

THE FUNCTION OF THE TRIBULATION SAINTS*

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IN REVELATION 7:9–10 JOHN WROTE that he saw a great multitude praising God for their deliverance.¹ An elder informed John that these saints were coming out from the Great Tribulation (vv. 13–14). John was also told that every one of these Tribulation saints would be delivered, not only from sin but also from worshiping the Antichrist (12:11; 13:8–10; 14:11–12; 15:2; 20:4). Bible students debate whether the perseverance of these Tribulation saints is unique and whether they will be indwelt by the Holy Spirit like today's church-age saints. Examination of the New Testament indicates that (a) their deliverance from sin is similar, (b) their function as overcomers could be different, and (c) the indwelling ministry of the Spirit could be the same for Tribulation saints and church-age saints.

DELIVERANCE FROM SIN

WASHED AND WHITENED ROBES

John saw these saints clothed in white robes that had been washed by the Lamb's blood (7:14).² Since literal blood cannot wash robes

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¹ The use of the dative $\tau\omega\ \theta\epsilon\omega\varsigma$ in verse 10 ("Salvation to our God") indicates that "the acquisition was recent or the emphasis is on the possessor" (F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. Robert W. Funk [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961], 102). The context clarifies that it is used as a dative of reference, emphasizing that the deliverance belongs to God (as rendered in the New International Version), that is, it comes from Him.

² They were cleansed *by means of* the blood of the Lamb, for $\epsilon\nu$ is used in the instrumental sense here (Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 498).

clean, the phrase is figurative. The figure of the Lamb particularly related to Christ's sacrificial work on behalf of man's sin (5:9).³ The Old Testament used a similar metaphor of forgiveness of sins (Ps. 51:7; Isa. 1:18; 64:6; Zech. 3:3–5). According to the New Testament, applying Christ's blood by faith is necessary for cleansing people from sin (Heb. 9:14; 1 John 1:7). Thus white clothes symbolized the Tribulation saints' complete forgiveness from sin.

Obviously these saints were forgiven before they entered heaven, for in Revelation 7:14 John used the present tense *ἔρχομαι* ("coming") along with the aorist tense of *πλύνω* ("washed") and *λευκαίνω* ("made white"). Later he wrote that these victorious saints come out of the Great Tribulation as martyrs for their faith in Christ (12:11). Such faith indicates that they were declared righteous before they were martyred (Rom. 5:1).

GOD'S SAINTS

As forgiven people, these believers will serve in the Tribulation as God's redeemed saints on earth. Several times in Revelation the term *ἅγιοι* ("holy ones, saints") is used to identify the people of God in the Tribulation (8:3–4; 11:18; 13:7, 10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6).⁴ It is a regular apocalyptic term, derived from the Septuagint of Daniel 7:18, 21–22, 25, 27, where faithful Jews are referred to as *ἅγιοι*.⁵ In Revelation believing Gentiles are referred to as *ἅγιοι* in the Great Tribulation (Rev. 13:7, 10).⁶ The word *ἅγιος* indicates that the person is "consecrated to God."⁷ Thus Tribulation saints (like church-age saints; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 2:10; 1 Pet. 1:9) will function as God's forgiven people, representing Him to the rest of the world.

³ "The 'blood' imagery seems always to refer to the Lamb's victory on the cross, not to our victory via martyrdom" (Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 335). See also James Moffatt, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 5:400.

⁴ The word "*ἅγιος* refers to the 'people of God' in which a cultic element is retained in both the Old Testament and New Testament" (Otto Protsksch, "*ἅγιος*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringren, vol. 1, trans John T. Willis [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 110).

⁵ Donald W. B. Robinson, "Who Were the Saints?" *Reformed Theological Review* 22 (June 1963): 46.

⁶ Eugene W. Pond, "Interpretive Issues Pertaining to the Judgment of Sheep and Goats" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001), 170.

⁷ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Fredrick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 11.

GOSPEL MESSAGE?

How will these Tribulation saints come to faith in Christ's redemptive work? Is their path to salvation different from that of church-age saints? Consideration of these questions helps clarify their function and possible distinctions.

The message that will be preached to these saints in the future Tribulation is the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is based on the fact that these saints will overcome because of the blood of the Lamb, implying that they will know of His sacrifice for their sins (Rev. 12:11). Since those who "do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus"⁸ will be punished when Christ returns at the end of the Tribulation (2 Thess. 1:8), it seems that these saints, by contrast, are those who will know and respond to the gospel. Also, unlike those deceived by the Antichrist, Tribulation saints will "receive the love of the truth" and will be saved (2:10, 12).⁹ Thus like today's saints, they will be saved by believing the gospel of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-5).

However, their redeeming message will also incorporate the gospel of the kingdom. This is the gospel that will be preached to the whole world in the Tribulation (Matt. 24:14, 21). The phrase *τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας* ("the gospel of the kingdom") is found in the New Testament only in Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; and Luke 16:16. In these Gospel accounts it is used in reference to the offering of the messianic kingdom to Israel.¹⁰ The phrase is not used in the New Testament in connection with the message of salvation for the church age. Thus it is questionable whether the message to these Tribulation saints will be entirely the same as in the church age.¹¹ The gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed in the Tribulation because Christ will soon return to set up His kingdom (Matt. 24:29-30).

⁸ Their rejection of the gospel will occur just before the Antichrist's deception, which will start at the midpoint of the seven-year Tribulation (Randy Jenkins, "A Chronological Identification of the Rejecters in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-12" [M.Div. thesis, Grace Theological Society, 1982], 61).

⁹ Since the deception of the Antichrist is related to his abomination (2 Thess. 2:4, 9-10), it is conceivable that people will have ample opportunity to hear the gospel in the first half of Daniel's seventieth week. After the midpoint those who did not receive the truth will be deluded "so that they will believe what is false" (v. 11).

¹⁰ "The message will be much the same as that which was proclaimed by John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and the disciples" (Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945], 216).

¹¹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), 869.

Who will bring this salvation message to these future Tribulation saints? The fact that the 144,000 are mentioned in Revelation 7:1–8 immediately before the scene of the great multitude (vv. 9–19) has led some to suggest that the 144,000 are those who will evangelize the great multitude.¹² Also the prophesying of the two witnesses for three and a half years could also alert these people to the way of salvation (11:3).

Matthew 10:16–42 mentions another group that will preach the gospel during the Tribulation. These are disciples of Jesus who will “not finish [going through] the cities of Israel, until [*ἕως*] the Son of Man comes” (10:23).¹³ In noting their preaching through the cities of Israel, Jesus indicated that much of Israel (as it will exist during the Tribulation) will be evangelized. While these evangelists are Jewish (v. 17), some believing Gentiles could also be gospel messengers.¹⁴ Jesus will reward Gentiles who survive the Tribulation on the basis of how they will treat the “least of these brethren of mine” (25:40; cf. 10:42). Since Jesus’ “brethren” seem to include all believers (12:48–50), these brethren could refer to missionary martyrs who are either Jews or Gentiles.¹⁵

Certainly the initial Gentile converts of the great multitude could be used to reach other Gentiles. Also the ministry of previous believers—who testified for Christ before dying or being raptured—could provide seed that will later be harvested in the Tribulation. What is unusual is that an *innumerable* group of people will be saved in the limited span of the seven-year Tribulation period (Rev. 7:9).

¹² W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 185; Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 142; Isaac Newton, *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John in Two Parts* (London: Darby and Browne, 1733), 317; C. Marvin Pate, “A Progressive Dispensationalist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. Marvin C. Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 165–66; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Findley, OH: Dunham, 1958; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 300; and John F. Walvoord, “Revelation,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983; reprint, Colorado Springs, CO: Cook, 1991), 149.

¹³ The preposition *ἕως* suggests that their preaching will be finished by the time of Jesus’ second coming.

¹⁴ Pond, “Interpretive Issues Pertaining to the Judgment of Sheep and Goats,” 169.

¹⁵ Eugene W. Pond, “Who Are ‘the Least’ of Jesus’ Brothers in Matthew 25:40?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (October–December 2002): 448.

DELIVERANCE FROM THE ANTICHRIST

John also saw Tribulation saints affirming the fact that God gave them victory over Satan and the Antichrist. This deliverance is suggested by the use of *σωτηρία* in Revelation, their holding palm branches, and their heavenly clothing.

SALVATION

Σωτηρία ("salvation") in Revelation can refer to victory over the Antichrist.¹⁶ In the three places in Revelation where *σωτηρία* is used, it is a Hebraism meaning "salvation as victory intimately associated w. God" (Rev. 7:10; 12:10; 19:1).¹⁷ This relates to the basic meaning of *σωτηρία* as "deliverance or preservation."¹⁸ Revelation 12:10 and 19:1 refer to the victory of Tribulation saints overcoming and avenging Satan and his dominion.

PALM BRANCHES

John saw the multitude with palm branches (*φολιυκες*) in their hands (7:9), indicating that they will be victorious in the Great Tribulation (v. 14). John's readers were likely familiar with Greek and Roman customs that involved holding palm branches to proclaim triumphs.¹⁹ Ancient Jews also held palm branches as a symbol of victory. Philo noted that a palm tree was "the symbol of victory."²⁰ Palm trees were engraved on Jewish coins from 140 B.C. to A.D. 70.²¹ One such coin also has the inscription "the redemption of Zion."²² In 1 Maccabees 13:51 Jewish soldiers waved palm

¹⁶ Paul Ellingwood, "Salvation to Our God," *Bible Translator* 34 (1983): 444–45; Werner Foerster and Georg Föhrer, "σῶζω, κτλ." in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 997–98; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 254–55; and Osborne, *Revelation*, 320.

¹⁷ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 986.

¹⁸ Ibid. See also Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. and aug. Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick Mckenzie, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 1751.

¹⁹ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Woodward, 1811), 2:977–79.

²⁰ Philo, *Legum Allegoria* 3.74.

²¹ Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 486.

²² Herbert Hamburger, "Money Coins," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 3:434.

branches when Jerusalem was liberated from the Syrians. Also Jews held palm branches when they celebrated their victory over Antiochus Epiphanes (2 Macc. 10:7). Second Esdras 6:25; 9:7–8 associates palm branches with persevering ones who will be delivered at the end of the age. So *φοῖνιξ* was a general symbol of victory and joy for Jews.²³ This imagery shows that John saw Tribulation saints as victors over the Antichrist, the enemy of Christ.

However, several scholars hold that the palm branches refer to the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, not victory over the Antichrist.²⁴ Some argue that it is best to explain the text from an Old Testament and Jewish background rather than with nonbiblical symbolism. It is true that palm branches were not used in the Old Testament as a symbol of victory and that they were used in the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:39–40),²⁵ which will be celebrated in the end times (Zech. 14:16). The Mishnah also notes that the *lulab* (palm branch, willow branch, and myrtle branch) was shaken during the *Sukkah* (Feast of Tabernacles) when the celebrants recited Psalm 118:25.²⁶ It is further argued that Revelation 7:15 refers to God's tabernacling over His people. Verse 17 mentions the final harvest when the nations will be gathered and there will be no more death (cf. Isa. 25:7–8), and the heavenly rest symbolizes the Tabernacles celebration (Deut. 16:13–15; Neh. 8:15).

Other writers say that Revelation depicts God's people "in Exodus-related terms."²⁷ Like the original celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, these "saints rejoice in their latter-day exodus redemption, in their victory over their persecutors, and God's protection of them during their wilderness pilgrimage (Rev. 12:6, 14) through the 'great tribulation' (see on 7:13–14)."²⁸ Thus some con-

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 428; Robert E. Coleman, *Songs of Heaven* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1980; reprint, *Singing with the Angels* [Grand Rapids: Revell, 1998]), 83, 85; Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary*, 489–90; Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of John*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 100; Håkan Ulfsgård, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9–17 and the Feast of Tabernacles*, Coniectanea Biblica New Testament Series (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1989), 90.

²⁵ Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services As They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1874; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 275.

²⁶ *m. Sukka* 3:8.

²⁷ Ulfsgård, *Feast and Future*, 90.

²⁸ Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 426.

tend that “the allusion to victory does not suffice as the primary explanation of the symbolism of the palm branches [in Rev. 7:9], but must be seen as secondary compared to the allusion to the Feast of Tabernacles, which fits in well with the general Exodus pattern found throughout the book.”²⁹

In response to the view that the palm branches symbolize the Feast of Tabernacles, the following points need to be considered. First, the other New Testament occurrence of *φοῖνιξ* in John 12:13 relates to the time when people were coming to Jerusalem for the Passover, not for the Feast of Tabernacles. A symbol of victory would be pertinent there, where the Passover focus was on praising God for saving His people from Egyptian oppression.³⁰ Also unlike the kingdom predictions in Zechariah 14:17 the scene in Revelation will occur just before the end of this age. Also, as will be discussed in the third article in this series, the rewards mentioned in Revelation 7:15b–17 are anticipating not the kingdom but the eternal state (21:1–6).

The following facts support the premise that the Tribulation saints’ palm branches in 7:9 symbolize their victory over the Antichrist. First, the immediate context affirms that God is their Deliverer (v. 10). Second, the context identifies these saints as being delivered from sin and the Great Tribulation (v. 14). Third, God’s tabernacling among them relates to the rewards for their victories (7:15; 21:1–3). Fourth, the reward of being guided to living springs of waters (7:17) is promised for victors (12:6–7). Fifth, John emphasized that Tribulation saints will be honored for their victory over sin and the Antichrist (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7). Sixth, the other New Testament usage of *φοῖνιξ* can be understood as referring to anticipation of the Messiah saving Israel (John 12:13). Seventh, palm branches were known as symbols of victory in Jewish as well as Roman and Greek cultures.

WHITE GARMENTS

The white robes mentioned in 6:11 and 7:9, 13 could also signify victory.³¹ In 6:11 “white robes” describe the garments given to the souls of martyred Tribulation saints. This robing could be a reward

²⁹ Ulfgard, *Feast and Future*, 92.

³⁰ Friedrich Düstertdieck, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John*, trans. and ed. Henry E. Jacobs (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1887), 251; and Osborne, *Revelation*, 320.

³¹ Cook, *The Theology of John*, 227; and Osborne, *Revelation*, 320.

for their staying true to Christ (v. 9). Also Christ told the faithful in Sardis that they would be dressed in white (3:4–5; cf. Dan. 11:35; 12:10).

VICTORY WAS PREDICTED

Christ predicted that these future evangelists will function as overcomers, even though they will risk their lives for Him (Matt. 10:22–23, 27–28, 39). And He said that those who endure “to the end” (τέλος) will be delivered (24:13). That is, believers who live through the Tribulation will be delivered and brought into the millennium.³² Several church fathers wrote of this deliverance for the saints who live to the end of the Tribulation,³³ and Tertullian wrote that victorious Christian martyrs, “celebrating their triumph doubtless over Antichrist,” will hold palm trees.³⁴

Their specific victory will be overcoming the Antichrist and his system (Rev. 7:9; 12:11; 13:8, 10; 14:11–12; 15:2; 20:4). Instead of worshiping the beast, Tribulation saints will be noted for their keeping God’s commandments and maintaining their testimony for Christ (6:9; 12:17; 14:12; 19:10; 20:4). Thus they are overcomers: “they overcame [ἐνίκησαν] him [Satan] because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony” (12:11).³⁵ In another scene John wrote that these saints will be “victorious [τοὺς νικῶντας, lit., ‘the overcoming ones’] over the beast and his image and the number of his name” (15:2), and therefore they will sing praises to the Lord (vv. 3–4).

John saw them as a victorious group because they had not worshiped Antichrist by bowing to his image or taking his mark. Like the three Jews in Daniel 3, Tribulation saints will worship the true God and willingly take the consequences. Thus though martyred, they will be victors.

³² Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980), 272.

³³ *Didache* 16.1–8; *Barnabas* 4.1–4; and *Hermas*, *Visions* 2.2.7–8; 2.3.4.

³⁴ Tertullian, *De spectaculis* 12.29.

³⁵ *Νικάω* means “to win in the face of obstacles, *be victor, conquer, overcome, prevail*, a. in a battle or contest . . . of Christ Rev 3:21b; 5:5. . . . The Christian as *ὁ νικῶν* *the one who is victorious* . . . Rv 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7. . . . *οἱ νικῶντες ἐκ τοῦ θηρίου* . . . 15:2” (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 673 [italics theirs]).

KEYS TO VICTORY

Revelation 12:10–11 points up two keys to their victory. First, they will overcome Satan's accusations "because of the blood of the Lamb," that is, because of their faith in His work on the cross, which will assure them of eternal life. By being "released" from their sins by His blood, they will become priests and rulers (1:5–6; 5:9–10). Their faith in Christ's sacrifice means that Satan and the beast will not be able to defeat them.

Second, John saw the Tribulation saints as victorious over the Antichrist because of "the word of their testimony,"³⁶ that is, their bold and verbal witness as followers of Christ (12:11). John then added, "They did not love their life even when faced with death." They will continue to evangelize in spite of the persecution it will bring them. They will willingly give up their lives if necessary. They will maintain their witness for Christ even if it means martyrdom (6:9; 12:17; 18:24; 20:4).³⁷

THE QUESTION OF MARTYRDOM

Scholars differ on whether all these saints will be martyred. Many writers say the entire multitude will be martyrs.³⁸ Certainly all the

³⁶ In the phrase "of their testimony" *αὐτῶν* is a subjective genitive: "the word of God to which they have born testimony" (Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 664; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1995], 135); and Allison A. Trites, "Witness and the Resurrection in the Apocalypse of John," in *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 277.

³⁷ "In the Apocalypse, the presence of martyrs before the Throne or under the altar is conceived of as resulting from their participation in the great tribulation (6,9; 7,14–15). In the background of this mode of presentation are ancient Jewish speculations on the destiny of martyrs. This destiny was understood in terms of sacrifice and of access to God" (Christian Grappe, "L'immolation terrestre comme gage de la communion céleste (Apocalypse 6,9; 7,14–15; 20,6)," *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 79 [January–March 1999]: 71).

³⁸ Ambrose, *Apocalypse* 9.19.16; Andreas of Caesarea, *Apocalypse Commentary* 32; Beatus, *Apocalypse* 4.6.70; R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1920), 1:201; Cook, *The Theology of John*, 213; A. R. Fausset, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," in *A Bible Commentary: Critical, Practical and Explanatory* (New York: Revell, 1878; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 2:570; Johnson, "Revelation," 484; Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), 139, 141, 145; George Eldon Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 118–19; R. C. H. Lenski, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 261; J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 135; Leon Morris, *Revelation*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 116–18; and Tertullian, *De spectaculis* 29.

information given by John about the death of these Tribulation saints involves martyrdom (6:9, 11; 11:7; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4).³⁹ Yet one may question whether all these deceased Tribulation saints were martyred. Natural causes or plagues may cause the deaths of some of them, as noted in 6:8 and 9:18.⁴⁰ Unlike the 144,000 (7:3; 9:4), these saints are not said to be exempt from God's judgments. Also martyrdom is not the only form of persecution these overcomers will face. Some will be imprisoned (13:10). In the words "they did not love their life until death" (author's translation) the preposition until (*ἄχρι*) does not mean they will be martyred (12:11). It simply suggests the extent to which those believers are *willing* to suffer for the Lord.⁴¹ Thus some scholars suggest that not all Tribulation saints will be martyred, though these saints will be willing to die for Christ, if necessary.⁴²

UNIQUE OVERCOMERS

In the present church age many believers, unfortunately, fail to be victorious in overcoming immorality and the temptation to turn their backs on the Lord (1 Cor. 5:1, 5; 2 Tim. 2:12). Yet during the Great Tribulation *all* believers will function as overcomers, for by contrast, anyone who submits to worshipping the beast will be eternally condemned (Rev. 14:9–12). Tribulation saints are uniquely noted as those who "keep . . . their faith in Jesus."⁴³ This does not mean that these Tribulation saints are saved by works. It simply means that they will not buckle when tested. Since the resurrected Tribulation saints will include only overcomers (20:4), it is clear that no Tribulation saint will recant (Rev. 20:4).⁴⁴

³⁹ Johnson, "Revelation," 484.

⁴⁰ David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 443–44.

⁴¹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 665.

⁴² Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 447; Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 438; Charles Brüttsch, *Die Offenbarung Jesu Christi, Johannes-Apokalypse*, 2nd ed. (Zürich: Zwingli, 1970), 1:336–37; B. F. Hosford, "Martyrdom in the Apocalypse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 23 (April 1866): 320; Osborne, *Revelation*, 318; Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary*, 484–85; and Daniel Whitby and Moses Lowman, *A Critical Commentary and Paraphrase on the New Testament*, new ed. (London: Clarke, 1760; reprint, Philadelphia: Gihon, 1854), 1041.

⁴³ Donald Deer, "Whose Faith/Loyalty in Revelation 2:13 and 14:12?" *Bible Translator* 38 (July 1987): 328.

⁴⁴ Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 539.

Also Jesus affirmed that all Tribulation saints will be victorious. As already noted, He said that only those who endure until the end will be delivered (Matt. 24:13). He also taught that Gentiles, who will aid believing missionaries, will inherit the kingdom (25:34),⁴⁵ and that those who do not aid them will be sent to eternal fire (v. 46).⁴⁶ There is no middle ground in this judgment. Individuals will either stand up for God's people, or they will reject them. Tribulation saints will not refuse to aid an evangelist during this coming period of severest persecution.

The fact that none of these Tribulation saints will recant points to their uniqueness. This may well be the only time period when no believer will recant. Before the church age some believers lapsed (Gen. 20:2, 11; Matt. 26:34; Luke 8:13). Peter's lapse was brief and led to his weeping when he realized what he did in denying that he knew Jesus Christ. And the New Testament is full of exhortations to church-age believers not to fall back into their old ways (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:18; Gal. 4:11; Heb. 2:3; 6:6; 10:26; 1 John 2:15; Rev. 3:3, 18). Indeed some Christians were noted for lapses in their practice and profession of faith (Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor. 5:1; 11:30; 2 Cor. 12:21; 13:2; 1 Tim. 4:1; 5:15; 2 Tim. 2:12–13; James 5:19–20; 1 John 5:16). John taught that those who are born of God overcome the world (1 John 5:4–5). Yet he warned the "little children" of his flock not to love the world (2:15).

The letters to Sardis and Laodicia encourage carnal church-age believers to change and become overcomers (Rev. 3:3, 19). If they did, they would receive rewards (vv. 5, 18). Since rewards (crowns) can be gained or lost by believers (1 Cor. 3:14–15; 2 Cor. 5:10), it seems that not all believers addressed in Revelation 2–3 were overcomers.⁴⁷ The overcomers in Revelation 2–3 seem to be in a special class.⁴⁸ They were victorious over immorality and held

⁴⁵ Inheriting the kingdom (Luke 10:25; 18:18) could be synonymous with eternal life, since it stands in contrast to eternal fire. The good works of some will reflect that they have saving faith (James 2:18–26).

⁴⁶ The sheep and goats in Matthew 25:32–33 refer to Gentiles living on the earth when the Lord returns to establish His kingdom (Pond, "Interpretive Issues Pertaining to the Judgment of Sheep and Goats," 166, 169).

⁴⁷ Richard Reagan Benedict, "The Use of *Nikaō* in the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1966), 44.

⁴⁸ The argument that the overcomers do not include all believers in Revelation 2–3 is supported by the fact that the seven letters deal with Christian works, not salvation (2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). This is seen in Christ being in their midst (1:13), His call for them to change rather than to have faith (3:3), and His rebuke of them as His legitimate children (v. 19; cf. Heb. 12:8). Revelation 2:4 and 3:20 indicate that the audiences were believers who had drifted from close fellowship with Christ.

strong to their testimony. And they were victorious against opposition. Some of the rewards to the overcomers in Revelation 2-3 go beyond the salvation that all believers share. They relate to the enjoyment of the fruit of salvation. They reflect the fact that there are various levels of placement in the future state (Luke 13:30). While believers do not equally share in some rewards, ruling over the nations is for overcomers (Luke 12:8-9; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26; 3:5).

Sources in extrabiblical history support the view that not every church-age believer has been an overcomer, and this stands in contrast to the fact that every Tribulation saint will be. Ignatius warned the Philadelphians not to be overcome by sin.⁴⁹ In his letter to Trajan (A.D. 111) Pliny the Younger referred to believers who under pressure recanted their faith.⁵⁰ Eusebius recorded that believers who were persecuted for their faith in Lyons (A.D. 177) and had fallen from their confession of Christ were later absolved.⁵¹ Under persecution by the Roman emperor Decius in A.D. 250 thousands of Christians lapsed and then later sought restoration.⁵² The church was divided over what to do with apostates who sought to renew their membership after Decius's death.⁵³ The majority of bishops followed the synods in Rome and Carthage (A.D. 251 and 252) by permitting the lapsed to be restored. In the fourth century, Donatists refused to accept ordinations conducted by bishops who had surrendered copies of the Scriptures under persecution. Cyprian (A.D. 251), bishop of Carthage, distinguished between past persecutions and the coming affliction under the Antichrist.⁵⁴ He emphasized that those who lapsed under past adversaries needed to repent to be equipped for the trouble that was drawing near.⁵⁵ In A.D. 408 Augustine wrote of a Christian friend who wrestled with his concern about being afraid to confess Christ before others.⁵⁶ Augustine said that the church should deal with those who forsook the church

⁴⁹ Ignatius, *Letter to the Philadelphians* 6.

⁵⁰ Pliny, *Epistles* 96.6.

⁵¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.2.

⁵² Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, rev. Robert T. Handy, 3rd ed. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1970), 93.

⁵³ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Persecute," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 3:773.

⁵⁴ Cyprian, *Epistles* 55.1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.2.4.

and later turned back in the same way as it welcomed those who sought her for the first time.⁵⁷

Other commentators, however, say that the Tribulation saints' perseverance is not unique. They argue that all true church-age believers persevere, and that those who lapse are not born again.⁵⁸ Their view is based on five things. First, they claim that 1 John 2:13-14; 4:4; and 5:4-5 mean that all believers are overcomers.⁵⁹ Second, they say the rewards to be given to the overcomers in Revelation 2-3 are the same for all believers.⁶⁰ Third, they view true believers as those who will lose their lives for Christ's sake in this age (Matt. 10:37; Luke 14:33; John 12:25).⁶¹ Fourth, some maintain that those who deny Christ in the Great Tribulation will not receive eternal life.⁶² Fifth, some claim that the Tribulation saints are not unique in perseverance because the carnal "Laodician era of the Church includes Daniel's seventieth week."⁶³

In response to these points one should note that all saints do not persevere to the extent Christ called the overcomers to do so in Revelation 2-3. While five of the churches are commended for their perseverance (2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:10), believers in dead Sardis and lukewarm Laodicia were not.⁶⁴ In fact Sardis believers are exhorted to keep what they have heard (3:3). This indicates the possibility that some believers were not remaining faithful. Also believers in Laodicia needed to repent from shameful deeds (v. 18). Other saints such as Ananias and Sapphira and some carnal believers in Corinth died, for they had not persevered in their testimony (Acts 5:5, 10; 1 Cor.

⁵⁷ Augustine, *Epistles* 93.52.

⁵⁸ John F. MacArthur, "Perseverance of the Saints," *Master's Seminary Journal* 4 (spring 1993): 5-24; James E. Rosscup, "The Overcomer of the Apocalypse," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (fall 1982): 261-86; and Daniel K. K. Wong, "The Johannine Concept of the Overcomer" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 131-49.

⁵⁹ Wong, "The Johannine Concept of the Overcomer," 149.

⁶⁰ Rosscup, "The Overcomer of the Apocalypse," 276.

⁶¹ MacArthur, "Perseverance of the Saints," 5-23.

⁶² Hermas, *Vision* 2.2.7-8.

⁶³ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 78.

⁶⁴ "These [seven] letters do not present victory as a *certainty*, but rather as an *aspiration* which each individual should pursue. The Savior's words are never to *them* who overcome, but to *him* who overcomes. Victory is not a collective right, but an individual attainment" (Zane C. Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse: A Study of Eternal Rewards*, 2nd ed. [Dallas: Redención Viva, 1985], 108-9).

11:30). Although Christians in Corinth lived carnally, they were saved and went to heaven (3:15).

Yet such backsliding is not noted of the Tribulation saints. Possibly then *all* the Tribulation saints will remain true to the Lord in their testimony for Him. This supports the view, proposed in the first article in this series, that Tribulation saints differ in some ways from church-age saints.

THE INDWELLING OF THE SPIRIT

The view that all Tribulation saints will be overcomers leads to the observation that they will all need the enabling power of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16). Also the point that an innumerable group are saved from every nation and tribe suggests that the convicting work of the Spirit will continue during the coming Tribulation. Such a work could be similar to the Spirit's ministry on earth today (John 16:8; Acts 1:8). Does this indicate that Tribulation saints, like today's church-age saints, will be indwelt with the Holy Spirit?

REASONS FOR THE SPIRIT'S INDWELLING

Dispensationalists debate whether Tribulation saints will be indwelt by the Spirit in the same manner as church-age saints.⁶⁵ Some deduce that the indwelling ministry of the Spirit will be removed when the church is removed at the rapture. This would lend support to the point that Tribulation saints and church saints are different.

The Bible indicates that the Holy Spirit will speak through Jesus' saints during the Tribulation period, immediately before His return (Matt. 10:20; cf. Mark 13:11). When Jesus referred to those who will preach just before His return, He said the Holy Spirit would speak "in" (ἐν) them.⁶⁶ In order to speak *in* Tribulation saints, most likely the Holy Spirit will indwell them during the Great Tribulation. This is similar to what He predicted will be true for His followers during the church age: "the Spirit of truth . . . will be in [ἐν] you" (John 14:17).

⁶⁵ See *ibid.*, 126; and Thomas L. Constable, "2 Thessalonians," in *The Expository Notes of Dr. Thomas L. Constable* (January 2000 ed.; www.sonlight.com), 17 n. 48.

⁶⁶ "These words of the Lord [in Matt. 10:16–23] probably had an application beyond His own lifetime. . . . These words will find their fullest manifestation in the days of the Tribulation when the gospel will be carried throughout the entire world before Jesus returns . . . to establish His kingdom on the earth" (Louis A. Barbieri, "Matthew," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, 42).

Also in the Olivet Discourse Jesus predicted this coming work of the Spirit. Referring to those who would see the abomination of desolation and endure the greatest time of tribulation (Mark 13:14, 19), Jesus noted that the Spirit would give His followers the words to speak on His behalf (Mark 13:11). Thus as the Spirit empowered prophets of old (2 Pet. 1:21), so God will speak through Tribulation saints. He will also empower the two witnesses to prophesy and perform miracles during the second half of the Tribulation (Rev. 11:3, 6). This empowering ministry could relate to the indwelling of the Spirit.

Joel predicted that the Spirit would be poured out on people in the last days (Joel 2:28–29). According to Jesus Joel's prophecy relates to the end of the Tribulation period (Matt. 24:29–30). Joel wrote, "I will pour out my Spirit on all kinds of people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your elderly will have revelatory dreams; your young men will see prophetic visions. Even on male and female servants I will pour out my Spirit in those days" (Joel 2:28–29, NET).⁶⁷ Significantly Peter linked his initial church-age experience of the Spirit's coming to indwell believers with this prophecy of Joel, which indicates what will happen at the end of the Tribulation (Acts 2:16–21; 11:15). Thus the indwelling ministry that began with the first members of the church could be in place for the last believers of the Tribulation period.⁶⁸

The global preaching and universal receptivity to the gospel in the end times further indicates that the Spirit will indwell Tribulation preachers (Matt. 24:14; Acts 1:8; Rev. 7:9).⁶⁹ At the end of the Tribulation the Spirit will bring conviction and understanding to the nation Israel (Zech. 12:10). Since conviction and regeneration come only through the Spirit (John 3:3–7; 16:7–11; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 2:12–15; Titus 3:15), no doubt He will carry out these ministries in the Tribulation as well.⁷⁰ Many Jews will turn to God when Christ

⁶⁷ NET Bible: *New English Translation*, First Beta ed. ([Spokane, WA]: Biblical Studies, 2001), online: <http://netbible.bible.org/Joel2.htm>.

⁶⁸ Bernardos Guidonis held that the Spirit would be poured out in full measure on all the faithful after their persecution by the corrupt church (*Manuel de l'inquisiteur; édité et traduit par G. Mollat avec la collaboration de G. Drioux*, ed. Louis Halphen, trans. and ed. G. Mollat, *Classiques de l'histoire de France au moyen âge* (Paris: Champion, 1926), 144, 146, 150.

⁶⁹ René Pache, *La personne et l'oeuvre du Saint-Esprit: exposé de doctrine biblique, suivi de questionnaires destinés à faciliter l'étude personnelle et l'enseignement dans les groupes et les classes bibliques* (Lausanne: Emmaus, 1947), 198.

⁷⁰ Gleason L. Archer, "The Case for the Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture Position," in *Three Views on the Rapture: Pre; Mid; or Post-Tribulation*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 128.

returns, immediately after the Great Tribulation (Zech. 12:10; 14:1–5; Matt. 24:29–30; Rom. 11:26). Thus believing Jews will receive the Spirit before the millennium (Joel 2:26–27). Since the Spirit will indwell saints immediately after the Tribulation and in the millennium, and since there is no clear Scripture stating that His present indwelling ministry will cease, it is arguable that He will indwell believers in the Tribulation as well.

While no verse specifically states that the Holy Spirit will indwell all Tribulation saints, neither is there any verse that says that He will not. Also any regeneration of these saints would likely be done by the Spirit. The universal acceptance of the gospel and the ability of every Tribulation saint to be a testifying overcomer further suggest that the Holy Spirit will indwell them all.

RESPONSE TO OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

Conversely some dispensationalists conclude that the Spirit will *not* indwell believers during the Tribulation.⁷¹ Instead His ministry, they say, will revert to what it was before the church age, when He did “convict and regenerate sinners.”⁷² They note that Revelation 4–19 does not mention the Holy Spirit working during the Tribulation.⁷³ However, this is an argument from silence. True, the Spirit’s ministry in the Tribulation is not detailed in Revelation, but the Gospels do note the work of the Spirit in the Tribulation through His saints (Matt. 10:20; Mark 13:11).

Many dispensationalists see the church age as a parenthesis between Daniel’s sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks.⁷⁴ Some therefore claim that conditions in the seventieth week will be as they were before the church age.⁷⁵ This, however, is speculative and is

⁷¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948), 4:364; Robert G. Gromacki, *The Holy Spirit: Who He Is, What He Does*, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville: Word, 1999), 239; Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *Prophecy Watch* (Eugene, OR: Harvest, 1998), 135; Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, 263; and Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour: A Systematic Study of the Rapture in Bible Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 105.

⁷² Gromacki, *The Holy Spirit: Who He Is, What He Does*, 239.

⁷³ John F. Walvoord, “Posttribulationism Today,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134 (April–June 1977): 112.

⁷⁴ Contra Donald W. Kopecky, “Salvation in the Tribulation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 436 (December 1952): 126; and John William Lawrence, “The Dispensational Place of the Great Tribulation” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1960), 148.

⁷⁵ Robert L. Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 323; and John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit: A Comprehensive Work on the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1958), 230.

not consistent with God's progressive revelation. Since the Fall, God's method has been to reveal progressively more information and give further blessings to humans in each successive time period (Phil. 3:20; Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:6; Rev. 22:3–6).⁷⁶ The principle of progressive revelation suggests that God will provide for future saints in a way greater than He has for present-day saints.⁷⁷

The view that God would limit the Spirit's indwelling to church-age Christians but not provide that ministry for saints of a later time period⁷⁸ is questionable. The Old Testament repeatedly states that God will put His Spirit into His people when they return to Him in the last days (Isa. 32:15–16; Ezek. 11:16–20; 36:26–27; 39:29; Zech. 12:10; cf., Joel 2:29). No passage prohibits the Spirit from indwelling believers beyond the church age. While some Jews will be involved in temple ritual (Dan. 9:27; Rev. 11:1), there is no indication that Gentile Tribulation saints will function under the Old Testament economy. Their keeping the commandments of God is part of the New Testament dispensation (John 14:15; 15:10; 1 John 2:3; 3:22, 24; 5:3). The Tribulation will be a transitional stage between the church age and the millennial kingdom.⁷⁹

Another argument against Tribulation saints being indwelt by the Holy Spirit relates to the unique baptizing ministry of the Spirit in this age. The baptism of the Spirit places believers into the body of Christ, the church (1 Cor. 12:13). This truth leads some to conclude that since the indwelling ministry of the Spirit began with the baptism of the Spirit at the birth of the church (Acts 11:15), the indwelling of believers is unique to the church age as well. This leads to the assumption that those not baptized into the body of Christ, the church, will not have the accompanying and permanent indwelling of the Spirit.⁸⁰

In response, one should note that the baptizing ministry of the Spirit is not synonymous with or dependent on the indwelling ministry of the Spirit. The fact that both ministries began for the church simultaneously does not make them both unique to the

⁷⁶ C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (London: Nisbet, 1948), 277.

⁷⁷ Craig A. Blasing and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 48.

⁷⁸ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:189.

⁷⁹ R. J. Bauckham, "The Great Tribulation in the Shepherd of Hermas," *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (April 1974): 33.

⁸⁰ Constable, "2 Thessalonians," 17.

church. While people were not baptized by the Spirit into the church before Pentecost, some people were temporarily indwelt by the Spirit before the birthday of the church on the Day of Pentecost (Exod. 31:3; Num. 27:18; Ps. 51:11; Ezek. 3:24; Acts 4:25; 1 Pet. 1:11). Before Pentecost, Jesus was indwelt and empowered by the Spirit (Matt. 12:24, 28; Luke 3:22; 4:1, 18). While the baptizing work of the Spirit could end after the church age, people will be indwelt with the Spirit in the age to come (Ezek. 11:19; 36:27; 37:14).⁸¹

Therefore, though the church will be removed before the Tribulation, it is possible that the Spirit will indwell all Tribulation believers, though He will not baptize them into the church. Certainly other blessings of the church age will not be eliminated after the church is raptured. For example the prerequisite for the present indwelling ministry of the Spirit in one's life is faith in Jesus' death and resurrection (John 16:7; Acts 2:32–33). That prerequisite and its effects will not be erased. As in John's day, Christ's work will be the basis of the Tribulation saints' endurance (Rev. 12:11, 17; 19:10).

WILL THE HOLY SPIRIT BE REMOVED?

Some dispensationalists say that the Holy Spirit is the "restrainer" (of lawlessness) that will be removed from the earth before the Tribulation (2 Thess. 2:7).⁸² However, because of ambiguity at several points in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–8,⁸³ the identity of the restrainer is disputed.⁸⁴ The major views regarding its identity include the Roman Empire, human government, the Jewish state, Satan or another evil power, Michael the archangel, and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit may well be the restrainer because the masculine gender in verse 7 suggests that the restrainer is a person. Also He does

⁸¹ Walvoord concedes that millennial saints seem to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Ezek. 36:27), though not baptized into the church, the body of Christ (Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit: A Comprehensive Work on the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit*, 151).

⁸² For example Stanton, *Kept from the Hour: A Systematic Study of the Rapture in Bible Prophecy*, 92–107; and Thomas L. Constable, "2 Thessalonians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, 719.

⁸³ D. Michael Martin, 1, 2 *Thessalonians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 240; and Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 332.

⁸⁴ Leon Morris, "Man of Lawlessness and Restraining Power," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 593.

restrain evil and would be able to restrain the work of Satan. Yet the Spirit is not explicitly mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2.

However, even if the Spirit is the restraining force, He Himself will not be removed. The emphasis in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 refers to the Restrainer's change in activity rather than His change in location. The words Paul used in verse 7 (*ἐκ μέσου γένηται*) refer to "a voluntary withdrawal to another sphere."⁸⁵ This is also its meaning in ancient Greek literature.⁸⁶ Though His restraining ministry, perhaps through the church or civil government, will be removed, this does not mean that the Holy Spirit will remove Himself from the world. After all, apart from the influence of the Spirit, there can be no miracle such as conversion. Thus while His restraining ministry will be changed, His indwelling ministry will remain intact for believers.

There is no substantial argument supporting the view that Tribulation saints will not be indwelt by the Spirit. While this does not distinguish them from present-day saints, their unified perseverance will set them apart as distinct from the church age. Other distinctions relate to their rewards and the time of their resurrection, topics to be discussed in the upcoming third and fourth articles in this series.

⁸⁵ Charles E. Powell, "The Identity of the 'Restrainer' in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (July-September 1997): 320-22.

⁸⁶ *Thesaurus linguae Graecae: Canon of Greek Authors and Works* found one use for *ἐκ μέσ γέν* in Aeschines Oat. Epist 12.6.2 (4 B.C.). Of the eighty-nine usages for *ἐκ μέσ*, none had *ἐκ μέσ γένηται*.