

GOD'S PURPOSE FOR THE TRIBULATION

by Thomas Ice

Over the years I have done dozens of radio and television interview shows which include a time where listeners are permitted to call in with their questions about Bible prophecy. Since I am director of an organization that researches, teaches, and defends the pretribulation rapture teaching, I get many questions and comments relating to that subject. It is not hard to detect questions and comments that flow from an individual who is biblically informed versus those who speak from a position of mere human whim or opinion. The same is true of written correspondence. I have found that when it comes to the issue of the tribulation so many have not taken the time to let the Bible define the meaning and purpose for that future period of time.

A common statement made by some is as follows: "I believe that the church will go through the tribulation because the Bible says that we will suffer for our faith." The problem with such a statement is that while it may appear to have the veneer of biblical correctness, at core it betrays a lack of understanding of God's purpose for the tribulation. Certainly the Bible teaches that all through out the church age Believers will suffer persecution. This is taught by such passages as John 16:33b, "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." And in 2 Timothy 3:12 "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." The question is will the church experience the trials of the tribulation? I have found that when a person is knowledgeable of what the Bible says is God's purpose for the tribulation, or any issue for that matter, then a very high percentage of those people will come to believe that the church will be taken in the rapture before the tribulation. What is God's purpose for the tribulation?

START OF THE TRIBULATION

First, we need to know that the tribulation in Bible prophecy is the period of time that begins with the signing of a covenant between Israel and the antichrist and ends seven years later at the second coming of Jesus Christ. The most extensive biblical comments on the tribulation are found in the writings of John, specifically in Revelation 6—19. In these chapters, John provides a detailed exposition of the tribulation days. Daniel's "70 weeks," prophesied in Daniel 9:24-27 are the framework within which the tribulation or the 70th week occurs. The seven-year period of Daniel's 70th week provides the time span with which a whole host of descriptives are associated. Some of those descriptive terms include: tribulation, great tribulation, day of the Lord, day of wrath, day of distress, day of trouble, time of Jacob's trouble, day of darkness and gloom, and wrath of the Lamb.

JUDGMENT NATURE OF THE TRIBULATION

Second, God's basic purpose for the tribulation is that it be a time of judgment, while at the same time, He will hold forth the gospel of grace. This will precede Christ's glorious 1,000 year reign from David's throne in Jerusalem. Judgment, or God's wrath, is needed to put down the rebellion of mankind in preparation for Christ's reign of peace upon earth during the millennium.

THE GOALS OF THE TRIBULATION

Third, while a number of goals for the tribulation could be given, there are at least three specific major purposes. Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum lists them as follows:

Gentile Judgment

Before the Lord can personally rule on earth in the Person of Jesus Christ He must first judge the world in order to prepare it for His righteous rule. Dr. Fruchtenbaum says that the first purpose for the tribulation is,

- *To make an end of wickedness and wicked ones* (Isaiah 13:9; 24:19-20)—The first purpose for the tribulation is seen to be a punishment in history upon the whole world

for its sins against God, in a way similar to that of the global flood in Noah's days (Matthew 24:37-39).¹

Deuteronomy 30:7 tells us that God will “inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you.” This will take place during the tribulation and will be retribution to the nations for how they have treated the Jews during the last 2,000 years. This purpose does not encompass the church.

World-Wide Evangelism

The seven-year tribulation will be a time of phenomenal evangelistic outreach. It will be a time unlike any previous period of history. Dr. Fruchtenbaum explains:

• *To bring about a world-wide revival*—This purpose is given and fulfilled in Revelation 7:1-17. During the first half of the tribulation, God will evangelize the world by the means of the 144,000 Jews and thus fulfill the prophecy found in Matthew 24:14.²

In addition to the 144,000 Jewish evangelists, there will be normal evangelism taking place like we see today. Further, the Two Witnesses will provide an evangelistic witness to Israel. Finally, at the mid-point of the tribulation Revelation 14 tells us that God Himself will use angels to preach the gospel and warn “earth dwellers” not to take the mark of the beast—666.

The three angelic announcements are as follows: First, an angel will preach “an eternal gospel . . . to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people” (Revelation 14:6). Second, the next angel will make the following pronouncement: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her immorality” (Revelation 14:8). Finally, the last angelic proclamation will specifically warn every person on earth not to take the mark of the beast, since doing so will result in their eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire. “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or upon his hand . . . he will be tormented with fire and brimstone . . . forever and ever” (Revelation 14:9–11). This tribulation purpose also does not include the church.

Conversion of Israel

One of the most glorious and important purposes of the tribulation will be the conversion of Israel. Dr. Fruchtenbaum tell us,

• *To break the power of the holy people—Israel*—Finally, the tribulation will be a time in which God, through evil agencies, prepares Israel for her conversion and acknowledgment that Jesus is their Messiah, resulting in the second coming of Christ.³

The Bible teaches us that God will use the tribulation to bring His elect people to faith in Jesus as their Messiah. When we put together the biblical information it appears that God will accomplish this goal in the following way: First, the Lord will return Israel to the land *before* the tribulation, the time of God’s wrath. “I shall bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out (Ezekiel 20:34). The regathering before the tribulation is what our Lord has been doing since 1948 with the modern state of Israel.

Once the tribulation begins He “shall make you pass under the rod, and I shall bring you into the bond of the covenant; and I shall purge from you the rebels and those who transgress against Me; I shall bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they will not enter the land of Israel. Thus you will know that I am the LORD” (Ezekiel 20:37–38). This tells us that the unbelieving Jews (“the rebels”) will be removed during the tribulation.

In an interesting passage that speaks of “My Associate,” which is an obvious prophetic reference to Jesus The Messiah (Zechariah 13:7–9), Zechariah gives us a numeric ratio that will be purged. “And it will come about in all the land,” Declares the LORD, “That two parts in

¹Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, (Tustin, CA: 1982, pp. 122–23.

²Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps*, pp. 123–25.

³Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps*, pp. 125–26.

it will be cut off and perish; But the third will be left in it. And I will bring the third part through the fire, Refine them as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, And I will answer them; I will say, 'They are My people,' And they will say, 'The LORD is my God.'" (Zechariah 13:8–9) Therefore, we learn that two-thirds of Israel will be purged through the fire of the tribulation, leaving the one-third elect who will be converted to Jesus as their Messiah. Thus, "all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins'" (Romans 11:26–27). What a glorious day that will be! Israel will be converted to Jesus as their Messiah resulting in the second coming, which will in turn give rise the millennial reign of Christ. The church is no where to be found in these tribulational activities.

Conclusion

While many people think the tribulation will involve the church, the Bible does not provide support for such a notion. Instead, Scripture informs us of at least a three-fold purpose for the coming tribulation, none of which involves the church. The New Testament teaches that the church will be taken at the rapture to be with the Lord before the tribulation begins, because God has not destined His bride for His wrath (Romans 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9; Revelation 3:10). Other groups of redeemed individuals will go through the tribulation, but not Christ's bride, the church. Maranatha!