SALVATION IN THE TRIBULATION: REVISITED

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

A few years ago I wrote an article about salvation in the tribulation in the *Pre-Trib Perspectives* (Vol. IV, No. 2; May 1999). I want to revisit this question in order to deal with some additional aspects of this issue. I want to deal with the belief that one who has heard the Gospel and rejects it before the Rapture will thus be unable to be saved in the Tribulation. I am in strong disagreement with this view.

THE *LEFT BEHIND* SERIES

This is an important issue since many, who believe this theory, naturally think that the *Left Behind* novel series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins is unrealistic in that they portray a great number of Gentiles being saved during the Tribulation. I agree with LaHaye and Jenkins on this matter. I do not hold this view because I work closely with Dr. LaHaye, but because I am not convinced that the Bible teaches such a view.

Long before I ever met Dr. LaHaye I was exposed to the idea that if a lost person hears, understands and rejects the Gospel before the Tribulation, then he or she would be unable to be saved during the Tribulation. Back in the early '70s such a view was widely held. I once held this view.

In the last few months I have heard criticism about the *Left Behind* novel series such as: Tim LaHaye is condemning people to Hell by not preaching their view, since he believes they will have a "second chance" to come to salvation during the tribulation. One preacher said that it was foolish to think that someone like Bruce Barnes (a character in *Left Behind*) could be an unsaved pastor before the rapture and then get saved after the rapture. This pastor believes that Barnes, who would have heard the gospel before the rapture, rendering him as gospel-hardened after the rapture, thus making him unsavable. The preacher went on to warn of the danger of the Left Behind series because of this supposed error.

I recall in the late '70s sitting down and studying this view for myself. I concluded then that this was not taught in the Bible, since the passage in which it is supposed to be taught, refers to events that will occur in the Tribulation (2 Thessalonians 2:3-12), not related to our current church age. Naturally, as one who labors full-time in the field of Bible prophecy I have been challenged dozens of times to reconsider my understanding on this matter. I have gone over and over this passage, in light of this question, many times throughout the years. No one has yet to produce an insight from Scripture that would cause me to change my thinking.

One thing that has grown and developed over the years is my understanding of this view that I disagree with. Therefore, I have more to say about this item. This article presupposes the arguments that I made in the earlier essay, so I will not repeat them here. In this piece I want to write about some other items relating to this issue.

THE APOSTASY

One of the primary reasons I think that this errant view gained popularity revolves around the meaning and use of the word "apostasy" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. The passage reads as follows: "Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction." Too often interpreters think that the apostasy, which is to come, describes

those who depart from the faith at the end of the church age, right before the day of the Lord or seven-year Tribulation. Those who teach this view then contend that since the apostasy occurs at the end of the church age, then the strong delusion that God sends in the Tribulation is upon those apostates or false professors (verses 11-12) whose unbelief took place at the end of the church age. I have at least two major problems with such a view.

The Meaning of "Apostasia"

I believe that there is a greater than 50 per cent possibility that the Greek noun *apostasia* could refer to the rapture and not departure from the faith as is generally thought. First of all, the core meaning of the verb and noun is "depart."[1] *Apostasia* can mean physical departure, in which case it would mean "to disappear" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Or, it can be used abstractly, in which case it would mean "to depart from the faith." Since the definite article is used (i.e., the apostasia), it most likely is a reference to a specific event. This would favor the rapture view, since it will be a definite event, unlike departure from the faith, which would be a developing condition. Since the definite noun *apostasia* does not have a stated direct object, one must be supplied in order to know whether Paul was using the word abstractly or not. Whatever Paul was referring to, he says in verse five the following: "Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?"

I want to write a more extensive support of this view at a future time, but to suffice it to say that if *apostasia* refers to a physical departure at the rapture, then the view that one who has heard the Gospel and rejects it before the Rapture will thus be unable to be saved in the Tribulation falls to the ground. Why? Because all other events described in 2 Thessalonians clearly refer to things that will occur during the Tribulation. In order for this view that I oppose to even have a possibility that it could be correct, then *apostasia* would have to refer to a pretribulational apostasy. This leads us to the other major problem.

The Timing of the Apostasy

If we suppose, for the sake of argument, that *apostasia* is used abstractly and has the meaning of apostasy it would not necessarily support the view to which I am disagreeing. Why? Because, in context, the apostasy that is being spoken of most likely refers to events associated with the Antichrist during the middle of the Tribulation. Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum explains:

> These verses have often been interpreted as teaching that if one hears the gospel before the Rapture and rejects it, he will not have an opportunity to be saved after the Rapture. But this is not the teaching of this passage. The point of no return is the acceptance of the "big lie" of the Antichrist's self-proclaimed deity and the submission to the worship of him by means of taking the mark of the beast. It is only then that the point of no return is actually reached. The option of taking the mark of the beast only begins in the middle of the tribulation. Even the context of this passage shows that it speaks of events that occur in the middle of the tribulation. The worshippers of the Antichrist do so because they are deceived by the Antichrist's power of miracles. They are deceived because they received not the love of the truth. The rejection of the gospel was not what they may have heard before the Rapture but rather the preaching of the 144,000 Jews and the Two Witnesses.[2]

Dr. Fruchtenbaum is correct to link this passage with events in the middle of the Tribulation. This passage lines up with events described in Revelation 12—14. The "strong delusion" of 2 Thessalonians 2:11 relates to those who receive the mark of the Beast, called "those who dwell upon the earth" throughout Revelation (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 [twice]; 12:12; 13:8, 14 [twice]; 14:6). 2 Thessalonians 2, seen in light of Revelation 12—14, makes it clear that the timing of the act of those who "love not the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:10).

New Testament Apostasy

To take the view that I do does not mean that I think that the New Testament does not talk frequently about the subject of apostasy. It surely does. There are plenty of passages that do teach of increasing apostasy as the age progresses. Two major passages, among many, that teach an end-time church age apostasy occur in 1 Timothy 4:1-16 and 2 Timothy 3:1—4:8. In fact, 2 Timothy 3:13 declares, "{B}ut evil men and imposters will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." But end-time apostasy will not suddenly show up in history right before the Rapture. Instead, Peter wrote a whole Epistle to warn believers about a coming apostasy in his own day (2 Peter). Peter wrote the following warnings:

> But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves (2:1).
>
> You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness (3:17).

Long before the first century A.D. had come to an end, Jude, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said that Peter's prediction of apostasy had come.

> Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 3-4).

Thus, at least 1,900 years ago, New Testament writers clearly declare that church age apostasy had arrived in their own day. How much more is it true of today! This means that church age apostasy has been with ever since the days of the Apostles themselves. Yet church age apostasy is not stagnant. As the church grows, so does apostasy (2 Timothy 3:13).

Conclusion

I believe Scripture indicates that millions of people will be saved during the Tribulation. We see, in Revelation 7:9, a report of what are the apparent results of the evangelistic efforts of the 144,000 Jewish witnesses.

> After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands;

True, today is the day of salvation and it is never advisable to delay when the Lord is calling through His gospel. However, the New Testament does not teach that an individual reaches an unsavable position until they die with one exception. That exception is when the mark of the beast is issued and received during the second half of the seven-year Tribulation. Those receiving the Antichrist's mark will be beyond salvation (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12; Revelation 14:9-12). There is an urgency that we all need to have when we preach the gospel, because the time of God's grace is running out. Nevertheless, we do not need to invent devices that we think will help God out. All they do is confuse people and distort the clear message of Scripture. Jesus Christ could return at any moment and you need to be ready by believing the gospel and serving Him until the Father sends His Son to bring us all home. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

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[1] See the excellent survey of this issue in H. Wayne House, "Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?" in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today's Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Times Controversies* (Eugene OR: Harvest House, 1995), pp. 261-96.

[2] Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (San Antonio: Ariel Press, 1982), p. 176.