

Will Christians Be On Earth During The Great Tribulation?

While sitting in Sunday school one morning (10-12-08), a sister in Christ asked me if we were going to escape the tribulation. She further requested that I write a paper on the subject if I had an opinion regarding her question. This is a uncertainty that Christians have debated for years and I settled the answer personally many years ago after spending a great deal of time studying the biblical references pertaining to eschatology (doctrines about death and its aftermath: the body of religious doctrines concerning the human soul in its relation to death, judgment, heaven, and hell). I am now convinced that we Christians will not be here on earth during the time of the great tribulation, the horrific event described to Daniel long ago as being a "time of distress." The following reference is that passage which teaches us this truth. *At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever* (Daniel 12:1-3).

The individual to whom the passage refers, Michael, is an angel who has guarded true Israel since its inception. The Lord has provided guardian angels for all of the elect. *Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?* (Hebrews 1:14) The "time of distress" is that period of time lasting seven years, now known as The Great Tribulation. The names of all of God's elect are "written in the book." The promise is twofold: one concerns those 144,000 Jews who will be miraculously converted to evangelize the world during the tribulation period described by the apostle John as follows: *Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel* (Revelation 7:4). The seal is the Holy Spirit. *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption* (Ephesians 4:30).

The second promise refers to the rapture of the Church and begins, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust will awake," which refers to the joining of the souls and glorified bodies of the departed whose souls have long been in heaven. It is at that moment that the rapture occurs and that is clearly described

by the apostle Paul in the following passage. *According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever* (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

The word 'rapture' derives from the Latin word *rapere*, which means to seize or snatch away. The Greek word, used in Scripture is *harpazo*, from which the word harpoon comes. Paul uses the words again in 2 Corinthians 12: 2, 4 where he tells of being "caught up" to the third heaven. Some have jokingly called the rapture "The Great Snatch" that will occur before the Great Tribulation. It differs from the Second Coming of Christ, an event that is described in the book of Revelation in chapter 19 (because the rapture is confined to the elect) and the tribulation has been explained in chapters 6 through 18. The church appears in heaven in chapters 4 and 5 and is not described as being on earth after chapters 2 and 3. Paul speaks of the suddenness of the rapture event in another letter as well, this one his first to the church at Corinth. *Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound; the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality* (1 Corinthians 15:51-53). Paul uses the term 'sleep' to signify physical death. What he is saying is that some believers who have not yet died will be changed (given a glorified body) and taken away from earth to heaven without dying physically.

Enoch: the First to be Raptured

The precedent for that was set when God did the same thing to Enoch. If you read through chapter five of Genesis, you will find that every person there was said to have died, all, that is, with the exception of Enoch. God snatched him away. Moses informs us of the event as follows: *When Enoch had lived 65 years, he became the father of Methuselah. And after he became the father of*

*Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived 365 years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because **God took him away** (Genesis 5:21-24). It has been surmised that the change in Enoch's life, that is when he began to walk with God, came as a result of God giving him his son's name. Methuselah means, "when he dies it shall be sent." If you do a chronology (time study) on the last verses in that chapter, you will see that Methuselah died in the year of the Flood. The event is reiterated by the author of Hebrews. *By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God* (Hebrews 11:5).*

Enoch had pleased God because he believed what God had told him about the flood and he tried to convince others by telling them as much. It took a tremendous amount of faith to believe that because it had not yet rained on planet earth. Our faith, if it is genuine faith, should also convince us of Christ's return to earth and the judgment to follow. The same had been said regarding Noah's faith. *By faith Noah, when warned about **things not yet seen**, in holy fear built an ark to save his family* (Hebrews 11:7). The unseen things were rain drops that would fall for 40 days and nights and the welling up of subterranean oceans, the combination of which caused the worldwide deluge. *In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month—on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened* (Genesis 7:11).

Enoch had also faithfully preached the prophetic word of God regarding the coming judgment, and included the second Coming of Christ. *Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him"* (Jude 14-15). We are the "holy ones" who will accompany Jesus along with the angels that did not fall. We read of that event in the 19th chapter of the book of Revelation. *I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called **Faithful and True**. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are*

*like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and **his name is the Word of God**. The **armies of heaven** were following him, riding on white horses and **dressed in fine linen**, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS (Revelation 19:11-16). The fine linen robes were identified earlier in the chapter and the word 'her' there represents the church, the Bride of Christ. *Fine linen, bright and clean, was given **her** to wear (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints)* (Revelation 19:8).*

So God raptured Enoch to show us that He meant what He said when He promised us the same way out should we live long enough to approach the days of the Great Tribulation. He tells of the event in the gospel of Matthew as well. *No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come* (Matthew 24:36-42).

That passage is revealing in several ways. First, the rapture and the Second Coming will occur utterly unannounced and without warning. No bells and whistles with a news channel declaring "BREAKING NEWS." There will be a trumpet sounding at the rapture (which only the elect will hear) but the event will have occurred by the time we realize what it was that we heard. Second, Jesus confirms the fact that a worldwide flood occurred in the days of Noah; a verifiable historic event involving at least four historical figures: Noah, Ham, Shem and Japheth, with their wives remaining anonymous. Third, we see that some are taken and others are "Left Behind" as the popular series named for the event signaled.

Why I Believe We Will Go Before the Tribulation

In regard to last things, or eschatology, there are three basic theological positions with three subtypes within one of those. The opinions include views called pre-millennial, post-millennial and amillennial. The latter group denies that there will ever be a millennium, that is a 1000 year reign of Christ on earth following the Second Coming and prior to the final judgment. The Bible makes it patently clear that those who hold such a view are in error. *And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a **thousand years**. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the **thousand years** were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands.* (Revelation 20:1-4)

Those who were beheaded were people who had received Christ as Lord during the evangelistic work of the 144,000 Jews during the Tribulation. They were folks who had not yet heard the gospel message because those who had a first chance and refused to accept the truth of Christ would have never believed. We find proof of that in one of Paul's other letters. *For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness* (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12). They went on believing the lie.

Continuing with the biblical proof of the millennium we read: *They came to life and reigned with Christ a **thousand years**. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the **thousand years** were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a **thousand years**. When the **thousand years** are over, Satan will be*

released from his prison (Revelation 20:5-7; emphasis mine). The 'second death' referred to in that passage is that which unbelievers will suffer following their final judgment, and though they will be very much aware of their existence, it is called death because it will be in a Godless eternity and God is the author of all life. That will be the ultimate wrath of God to be poured out on unbelievers as well as Satan and his fallen angels. *They will be tormented day and night forever and ever* (Revelation 20:10).

Post-millennialism is the most unusual of the eschatological positions. Post-millennialists interpret the 1000 year reign of Christ as having already occurred in the past. There is no biblical backing for that belief and chapter 20 of Revelation is even more contradictory of that position than it is toward amillennialism. Pre-millennialists are represented by three categories, depending on their timing of the rapture. They are either 'post trib,' believing that the rapture occurs following seven years of tribulation sorrows, 'mid trib,' trusting that the rapture occurs at the time when the Antichrist sets himself up as God and demands that all worship him and him alone, that being three and a half years into the seven year period, or 'pre-trib;' that means the church is taken to heaven before the Antichrist is revealed and begins his seven year reign during the period of tribulation, characterized as a one world government and a dictatorial supremacy of this despotic, Satan-incarnated person over all the earth. It is with this last subtype of pre-millennialism that I hold a firm belief. Paul described the Antichrist in this manner: *The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing* (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). Daniel wrote of him as follows: *He will confirm a covenant with many for one seven. In the middle of the seven, he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him* (Daniel 9:27). The 'seven' is a period of years and the 'covenant' is a pact, a treaty, an accord or agreement that he will make with the nations of the world, possibly through a perfect venue, the United Nations. He will promise peace and security and freedom of worship for all religions but Christianity, but he will break his promise after an interval of three and a half years (in the middle of the seven years of tribulation). In the restored Temple in Jerusalem he will declare himself to be the Second Coming of God to earth. Jesus Himself warned of such a time. *For then there will be **great distress, unequalled from the beginning of***

the world until now—and never to be equaled again. *If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For **false Christs** and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible (Matthew 24:21-24). A false prophet will be the right hand man for the Antichrist (aka 'the beast'). *But the beast was captured, and with him the **false prophet** who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Revelation 19:20).**

The apostle Paul has made it abundantly clear that the Church, the bride of Christ will be raptured before the Antichrist sets up his worldly kingdom. He wrote these words of assurance to the church at Thessalonica: *Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for (that day will not come) until the rebellion occurs and the **man of lawlessness is revealed**, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now **you know what is holding him back**, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but **the one who now holds it back** will continue to do so **till he is taken out of the way**. And then the lawless one will be revealed (2 Thessalonians 2:3-8).*

The Holy Spirit is HE who is holding back the lawless one (Antichrist) and HE is taken out of the way when the church is raptured for we are collectively known as the temple of the Holy Spirit. Were the Holy Spirit not working to suppress some measure of evil in this world, it would be a literal Hell here for all of us. Paul asked a question and then answered it: *What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For **we are the temple** of the living God (2 Corinthians 6:16).* In another letter he asked this: *Don't you know that **you yourselves are God's temple** and that God's Spirit lives in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16)* Thus, in order to take the Holy Spirit out of the way, God must take us as well because once he has taken up residence within us he will never leave. This is what Jesus

told His disciples regarding the Spirit of truth. *The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and **will be in you*** (John 14:17).

In 1 Thessalonians 4:18, after describing the rapture (see page 2 of this paper) Paul tells the Christians (including you and me) to: *Encourage each other with these words*. It would not be much of an encouragement if he had also taught that we Christians would have to suffer through three and a half years (aka 'mid-tribs') or seven years (aka 'post tribs') of the Great Tribulation. In fact, Paul made it vividly clear in another place in the same letter to the same church that they would not go through the tribulation. *For God did not appoint us to **suffer wrath** but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Thessalonians 5:9). The wrath is that which will continue in hell and the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:14) and begins on earth with the tribulation. Paul repeated the statement *encourage each other with these words* in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, an encouragement based on our not being subject to God's wrath.

God's Gracious Habit of Rescuing the Elect

Throughout the Bible we find numerous occasions where God has rescued His elect, not just the three Jews from the fiery furnace and Daniel from the mouth of a lion, but also His children from utter destruction before He passed judgment and inflicted His righteous wrath on the unbelieving pagans. The first great and terrible period of judgment came in the days of Noah. *So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them."* *But Noah found **favor** in the eyes of the LORD* (Genesis 6:7-8). God saved Noah for all eternity (afforded him saving grace, the unmeritable favor of God) and he built an ark to save his family to repopulate the earth, the latter an example of common grace. That common grace benefited all mankind because it ensured the propagation of the race of mankind.

When God planned to wipe Sodom and Gomorrah off the map because of the heinous sins of same sex marriage and blatant homosexual practices, he sent two angels to rescue Lot. *The two men said to Lot, "Do you have anyone else here—sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it." So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, "Hurry and get out of this place, because the LORD is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought he was joking. With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished"* (Genesis 19:12-15). Foolish people today also make fun of Christians and take light of the lessons of God's Word when it comes to a discussion of judgment day.

Even a prostitute named Rahab was a recipient of God's saving grace. *By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient* (Hebrews 11:31). That rescue occurred when God sent Joshua's army to destroy Jericho and tear down its walls. The event is graphically described in the book of Joshua in chapters 2 and 6. In the former we read of how Rahab had provided a refuge and escape for some Israeli soldiers and in the latter we read: *Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD's house. But **Joshua spared Rahab** the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho—and she lives among the Israelites to this day* (Joshua 6:24-25). In fact, a look at the genealogy of Christ in Matthew chapter one will show that she was an ancestor of Joseph, the earthly, surrogate father of Jesus.

Having saved Noah, Lot and Rahab from the consequences of His wrath inflicted on the evil in this world, would it not be odd that God would even think to subject us (the Church He loves so very much and gave his Son to save) to the wrath that will come upon this earth during the Great Tribulation? That would not be consistent with this statement in the book of Romans where we read,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height or depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35, 37-39).

From the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation, God has clearly taught us that there will be a time of judgment to come upon the earth and that He will save those believers who remain on earth from the penalties of sin when that comes. Our sins were judged on Calvary when Jesus willingly took upon Himself the payment for sin, which is death.

Jesus Himself talked about the elect and the events of the last days in the gospel according to Dr. Luke. He has cautioned us: *Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and **that day will close on you unexpectedly** like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray **that you may be able to escape** all that is about to happen, and **that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man** (Luke 21:34-36). The only possible way for us to stand before the Son of Man, who is currently at the right hand of God the Father, will be for us to have escaped 'that day' by means of the rapture and then *meet the Lord in the air*, as Paul has told us in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. The only way to escape is to place our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and to live each day as if He were about to snatch us upward at any moment. That means living in obedience to His Word and faithfully witnessing to His worth.*

And by all means, as Paul once said, "Comfort one another with these words" because when the Antichrist is about to be revealed and the tribulation is about to begin, praise God, **we're outta here!**

Dr. Chuck McGowen.

Soli Deo Gloria

