the martyred dead are found in heaven rejoicing in the presence of the Lamb and representing every tongue and nation. It is an indication that even in the tragic closing hours prior to the second coming of Christ to the earth, countless souls will find Christ as Saviour and be saved by His grace.

- 165 Henry Alford, The Greek New Testament, IV, 625.
- 166 Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, p. 166.
- 167 The Apocalypse of St. John, p 98.
- 168 A Revelation of Jesus Christ, p. 130.
- 169 Lectures on the Book of Revelation, p. 158.
- 170 Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, p. 589.
- 171 W. Hendriksen, And So All Israel Shall Be Saved, p. 33.
- 172 Alford, IV, 628.
- 173 Clarence Larkin, Book of Revelation, p. 67.
- 174 Ford C. Ottman, The Unfolding of the Ages, pp. 181-89.
- 175 F. C. Jennings, Studies in Revelation, pp. 218 ff.

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