

Salvation in the Tribulation

At some point in history the rapture will occur. Although no one knows when it will happen, the fact remains that it will happen. When it does take place the Lord Jesus Christ will return to this world 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.

When this monumental event happens many people will suddenly vanish – and an even larger number of people will be left behind. A few people teach that no one who's left behind can be saved, but that's 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 find 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”. That means 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 doesn't end when the church disappears.

The Strong Delusion

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

2 Thessalonians 2:8-12: “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: Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: 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. 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've already seen, this passage doesn't mean that salvation is impossible after the rapture. Instead it's 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 planet¹. (Right now that's the job of the church, but once we're

1 You can read about this in Revelation 7.

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've completed their mission the Lord will send an angel to fly over all the world and repeat the gospel one more time (Revelation 14:6-7). By the time this happens everyone alive will have heard the good news. There won't be anyone left who hasn't heard about Jesus.

At this time God sends an angel to warn people against taking the Mark of the Beast, which will be introduced to the world in the second half of the tribulation:

Revelation 14:9-11: “And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: 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.”

This is the strong delusion that Paul was talking about. All those who hated the truth and rejected the gospel will take the Mark – and when they do they'll be lost forever because it's impossible to repent and be saved once you've taken the Mark. However, those who loved the truth and accepted Christ will be saved. They'll probably be martyred for their faith, but 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 won't have some of the benefits

which the church currently enjoys.

Progressive Revelation

To understand why let's back up and look at the Old Testament. How was Abraham saved? Did he believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as we do today? Of course not. Abraham couldn't have believed in that because he didn't know about any of those things. He could have known that God was going to send a Savior to redeem mankind, but in his day God had revealed very little about this coming Messiah. The oldest books of the Old Testament weren't written until centuries after Abraham died. The clearest prophecies about Christ are found in Isaiah, which wasn't 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 the gospel: that the Messiah would live a perfect life, die for the sins of mankind, and raise from the dead on the third day. If the *disciples* didn't understand it then I think it's safe to say that Abraham didn't 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.”

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 it save him? Because salvation has always come about by faith in God. We believe what God has revealed, 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's*

revealed. God told Abraham that he would have a son and that one of his descendants would be a blessing to all mankind (which referred to the Messiah). Abraham believed it and that faith saved him. That's all it took. Abraham was indeed saved through faith: he had faith in the promise that God made to him.

Today we know a lot more than Abraham did. We know who Jesus is and what He's done, and God requires us to believe it. We're still saved by faith and by believing in God's promise, but since we know more about that promise the Lord requires more of us. As Jesus said in Luke 12:48, "To whom much is given, much is required." We've always been saved by faith in God and never by our own works, but Abraham knew less about the gospel than we do today. God didn't require Abraham to believe something that hadn't been revealed to mankind yet! What God *did* require was for Abraham to believe what He *had* revealed – and that's still what He requires today.

The Holy Spirit

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 danger of losing it.

This may be surprising but the verses which talk about this are well-known. 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. Since He was leaving He would send the Holy Spirit to minister to us. That happened on the day of Pentecost:

Acts 2:1-4: “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. 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 the church came into existence – and was also the day that God gave the Holy Spirit to us. Today each believer is filled with the Spirit from the moment they're saved. In fact, Paul tells us that anyone who doesn't have the Spirit isn't 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's nothing we can do to lose it. We may fall into sin and grieve the Spirit, but He is still sealed within us. That wasn't the case in the Old Testament. The gift of the Holy Spirit which Christ gave to us is special and unique to this age.

How do we know this? Well, first of all, Christ said that the Comforter *wouldn't come unless He left*. It's hard to get more plain than that! We have the Comforter *because Christ left*. Those who were alive before He came didn't have Him, except in a few rare cases.

It's true there were definitely people in the Old Testament who were filled with the Spirit. One example is Samson:

Judges 14:5-6: “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. 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 wasn't with Samson all the time, as He is with us. Instead He came and went as necessary. Samson was also in danger of losing the Spirit if he ever cut his hair – a fact 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.”

Very few people in the Old Testament had the Holy Spirit, and those who did have Him were in danger of losing Him through sin. King David worried about losing the Spirit after he sinned with Bathsheba:

Psalms 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 Him to everyone in the church as a free gift, and He can't be lost through sin – but in the days of the Old Testament things were different. In those days very few people were given the Spirit, and those who had Him were forced to be careful lest the Lord take Him away 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 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 11:28-29: “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!”

Moses had no desire to stop this! Instead he wished that all of God's people would be given the Holy Spirit. Back then having the Spirit was a priceless privilege that could be lost through sin. Today things are different. Moses' wish was granted: we all have the Spirit, which is an astounding and precious gift.

The Tribulation Saints

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*. At the rapture the church will disappear from this world. People will be saved after the rapture but they won't be part of the church and they won't have the Holy Spirit sealed within them as we do. Just like Samson and King David, they will have to be careful lest they lose the Spirit.

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

Matthew 25:1-12: “Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. 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. 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. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. 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's always depicted as *the bride*, not as 10 bridesmaids. After all, when the bridegroom comes He's not going to marry 10 bridesmaids; He's 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 her bridegroom. The whole reason the bridegroom returns is to get his bride and take her away. There's no danger that he's 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 *doesn't apply to the Church* in any way, shape, or form.

This passage is talking about those who are still alive on the Earth at the end of the tribulation. While many saints will be martyred during that terrible period of time, there will be some who will survive. When Jesus returns to this world at the end of the tribulation He will judge those who are still alive (which you can read about in Matthew 25:31-46 – it's actually part of the famous Olivet Discourse). Those who kept the faith and still had the Spirit will be saved, but those who grew weary and lost Him will be damned. Some people will allow their faith to run out, and when Jesus suddenly returns there will be no time to repent and seek forgiveness. Jesus was warning the tribulation saints to hold on to their faith and endure the terrible trials which were going to happen because their salvation literally depended on it.

To us, living in the church age, this seems very strange. Once we're saved we can't be lost. Many people don't realize that the gifts of the Holy Spirit and “once saved always saved” are very special gifts which were given *to the church* and weren't extended to others. The Old Testament saints were in danger of losing the Spirit, and the tribulation saints will face the same danger. They will face an additional test as well in the form of the Mark of the Beast.

The Mark of the Beast

One thing the Bible is very clear about is that if you take the Mark of the Beast you'll be damned forever. That 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. Once you take the Mark you can't change your mind or decide to come back to God. It's absolutely final. 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're saved we're sealed forever and can't be lost. Christians can commit all kinds of sins (and sadly, they do), but it doesn't affect their salvation. In the tribulation things 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's no forgiveness for it. As we saw 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'm *not* saying that in the church age we're saved by grace and in the tribulation people will be saved by works. That's 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 won't be an easy thing to do. The world 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 the saints who are martyred

during this time will be better off than those who are still alive because the dead will finally have peace (Revelation 14:12-13).

Different Dispensations

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 haven't seen Him. Thomas refused to believe until he had seen the risen Lord with his own eyes. We don't have that luxury: we must accept the Bible's account and believe that it's 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. When the tabernacle 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 Him specific questions and get specific answers! (I know that in our day we have prayer and I don't want to downplay that, but imagine if God had an address that you could write to and get back written responses.) In that dispensation you didn't need as much faith because the proof of God was everywhere.

In the tribulation the proof of God's existence will be *even greater*. By the time the tribulation happens the rapture will have already taken place. The entire world will have seen Jesus Christ come back, resurrect the dead, and remove the church. 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 everyone in the world will be aware of it:

Revelation 6:15-17: “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; 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: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"

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's happening. There are no atheists left.

The church age is a special time with special privileges. Although life in the tribulation will be far more difficult, 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, but those who *do* believe are blessed because we have the Spirit and we can't lose our salvation. In the tribulation it will be obvious that God is real, but those who wait until then to believe will miss out on the benefits of believing now. Losing one's faith – and succumbing to the Mark of the Beast – will be genuine dangers in the dispensation to come. In this dispensation there are no sins which can cost us our salvation, but that's not the case during the tribulation. It will be a different time.

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 living in faith and resisting the Mark of the Beast. Those who endure to the end shall be saved, but those who don't will be lost forever.