

# *Prophecy Concerning the Great Tribulation*

Excerpt from Systematic Theology, Volumes 3 & 4 by Lewis Sperry Chafer, 1993

## THE CHURCH AND THE TRIBULATION

Attention must be given at this point to a disagreement which obtains between premillenarians of equal sincerity over whether the Church will enter or pass through the great tribulation. A somewhat extensive literature is being created as the problem is argued, and the student would do well to read with attention. It is contended in this work that the Church never enters or passes through the tribulation and for certain reasons, namely, because of . . .

1. THE NATURE OF THE TRIBULATION. Proof has been presented earlier which demonstrates that the tribulation period, yet to be experienced in the world, is the completion of a sequence of predicted years, all of which should intervene between the plucking of Israel off the land, which occurred at the time of the Babylonian captivity, and the final return of that people to their land in the full realization of their covenanted blessings under Messiah's reign. But for the intercalary age of the Church, this period is precisely measured as 560 consecutive years, which time is divided into intervals, namely, 70 years of the Babylonian captivity as predicted by Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11-12), 49 years in which Jerusalem would be rebuilt (Dan. 9:25), 434 years to the cutting off of Messiah (Dan. 9:26), and 7 years in which the covenant between the prince and the many will be confirmed. Such is the precise measurement of Gentile times, though these years are equally laden with events which are Jewish. In the final 7 years the last Roman emperor — the beast — arises, and Gentile times are terminated by the glorious appearing of Messiah. Whatever belongs to the Gentile times began with the Babylonian captivity and aside from the intercalary age of the Church is revived and consummated in the yet future 7 years. It therefore follows that only as the Church is found to be a part of Gentile

times before the cutting off of Messiah will she be rightfully present in the consummating 7 years. Only the blindest form of Covenant Theology would ignore the overwhelming evidence in the Scriptures that the Church is not in Daniel's 483 years, or in any period of the Old Testament history. Those who would thrust the Church into the last 7 years of Gentile times are guilty of introducing an element into that period which has no place in that period since it is not to be on the earth during the eventful years which that period consummates. As a confirmation of these distinctions, it may be asserted again that no New Testament Scripture necessitates the placing of the Church in that period, nor does any New Testament Scripture warn the Church regarding the tribulation as though she were in danger of it.

Again, the purpose of the great tribulation is wholly extraneous to the Church. That period is declared to be for the final judgments of God upon a God- and Christ-rejecting world. It is the ending of the *cosmos* system. Over against this, the Church is neither a part of the *cosmos* (cf. John 15:18-19; 17:14, 16; 1 John 5:19) nor is she ever to be brought condemning judgment (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1). She will be judged relative to rewards which belong to faithful individuals, which judgment is not on the earth but is in heaven, and certainly is no feature of the earthly tribulation. To demand that believers must experience the terrible judgment and destruction which must fall on unbelievers is to do violence to every feature of the saving grace of God.

2. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH. Far more conclusive than all else in determining the question at issue is a right understanding of the nature of the Church. That she could not share in the great tribulation is settled finally for all who comprehend the essential truth of the individual believer's relation to God. Not only is the Church a product of this specific age with no relation whatsoever to any other age, but each believer is perfectly accepted now and forever before God on the ground of his place in Christ, the righteousness of God is imputed unto him, and, being saved out of this *cosmos* world, he is no more of this world than Christ is of this world (John 15:18-19; 17:14, 16). The coming tribulation is

the judgment of this world. Israel has her part in it since, being not yet saved (Rom. 11:26), she is of the world (cf. Matt. 13:44). The believer, being what he is in Christ, has no more a rightful place in this *cosmos* world's judgments than Christ Himself or any unfallen angel. Back of the theories that the Church will enter or pass through the tribulation is the Arminian heresy that the believer contributes something to his own acceptance before God, and, having failed to some extent in this responsibility, he will be purged and purified by the suffering which the tribulation affords. There is a line of truth which concerns the believer's personal faithfulness; but this, as has been seen, is consummated before Christ at His judgment seat in heaven. As for any condemnation, or other judgment, the Christian is wholly delivered forever on the most righteous ground that a Substitute bore the condemnation and judgment and has provided a perfect standing before God. It is established by unqualified Scripture that the believer is delivered from all condemning judgments (John 3:18; 5:24; Rom. 5:1; 8:1, 33-34; 1 Cor. 11:31-32). In general, those who contend that the Church will experience the tribulation assert that all believers – spiritual and unspiritual – will enter that period of suffering, though there are those believing in a partial rapture who assert that the Church will be divided and the spiritual element, which always includes those who advance this notion, will go directly to heaven, while the unspiritual will suffer for their sins in the tribulation. This constitutes a Protestant purgatory. The answer to all such conceptions is the recognition of the truth that, when members of this sinful race go to heaven, it is not on the ground of their own merit, but only through the merit of Christ. It is to be remembered that each believer is already perfectly justified forever (Rom. 5:1; 8:30, 33-34) and this wholly within the range of divine justice (Rom. 3:26). Thus the contention that the Church will enter or pass through the tribulation becomes an insult to, and unbelief towards, the measureless grace of God in Christ. To suppose, as some are asserting, that the great tribulation is greatly overestimated with respect to its sufferings becomes no less than a direct contradiction of the words of Christ. He said,

“For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake those day shall be shortened” (Matt. 24:21-22).

What Christ declares to be supreme and incomparable is not an overestimation of the facts (cf. Dan. 12:1).

Let those who teach that the Church – or any part of it – will enter the great tribulation, state how saved ones who are clothed in the righteousness of God, justified forever, and wholly rescued from this *cosmos* world could in accord with either reason or revelation be thrust into those last judgments which fall upon a Christ-rejecting, Satan-ruled, *cosmos* world.

3. MUST THE LAST GENERATION OF THE CHURCH SUFFER ESPECIALLY? Those who entertain the idea that the Church experiences the great tribulation must reckon with the fact that of upwards of 75 generations who comprise that company all but the present generation have entered glory without the supposed benefits of that purging experience. Why, then, should the last generation suffer that from which the vast host have been spared? On this point a specious argument has been advanced, namely, that as the Church has suffered martyrdom in certain periods of her history she may be expected to suffer thus again at the end of the age; but back of this claim is the failure to recognize that past sufferings were due to the attack of wicked men upon the Church, while the great tribulation is God's judgments upon wicked men. Wholly justified believers have no place among evil men who are destined to eternal doom.

4. THE TESTIMONY OF THE SCRIPTURES. The Bible is far from silent on this important theme; however, there is no more occasion for the Word of God to state specifically that the Church is not in the great tribulation than for it to declare that the Church is not in the Babylonian captivity, though in one text it is directly declared that the Church is not to be tested in that trial. The evidence of the Scriptures is gained from that which may be deduced. As has been stated, no

Scripture intimates that the Church is in the tribulation; nor is the Church warned as though in danger of so great a trial. Certain aspects of this phase of the subject should be considered separately.

a. THE IMMINENT RETURN OF CHRIST. Whether it be that coming of Christ to the earth in glory when Israel is to be delivered or that coming into the air to receive His Bride, the coming is imminent. Scripture which directs Israel in the tribulation, which time is terminated by the glorious return of Christ as their Judge and Deliverer, warns her to *watch*, for He will then come "as a thief in the night" (cf. Matt. 24:32-25:13; 1 Thess. 5:1-8; 2 Pet. 3:8, 10). Over against this, the Church is instructed to *wait* and to *look* for His return for her (1 Thess. 1:9-10; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:28). In both instances the return of Christ is unannounced and therefore impending, within the period to which each event belongs. The return of Christ for His Church was not impending in Old Testament days; nor is the glorious appearing impending until the tribulation (2 Thess. 2:3).

The imminent return of Christ to receive His Church is held before every believer as a "blessed hope." It is written,

"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:1-3).

The very absence of a date in this passage, addressed to the eleven in the upper room, extends that promise to all succeeding generations until He comes. Again, it is recorded,

"For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:11-13).

Here, as above, the promise extends to all generations until He comes. In a similar way it is declared, "For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we

had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from Heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:9-10). In this Scripture the important fact is revealed that it was in the divine purpose that the very first generation of Christians were appointed, not to look for the tribulation or for death, but for the imminent coming of Christ. So, also, it is written,

"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he *is*. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3).

This purifying hope was as much a reality to those of the earliest days of the Church as it has been to any later generations. The force of this argument is inescapable. The tribulation is not the hope of the coming of the Lord; it is not *at hand*, but "the Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:5). The Apostle Paul by a fivefold use of the self-including pronoun *we* placed himself among those who were actuated by the hope of Christ's return (cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:15-17).

b. THE ANTICIPATION OF THE ELEMENT OF TIME. It will be recognized that no prediction could be made of events within this age without a veiled intimation that the element of time would intervene. The problem is not one engendered by man; it is wholly of God. Therefore, it is, as other problems of a like nature, solved only in the mind of God. Both things are true – the Lord has always been at hand; yet certain times and events are predicted. Peter would grow old and die (John 21:18). The nobleman would delay a long time in a far country (Luke 19:11) – which parable teaches more the requirement that service is to continue than that time intervenes. The gospel is to be preached in all the world; but had it been commanded to convert all nations the case would have been different. Every new generation extends the evangelizing effort which, of itself, knows no end. It will be terminated whenever the Lord returns, and, since there is no revealed goal to be reached, the termination by His return could be at any time and is therefore impending. The conclusive feature of this particular argument is

the truth that the very men to whom it was disclosed that there would be times and events related to this age are the ones who in their writings declare that the return of Christ is imminent.

c. THE DISPENSATIONAL FEATURE. The interpretation of the Scriptures as advanced by those who teach that the Church will enter or pass through the tribulation is subject to errors which are traceable to a failure to discern dispensational distinctions, as well as to discern the true nature of the Church or of the tribulation. One writer builds his argument upon the statement that for the elect's sake the days of the tribulation will be shortened (Matt. 24:22). It does not occur to this individual that there are two elect companies – Israel and the Church – and that the context of Matthew where the declaration occurs is dealing only with Israel. Evidence of this is seen in the truth that the Church is never "hated of all nations" (Matt. 24:9), nor will its members – the members of Christ's Body – "hate one another" (vs. 10), nor will they ever be related to the "Sabbath day," nor will they ever pray that their "flight be not in the winter" (vs. 20).

d. THE MAJOR SCRIPTURE. The determining passage is Revelation 3:10, which is an address by the glorified Christ to the Philadelphian church. The Lord declares, "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." It is generally agreed that Philadelphia represents the true Church which has continued from the beginning and will continue until removed by translation. It is also conceded that "the hour of temptation" is a reference to the great tribulation. Those who would relate the Church to the tribulation interpret this passage as a guaranty that the Church will be preserved while passing through the tribulation. Those who oppose this view assert that the guaranty is that the Church will be kept out of that hour. It becomes a study of the original Greek words. On this passage, Dr. Henry C. Thiessen, whose advanced knowledge of the Greek language is established, writes:

Assuming then that the Philadelphia Church represents the Missionary Church and that the "hour of trial" refers to the future Tribulation, we need to examine the words: "I also will keep thee from the hour of trial." More especially do we want to know what is the meaning of the verb "will keep" (τηρήσω) and of the preposition "from" (ἐκ). Alford says on the preposition ἐκ, that it means "out of the midst of: but whether by immunity from, or by being brought safe through, the preposition does not clearly define." He goes on to say that the distinction which Duesterdieck, et al., attempt to set up between τηρέω ἐκ and τ. ἀπό cannot be safely maintained, for, as he well says, it is not easy to see that in John 17:15 ("but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil one"), where we have the former, and in James 1:27 ("and to keep oneself unspotted from the world"), where we have the latter, "the former implies passing scatheless through the evil, while the latter imports perfect immunity from it." He adds: "This last we may grant: but is it not equally true in the other case?" Thus he points out that grammatically the two terms can have the same meaning, so that Revelation 3:10 may mean, not "passing unscathed through the evil," but "perfect immunity from it." Alford's own preference for the former of these alternatives has nothing to do with the grammar of the statement (*Greek Testament, in loc.*). Moffatt similarly explains the terms. He says: "It is impossible from the grammar and difficult from the sense, to decide whether τηρέω ἐκ means successful endurance (pregnant sense as in John 17:15) or absolute immunity (cf. 2 Pet. 2:9), safe emergence from the trial or escape from it entirely (thanks to the timely advent of Christ, v. 11)." Again we may say that Moffatt's acceptance of the former interpretation does not vitiate his statement that the grammar of the text permits the latter sense (*Expositor's Greek Testament, in loc.*). Other scholars say the same thing as to the use of the preposition ἐκ. Buttman-Thayer say that ἐκ and ἀπό "often serve to denote one and the same relation." They give John 17:15; Acts 15:29; Revelation 3:10 as examples of this usage (*Grammar of the New Testament Greek, p. 326 f.*). Abbott doubts "if in the LXX and John ἐκ always implies previous existence in the evils from which one is delivered when used with σώζω and τηρέω" (*Johannine Grammar, p. 251 f.* I owe this note to Dr. A. T. Robertson). Westcott says on the former of these two phrases that it "does not necessarily imply that that is actually realized out of which deliverance is granted (comp. II Cor. 1:10), though it does so commonly (John 12:27)" (*Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 128*). Similarly we read in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, that Jesus delivers us "from (ἐκ) the wrath to come." This can hardly mean protection in it; it must mean exemption from it.

It would seem, then, to have been abundantly shown that the language of Revelation 3:10 permits the interpretation that the Church is promised complete exemption from this hour of trial; indeed, it seems to favor it. Dr. Moorehead's explanation is unsatisfactory. He says: "The natural and obvious meaning is, the safekeeping of them in the midst of world-wide trial, not exemption from it by being caught up to heaven. The preposition 'out of' (ἐκ)



signifies exactly this, and not rapture before the trial begins" (*Studies in the Book of Revelation*, p. 55). He says on John 17:15: "None can possibly mistake what the Lord meant in His prayer: His disciples were to remain in the world, but He asks that they be kept from its evil, or from the evil one who is its god. So precisely in Revelation 3:10, Philadelphia saints are to be in the trial, but safeguarded therein" (*Ibid.*). But Plummer more satisfactorily explains John 17:15 than either Moorehead or Moffatt (above). He says: "Just as Christ is that *in* which His disciples live and move, so the evil one is that *out* of which (ἐκ) He prays that they may be kept" (*Cambridge Greek Testament, Gospel of John, in loc.*). Besides, we should note that the promise is not merely to be kept from the *trial*, but from the *hour* of trial, i.e., it holds out exemption from the period of trial, not only from the trial during that period. And finally, when it would have been so easy to write ἐν τῇ ὥρᾳ, if the writer had meant preservation *in* that hour, why should he write ἐκ τῆς ὥρας, as he did? Surely, this is no accident.

We conclude, therefore, that we have in this text a promise that the whole Church will be taken away before the hour of temptation begins, and not merely an assurance of protection in it. Strange to say, interpreters who in one breath explain Revelation 3:10 as teaching that the Church will pass unscathed through the Tribulation, in the next breath explain the persecutions and martyrdoms in the Revelation as suffered by the Church! Consistency would demand that they seek some other solution of the problem. – *Ibid.*, pp. 201-3

e. THE TWENTY-FOUR ELDERS. In His desire to inform the saints concerning the future (cf. Gen. 18:17; John 16:13), which is the divine motive for providing all prophetic Scriptures, God calls John into heaven (Rev. 4:1) and causes him to see and hear what will be experienced by the Church in heaven and what will occur on the earth during the period of the last seven prophetic years. The purpose of this unveiling to John is that he may write these things, to the end that they may be transmitted as information to all believers (Rev. 1:1-2, 19). John sees twenty-four elders in heaven – even before the tribulation begins. It is pertinent to inquire into the identity of these elders.

Following the futuristic interpretation of Revelation 4:1 to the end of the book – that interpretation which alone is tenable or in harmony with all Biblical prophecy – it is concluded that the words μετὰ ταῦτα, twice used in Revelation 4:1, mark a turn in the message of this book from the history of the Church on earth, as disclosed in chapters 2-3, to that which will immediately follow that

earthly history. These elders are to be distinguished from the "four living creatures," from the angels, and from the "great multitude" which, it is declared, came out of the great tribulation. Ford C. Ottman writes:

"There ought to be very little question as to the identification of these crowned elders. They constitute the united royal priesthood predicted alike of Israel and the Church. They are seen here in one company redeemed and *glorified*. The prophet Daniel has a vision of the time when the Son of man comes to take His kingdom, and in that vision thrones are set, but they are without occupants. As a matter of fact, in Daniel's day, the thrones though established were vacant. Now we are come to the time of the accomplishment of Daniel's prophecy, and the thrones are filled" (*Unfolding of the Ages*, p. 109).

Such indeed is the identification of these elders by the majority of worthy expositors. It is concluded, therefore, that the twenty-four elders represent the saints from earth who are in heaven. Their praise is both identifying and revealing when they sing:

"And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nations; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:9-10).

Their own declaration indicates that they represent a vast throng and that they are in heaven only through the virtue of the redeeming blood of Christ. The presence of this company in heaven before the tribulation points clearly to the truth that they have been caught up to heaven before the hour of trial begins.

f. THE RESTRAINER REMOVED. Another determining Scripture is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7: "And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way." The context treats of the man of sin, of the evil he promotes, and of his destruction by the breath of the returning Christ. The central truth of the passage under discussion is that, though Satan would long ago have consummated his evil program for his *cosmos* world, and have brought forward its last human ruler, there is a Restrainer who restrains

to the end that Satan's program shall be developed and completed only at God's appointed time. The purpose of this age is not the development of evil, it is rather the outcalling of the Church; and Satan's enterprise will be timed to end at the moment God concludes the major age-purpose. Satan's program is only permitted of God at most and he must be subject to the thing God is doing. With due recognition of various opinions abroad, the Restrainer is the Holy Spirit. To achieve all that is to be accomplished, the Restrainer must be one of the Godhead. Even a casual contemplation of the power required will convince the open mind of this necessity; and, since the Holy Spirit is the active Executor of the Godhead in the world during this age, it is reasonable to conclude that He it is who restrains. Doubtless His restraint operates both directly and through the Church in which He dwells. When His work of gathering out the Church is completed – that for which He came into the world – He the Spirit, the Restrainer, will be removed from the world as resident here and reassume His position as omnipresent only, as He is everywhere. The right understanding of this important Scripture depends upon recognition of the distinction to be observed between the Spirit's relation to the world as resident therein or omnipresent. He who was always omnipresent became resident on the Day of Pentecost; He who is now resident will become merely omnipresent on the completion of that which He came on the Day of Pentecost to achieve. It is as clearly asserted that the believer can never be separated from the Holy Spirit. Christ's prayer that cannot go unanswered was that the Spirit should bide with believers forever (John 14:16); therefore, when the Spirit, the Restrainer, is “taken out of the way,” the Church will of necessity be removed with Him. It cannot be otherwise; but the appearance of the man of sin, who is the essential character of the great tribulation, follows the removal of the Restrainer and the Church. The Church is not bereft of the Holy Spirit and left to suffer in the world.

Closely related to this consideration of the removal of the Church from the world is the fact that time is required between the rapture and the return with Christ in glory, so that appointed events may be accomplished. All Bible expositors, who enter at all into these issues, agree that the Church must be caught

up to meet Christ before she can return with Him in glory (cf. Rev. 19:11-16). Those who teach that the Church goes through the tribulation agree that the Church must be translated thus; but to save a theory they declare that the Church is raptured to meet the Lord and then returns immediately with Him to the earth. But before she returns, as will yet be indicated, she must pass through the judgment for her rewards, be married to the Lamb, and participate in the marriage supper (Rev. 19:1-10). The post-tribulation rapture theory is forced to omit these great events or to contend that they are accomplished instantaneously.

It is to be concluded, then, that from every line of available evidence the Church will not, because she could not, either enter or pass through the great tribulation.