

WILL the CHURCH  
go *through*  
the TRIBULATION?

**NO!**

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# *Will the Church go through the Tribulation?* **No.**

**By John F. Walvoord, A.M., Th.D.**

The hope of the imminent return of the Lord is as old as the church. The apostles anticipated the coming of Christ as something that could occur at any time. Early in this ministry, Paul exhorted the Thessalonians “to wait for his Son from heaven” (1 Thess.1:10). They were told to “comfort one another with these words” (1 Thess.4:18) when their loved ones fell asleep in Jesus. Later Paul wrote Titus that Christians should be looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). The Apostle John records late in the first century the words of Christ to the disciples the night before He was crucified: “I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:3).

The early Church Fathers understood the Scriptures to teach that the coming of the Lord could occur any hour. To quote one authority, the Didache (about A.D. 120), Christians were exhorted: “Watch for your life’s sake. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins unloosed; but be ye ready, for ye know not the hour in which our Lord cometh.” It should be clear to any impartial observer that the early church believed in the imminent coming of the Lord, but without solving many problems related to it.

As many as twenty-five arguments support the translation of the church before the tribulation, but for the sake of brevity, seven principal reasons will be presented here.

## **THE DOCTRINE OF IMMINENCY**

If the coming of Christ is after the tribulation it cannot be imminent. Too many events precede His coming to allow it to be a daily expectation. Exhortations to the church to “wait” and to “look” for His appearing are hard to explain if signs must be fulfilled first. We should look for the signs instead. The blessed hope of an imminent return would be separated from us, then, by the awful period of tribulation.

## **THE DOCTRINE OF GOD'S PURPOSE FOR THE CHURCH**

Many careful Bible students distinguish the purpose of God for Israel and God's purpose for believers in this present age. God is now revealing His grace in the salvation of Jew and Gentile alike. Believers since Pentecost are regarded as the body and bride of Christ, a company distinct from Israel's program and promises. With the beginning of the tribulation period, however, God will resume His program for Israel in preparation for His millennial reign upon the earth.

It seems most logical to believe that God's program for the present age will be finished before God resumes His announced program for Israel in the tribulation. In confirmation of this, there is no reference to the church in any of the tribulation passages. Believers in the tribulation (Rev. 4-19) are referred to only by general terms such as saints and the elect – terms used for believers all through the Bible. By contrast, Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, mentions the church many times.

## **THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRIBULATION**

The tribulation itself is of such character as to raise serious question whether the church will be required to pass through it. Those who deny the translation of the church before the tribulation usually also deny that it is going to be as terrifying as the Scriptures describe it, and make it equivalent to troubles and trials common to life now. In the Scriptures, the tribulation is described as a definite period of trouble unprecedented in all history. Daniel describes it as a "time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation" (Dan. 12:1). Christ spoke of it as "great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no nor ever shall be" (Matt. 24:21). The Book of Revelation describes it as an outpouring of the wrath of God upon an unbelieving world (cf. Rev. 6:17), a time when apostasy and sin reach unprecedented blasphemy. It is a period which brings death to most of the earth's population and destruction to civilization. Nothing like it has ever happened before. It seems out of keeping with the present age of grace to inflict on the last generation of believers such a series of catastrophes. In fact, there are definite promises that point to deliverance before the day of wrath comes.

## **SPECIFIC PROMISES**

In John 14:1-3, in connection with the promise of Christ, "I will come again," the purpose of His coming is revealed to be to take believers to "my Father's house," by which term He describes heaven. After He meets the church in the air, He will take them to the place prepared. In contrast, at His coming to establish the millennial Kingdom, all believers remain in the earthly scene. In 1 Thessalonians 5:4-10, believers are assured that they are children of light, not children of darkness. They are comforted with the promise that the day of wrath will not overtake them as a thief, as it will the world. They are promised, "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:9).

In 1 Thessalonians 1:9 our hope is stated: "To wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come." If believers are delivered "from the wrath to come," why inflict upon them a day of wrath designed for the ungodly? Are not believers assured, "much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him" (Rom. 5:9)? In Revelation 3:10 the godly church at Philadelphia is promised, "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." Notice that they will be kept "from" the period of tribulation ahead.

This promise was true for the historic church at Philadelphia because they had the hope of the Lord's return before the tribulation. If this church prefigures the true church as a whole, as many believe, all true believers in this age will have the same hope. This seems to follow a pattern found even in the Old Testament. Noah was saved from the flood. He was borne safely above it. Lot was led out of Sodom before its destruction. Rahab was saved before Jericho fell. Enoch was translated before the flood.

## **REMOVAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

According to 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12, the one now restraining sin in the world will be removed from earth's scenes before the beginning of the Day of the Lord, which includes the day of wrath. While there has been much discussion as to the identity of the restrainer, the best answer is that it refers to God's restraining hand, more specifically to the work of the Holy Spirit resisting the rising tide of sin in the world. This restraint is removed during the tribulation time. Obviously, the

Holy Spirit cannot be taken away while resident in the church in the world as is now the case. A chronology can thus be set up – the church indwelt by the Holy Spirit removed from the earth; then, the man of sin is revealed; with his appearance the tribulation begins. While the Holy Spirit continues to be omnipresent, His work will be similar to the period before Pentecost, but with His restraint withheld.

## **NECESSITY OF AN INTERVAL BETWEEN THE TRANSLATION AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM**

A number of events which seem to occur after the translation of the church and before the establishment of the millennial kingdom requires an interval of some years duration. According to John 14:1-3, the believers in this age go to heaven when Christ comes. There they will be judged for rewards (2 Cor. 5:10). There, too, the marriage will take place between the church as the bride and the Lord as the bridegroom (Eph. 5:25-27). After His coming, they are forever together – “where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:3)., Again, “so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17).

Scripture indicates that there will be a believing remnant on the earth when Christ comes back to establish His millennial kingdom. This remnant is never identified with the church and is never spoken of as translated. It is composed of believing Jews and Gentiles living at the close of the tribulation (Ezek. 20:34-38; Matt. 25:31-46). After the second coming, they are still in the flesh and are not free from death. They till the ground, raise crops, bear children, and repopulate the earth (Isa. 65:20-23; 66:20-24; Zech. 8:5; Matt. 25:31-40).

Not a single passage in the Old or New Testament related to the Lord's coming to establish His kingdom ever speaks of a translation of living believers. If all believers were translated at the end of the tribulation, none would be left to fulfill these prophecies of a godly remnant still in the flesh to populate the millennial earth. While every believer will be translated when Christ comes for His church, a new body of believers will be formed in the awful days of the tribulation. Those of this group who escape martyrdom will be the believing godly remnant on the earth when the Lord returns with His church from heaven to establish His millennial kingdom. In view of these facts, it is impossible to make the translation of the church and the establishment of the millennial kingdom simultaneous.



## CONTRASTS BETWEEN THE TRANSLATION AND THE COMING TO ESTABLISH THE KINGDOM

These can be stated as (a) translation; (b) coming to establish His kingdom:

In (a) there is a translation of all believers; in (b) there is no translation at all. In (a) translated saints go to heaven; in (b) translated saints return to the earth. In (a) the earth is not judged; in (b) the earth is judged and righteousness is established. (a) is imminent; but (b) follows definite predicted signs including the tribulation. (a) is not in the Old Testament; but (b) predicted often in the Old Testament. (a) is for believers only; but (b) affects all men. (a) occurs before the day of wrath; (b) concludes the day of wrath. (a) contains no reference to Satan; in (b) Satan is bound.

These contrasts indicate that the translation of the church is an event quite different in character and time from the return of the Lord to establish His kingdom, and confirms the conclusion that the translation takes place before the tribulation.

## CONCLUSION

While earnest Christians differ on the question, many Bible students of prophecy believe that the Scriptures teach a pretribulation translation of the church. A striking evidence for this is found in the manifestos issued by the International Congress on Prophecy in meetings held in 1942, 1943, and 1952, in Calvary Baptist Church, New York City. In each of these international congresses, about thirty outstanding prophetic teachers took part. In each congress a manifesto was issued setting forth their condition regarding prophetic truth. All three congresses went on record in favor of the translation of the church before the tribulation without so much as a dissenting vote.

Before the first coming of the Lord, there was confusion even among the prophets concerning the distinction between the first and second comings (1 Pet. 1:10-11). At the present time, there is similar confusion between the translation of the church and the second coming to establish the millennial kingdom. An attitude of Christian tolerance is called for toward those who differ on this doctrine. But may we all "love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8).

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***“A good word from  
God’s Word to His saints”***

*In the 17th Chapter of Gospel of John, just before going to His cross, Jesus is quoted as praying to the Father for all who believe in Him (Jn 17:20-26):*

20 “I do not pray for these (*his apostles above*) alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 21 that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: 23 I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. 24 “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. 26 And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.” (NKJV)