

Salvation in the Tribulation

AT SOME POINT IN HISTORY the Rapture will occur. Although no one knows *when* it will happen (despite what certain people may try to tell you!), the fact remains that it *will* happen. When it finally does take place, Jesus Christ will return to Earth and take the Church to Heaven. The saints who died during the Church Age will be resurrected, and those who are still alive will be transformed. (The saints who died before the Church Age will not be resurrected until later.)

When this monumental event happens there will be many people who will suddenly vanish – and there will be an even larger number of people will be left behind. Some have argued that no one who is left behind can be saved, but that is not true. In fact, many people will come to know the Lord after the Rapture takes place. This is made clear from passages such as this one:

Revelation 7:9: “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, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;
10 And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. . . .
13 And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?
14 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.”

Here we see a tremendous number of people in Heaven who come from “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues”. These people “came out of great tribulation”. In other words, they were saved *after* the Rapture and were martyred during the Tribulation. If millions upon millions of people are saved after the Rapture, then salvation clearly does *not* end when the Church disappears.

One reason why some people have thought that salvation might not be possible is because of this passage:

2 Thessalonians 2:8: “And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming:
9 Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,
10 And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.
11 And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie:
12 That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”

In this passage Paul is talking about the antichrist. He says that when the antichrist appears “God shall send them a strong delusion” so that everyone who refused to believe the truth would believe the antichrist's lie and be lost forever.

As we have already seen, this passage does not mean that salvation is impossible after Jesus comes for His Church. Instead, it is actually talking about something else. During the first half of the

Tribulation the Lord will anoint 144,000 Jews to spread the gospel to everyone on the planet. (Right now that is the job of the Church, but after the Church is gone the Lord will appoint others to do it.) The antichrist will be unable to stop these witnesses until their task is done. After they have completed their mission the Lord will send an angel to fly over all the world and repeat the gospel one more time. By the time this happens everyone alive will have heard the good news. There will be no one left who has not heard about Jesus.

That is when the Mark of the Beast will appear. Those who hated the truth and rejected the gospel will take the Mark, and in doing so they will be damned forever. However, those who loved the truth and accepted Christ will be saved. They will most likely be martyred for their faith, but in losing their life they will gain everlasting life.

Salvation will be possible in the Tribulation, but it will be more difficult than it is now. The price will be higher, and those who are saved after the Rapture will not have some of the benefits that the Church currently enjoys.

To understand why, let's back up and look at the Old Testament. Here is something to think about: how was Abraham saved? Did he believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as we do today? Of course not! Abraham didn't know about any of those things. He probably knew that God was going to send a Savior to redeem mankind, but in Abraham's day God had revealed very little about this coming Messiah. The oldest books of the Old Testament were not written until centuries after Abraham died, and the most explicit prophecies about Christ are in Isaiah, which was not written until *long* after Abraham's death. Keep in mind that even Christ's disciples didn't realize that He was going to die – and this was despite the fact that *Jesus Himself told them about his impending death*. They had no understanding of what we today consider to be the gospel – that the Messiah would live a perfect life, that He would die for the sins of mankind, and that He would raise from the dead. If the *disciples* didn't understand it then I think it's pretty safe to say that Abraham didn't understand it either.

Besides, the Bible tells us exactly what saved Abraham:

Romans 4:3: “For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.”

Now think about this: what did Abraham believe? Did he believe that Jesus would die and then rise again on the third day? Nope. What he *did* believe was God's promise that he would have a son. Belief in that promise is what saved him.

Why did that save him? Because salvation has always come about by faith in God. We believe what God has told us, and that faith saves us. However, the *content* of that faith has changed throughout the millennia as God has revealed more truth to mankind. God has always required us to *believe what He has revealed*. God told Abraham that he would have a son and that one of his lineage would go on to be a blessing to all mankind (a reference to the Messiah that Abraham probably understood). Abraham believed it, and that faith saved him. That was all it took. Abraham was indeed saved through faith. He had faith in the promise that God made to him.

Today we know a great deal more than Abraham did. We know who Jesus is and what He has done, and God requires us to believe it. We are still saved by faith and by believing in God's promise, but since we know more about that promise, God requires more of us. “To whom much is given, much is required.” We have always been saved by faith in God and never by our own works, but surely it is obvious that Abraham knew less about the gospel than we do today. God didn't require Abraham to believe in things that had not yet been revealed to mankind. What God *did* require was for Abraham to believe what God *had* revealed – and that is still what God requires today.

Another key difference between Old Testament believers and the Church is that the Church has the Holy Spirit. There were a few people in the Old Testament who had the Spirit, but it was a very rare gift, and those who had it were in constant danger of losing it.

This may seem bizarre, but it's really not. The verses that talk about this are well-known. The problem is that we just don't stop to consider what is being said. For example, take a look at this:

John 16:7: “Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.”

Jesus told His disciples that if He didn't go away then the Holy Spirit wouldn't come. However, since He was leaving He would send the Holy Spirit to minister to us. This happened on the day of Pentecost:

Acts 2:1: “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.
2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.
3 And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.
4 And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

This is the day that the Church was formed, and it began by the appearance of the Holy Spirit. Today each believer is filled with the Spirit from the moment they are saved. In fact, Paul tells us that any person who does *not* have the Spirit is not saved at all:

Romans 8:9: “But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.”

Today all Christians have the Holy Spirit, and there is nothing we can do to lose it. We may fall into all kinds of terrible sin and we may deeply grieve the Spirit, but it is still sealed inside us. That was not the case in the Old Testament. The gift of the Holy Spirit that Christ gave us is a special gift that is unique to this age.

First of all, notice that Christ said that the Comforter *would not come unless He left*. It's hard to get more plain than that! The disciples weren't filled with the Spirit until Pentecost. We have the Comforter *because Christ left*. Those who were alive before He came did not have it, except in a few rare cases.

It is true that there were some exceptions. There were definitely people in the Old Testament who were filled with the Spirit. Samson is one example:

Judges 14:5: “Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to Timnath, and came to the vineyards of Timnath: and, behold, a young lion roared against him.
6 And the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand: but he told not his father or his mother what he had done.”

However, notice that verse 6 says “the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him”. The Spirit was not with Samson all the time, as it is with us; instead it came and went as necessary. Samson was also in danger of losing the Spirit if he ever cut his hair – a fact that he eventually discovered:

Judges 16:20: “And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the LORD was departed from him.”

As I said earlier, few people in the Old Testament had the Holy Spirit, and those who did have it were in constant danger of losing it through sin. Even King David worried about losing the Spirit after he sinned with Bathsheba:

Psalm 51:11: “Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.”

Today we don't have to worry about losing the Holy Spirit. The Lord has given it to everyone in the Church as a free gift, and it cannot be lost through sin. But in the days of the Old Testament it was not like that. In that dispensation very few people were given the Spirit, and those who had it were forced to be very careful lest the Lord take it from them.

Let me give one more example before I move on. While the Israelites were wandering around the wilderness there was a time when the Holy Spirit descended upon a whole group of people at once:

Numbers 11:25: “And the LORD came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took of the spirit that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders: and it came to pass, that, when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, and did not cease.”

Joshua heard about this and asked Moses to put a stop to it. What Moses said in response is very interesting:

Numbers 11:28: “And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of Moses, one of his young men, answered and said, My lord Moses, forbid them.

29 And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? would God that all the LORD'S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!”

In other words, Moses said “Stop it? Absolutely not! In fact, I wish all of God's people had His Holy Spirit.” Back then having the Spirit was a priceless privilege that was easily lost. Today, however, that is not the case. Moses' wish was granted: today we all have the Spirit. I don't think we fully realize what an awesome gift that really is.

What does this have to do with the Tribulation saints? Well, as I said earlier, the Holy Spirit was a gift that was given specifically to *the Church*, and at the Rapture the Church will disappear. There will still be people saved after the Rapture, but they will not be a part of the Church and they will not have the Spirit sealed within them as we do. Just like Samson and King David, they will have to be very careful lest they lose the Spirit.

Jesus warned about this very fact in the parable of the ten virgins:

Matthew 25:1: “Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

2 And five of them were wise, and five were foolish.

3 They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them:

4 But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

5 While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.

6 And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.

7 Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.

8 And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out.

9 But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.

10 And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.

11 Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

12 But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.”

This parable has been widely misinterpreted. Despite what you may have been told, it has nothing to do with the Church. Whenever the Church is referred to symbolically it is always depicted as *the bride*, not as 10 bridesmaids. After all, when the bridegroom comes He is not going to marry 10 bridesmaids; He is going to marry the Bride! Another important point is that the bride *cannot* be excluded from *her own wedding*, nor is the bride in danger of missing the bridegroom. The whole reason the bridegroom returns is to get the bride and take her away, and there is no danger that he is somehow going to miss her entirely and end up marrying no one. The wedding literally *cannot* happen without her. Finally – and most importantly – oil is symbolic of the Spirit, and the Church *cannot* run out of the Holy Spirit no matter what it does. This parable simply *does not apply to the Church* in any way, shape, or form.

This passage is actually talking about those who are still alive on the Earth at the end of the Tribulation. While many Christians will be martyred during that terrible period of time, there will be some who will survive. When Jesus returns to Earth at the end of the Tribulation He will judge those who are still alive. Those who kept the faith and still had the Spirit will be saved, but those who grew weary and lost it will be damned. Some people will allow their faith to run out, and when Jesus suddenly returns there will be no time to quickly repent and seek forgiveness. Jesus is warning them to hold on to what they have despite the terrible trials that are going to happen, because their salvation literally depends on it.

To us, living in the Church Age, this seems bizarre. After all, once we are saved we cannot be lost. We don't realize that the gifts of the Holy Spirit and of “once saved always saved” are very special gifts that were given *to the Church* and were not extended to others. As we've already seen, the Old Testament saints were in constant danger of losing the Spirit, and the Tribulation saints will face the same danger. The Tribulation saints will face an additional challenge as well, in the form of the Mark of the Beast.

One thing the Bible is very clear about is that if you take the Mark of the Beast you will be damned forever. This is an unforgivable sin. Taking the Mark gets you a one-way ticket to eternal damnation:

Revelation 14:11: “And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.”

There are no exceptions to this policy. Once you do this you cannot change your mind or decide to come back to God. It is an absolutely final decision. In fact, the Bible emphasizes that the only ones who will be saved out of the Tribulation are those who did *not* take the Mark:

Revelation 15:2: “And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them

that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God.”

Today, in the Church Age, once we are saved we are sealed forever and we cannot be lost. Christians can commit all kinds of terrible sins (and, sadly, they do), but it does not and cannot affect their salvation. In the Tribulation it will be different. True believers will have to demonstrate their faith by not taking the Mark of the Beast. Anyone who takes it – no matter how much they might regret it later – *will* be damned, because there is no forgiveness for it. Plus, as we saw earlier in the parable of the ten virgins, true believers will have to hold on to their faith until Jesus returns. Those who let it slip away will be lost.

Now, I am not saying that in the Church Age we are saved by grace and in the Tribulation people are saved by works. That is not the case at all. What I am saying is that Tribulation saints will have to demonstrate their faith by not taking the Mark and by holding on to their faith until Jesus returns. This will not be an easy thing to do: the whole planet will be ruled by the antichrist and besieged by armies of demons. Believers will be hunted down and brutally murdered. It will be a horrible time to be alive. Things will become so bad that Revelation says that Christians who get killed during this time will actually be better off than the ones who are still alive, because the dead will finally have peace.

Why is there such a difference between the Church Age and the Tribulation Age? Because circumstances have changed. Today, in the Church Age, we live in a time of faith. We believe in Jesus even though we have not seen Him. Thomas refused to believe until he had seen the risen Lord with his own eyes. We don't have that luxury: we have to accept the Bible's account and believe that it is true. We don't have constant physical proof of God.

However, that wasn't always the case. When the Israelites left Egypt they had a pillar of cloud to follow by day and a pillar of fire by night. At Horeb they actually heard the voice of God Himself. Later, when the Temple was built, the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies once a year and communicate with God Himself, in person. God actually had a street address, and people could use the Urim and Thummim to ask God specific questions and get specific answers. (I know we have prayer today and I don't want to downplay that, but imagine if God had an address that you could write to and immediately get back written responses.) In that dispensation you didn't need nearly as much faith because the proof of God was everywhere.

In the Tribulation the proof of God's existence will be *even greater*. Remember, by the time the Tribulation happens the Rapture will have already taken place. The entire planet will have seen Jesus Christ come to Earth, resurrect the dead, and remove the Church. This is probably something that will be broadcast on live TV for all the world to see. (The History Channel will probably make specials about it.) Which do you think requires more faith: believing in Jesus now, or believing in Jesus *after you saw Him return in person, raise millions of dead people, and rapture millions more into the sky?* In the Tribulation God's presence will be so obvious that every last person on Earth will be aware of it:

Revelation 6:15: “And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains;
16 And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb:
17 For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?”

Do you see that? Every single person – from the mightiest king to the lowliest slave – realizes that the day of the Lord's wrath has come and is deeply afraid. *No one* doubts God's existence or power.

No one questions what is happening. There are no atheists.

The point I'm trying to make is that the Church Age is a special time with special privileges. Although life in the Tribulation will be far more difficult than life is today, those who live during that period will have far *more* proofs of God's existence and power than we do today. In the Church Age we don't have constant supernatural proof of God's existence that convinces every last person on Earth. But those who *do* believe now are blessed, because we have the Spirit and we can never be lost. In the Tribulation it will be obvious that God is real, but those who wait until then to believe will miss out on some benefits of believing now. Losing one's faith – and succumbing to the Mark of the Beast – will be genuine dangers. In this dispensation there are no sins that can cost us our salvation, but there will be during the Tribulation. It will be a different time.

The bottom line is that it will be possible to be saved after the Rapture happens, and millions of people will do so. However, it will be a very difficult and horrible time. Those who are saved will have to be careful to keep holding on to the Spirit, keep living in faith, and keep resisting the Mark of the Beast. Those who endure to the end shall be saved, but those who don't will be lost forever.