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SALVATION IN THE TRIBULATION

by Thomas Ice

During the last couple of years, the most frequently asked question I have heard at prophecy conferences, relates to salvation in the Tribulation. It goes something like this: “If a lost person hears, understands and rejects the Gospel *before* the Tribulation, would he or she be able to be saved *during* the Tribulation?” Some think the answer is “No,” while others think it is “Yes.” I believe that people will have the possibility to be saved in the Tribulation regardless of how much they have been exposed to the Gospel before the Rapture. Here’s why:

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

The notion that one who has heard the Gospel and rejects it before the Rapture will thus be unable to be saved in the Tribulation is argued from 2nd Thessalonians 2:10—12, which reads as follows: . . . *and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.*” Proponents of this view contend that God, through the Antichrist, will actively delude those who do not believe. While this is true, nothing in the passage suggests that the delusion is the result of an individual’s unbelief due to his rejection of the Gospel before the Rapture. There are a number of reasons why I do not think that 2nd Thessalonians supports this view.

ANSWERING THE ISSUES

First, 2nd Thessalonians 2 does not say anything about an individual hearing, understanding and then rejecting the Gospel. It does make a universal statement about those who do not love the truth. Thus, all unbelievers are referred to in the same way as one group. There is no basis in this passage for identifying a subclass of unbelievers, such as those who have heard the Gospel, understood it, and rejected it.

Second, the context of the entire passage relates to what will happen in the forthcoming Tribulation period. The context for when “*they did not receive the love of the truth*” in verse 10 clearly will be taking place during the Tribulation. The 2nd Thessalonians 2 passage is talking about the response of unbelievers *during* the Tribulation. If the passage were referring to an unbelieving response *prior* to the Tribulation, with a result that such a decision would impact one’s destiny *during* the Tribulation, then the passage would have probably been worded differently in order to convey such a message. Since it is not so configured, then there is no support for the belief that a person’s rejection of the Gospel necessarily seals his fate if he enters the Tribulation. Specific support that verses 8–12 encompass events that will transpire in the Tribulation begins in verse 8, which says, “*And then that lawless one will be revealed . . .*” In other words, “then” denotes a shift from the current Church Age into a future era: the Tribulation. Nothing in verses 8–12 takes any part of that passage out of the context of the Tribulation. All, in my opinion, would agree that verses 8–9 refer to things the Antichrist will do during the Tribulation. Verse 10 is clearly related to its preceding context and speaks of something that will take place during the Tribulation.

Third, verses 11–12 further *explain* verses 8–10; It has been argued that when Paul says, “*God will send upon them a deluding influence . . .*” his use of the future tense in the verb *send* supports the notion that this is a future deluding influence and thus provides a reason for the view that I am rebutting. However, the future tense does not support that view. Instead, it refers to the whole of what is being said in verses 11–12. The future tense in the passage relates to the acts of unbelief (taking place in the Tribulation) as well as God’s judgmental response. So this does not support that view. Verse 12 provides the purpose for God’s judgment during the Tribulation, which is to judge unbelief.

FURTHER REASONS AND OBJECTIONS

The Bible teaches that the heart of all humanity is fallen and depraved (Genesis 6:5; 8:21; Jeremiah 17:10; Ephesians 4:17–18, etc.). All unbelievers, from Adam on down, are described as being “*spiritually dead*” (Ephesians 2:1–3) and “*blind*” (2nd Corinthians 4:4). Thus, for any individual to believe the Gospel at any time in history requires a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate and open the sinner’s eyes to God’s gracious offer. Left to ourselves, we will reject the Gospel when it is preached. What sinner has ever “heard and understood” the Gospel without the miraculous work of God enabling a *dead* and *blind* individual to see and believe? No sinner, on his own, has ever “heard and understood” the Gospel in such a way as described by the notion I am dealing with to make such a view feasible. No, unbelievers unaided by the sovereign work of God will remain in their unbelief and rejection equally during the current Church Age as well as during the future generation. Thus, every unbeliever will have an opportunity to hear and believe the Gospel during the Tribulation regardless of the extent of evangelism that they have received before the Rapture.

Revelation 13:8–10 says the following in conjunction with the rise of the Antichrist at the midpoint of the Tribulation: “*And all who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain. If anyone has an ear, let him hear. If anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints.*” Such language about belief and unbelief in the Tribulation—in relation to the Antichrist—as in 2nd Thessalonians 2, does not support the issue that I am addressing. Instead, it speaks of destiny as the factor determining salvation: God’s sovereign will! In other words, one’s salvation in the Tribulation will come about just as it does during our present Church Age.

Some who advocate the view that no salvation is possible in the Tribulation for those who previously heard the Gospel say that if their view is not true, then some unbelievers will be given a second chance. This is also faulty thinking based upon a mischaracterization. The notion of a second chance, which no one will ever receive, relates to those who have departed this life through death and have gone into eternity without Christ. That is not what will be going on when any unbeliever is left behind at the Rapture. Instead, all unbelievers will simply be passing from one phase of history (the present Church Age) into another phase (the Tribulation). They are not leaving history and passing into eternity yet. All unbelievers passing from the Church Age into the Tribulation will continue to have an opportunity to receive Christ until they have been either saved, killed, or have received the mark of the beast in the second half of the Tribulation. This is not a second, chance, since unbelievers will still be in history, not heaven.

We can see that 2nd Thessalonians 2 is a summary of Antichrist’s “career” that will take place during the Tribulation Period. Nothing in the text even suggests a relationship between things that will happen in the Tribulation and the current Church Age. So why does such a belief have a significant following among Pretribulationists?

EVANGELISTIC URGENCY

It appears to me that the view that I am opposing has been developed by sincere Pretribulationists who want to press an urgency to their preaching of the Gospel message. How so? If the Rapture occurred before people accepted Christ, then it would be the same as if they had already died without Christ. Thus, at that moment, an extra urgency could be added to the argument that unbelievers should trust Christ *now*, since they may never have another opportunity. While it is true that this would pragmatically increase the urgency of the matter, it is not an idea supported by Scripture. It is easy to see why believers pleading with sinners to accept Christ would want to challenge unbelievers with all possible ramifications of their decision. However, pragmatics are never a valid reason to go beyond the limits of God’s Word.

CONCLUSION

While this is not the most important issue in the Bible, it is one that I am frequently asked about at prophecy conferences and when I am fielding questions on radio and television. Since I have not really seen anyone give a written answer. I thought I would do so at this time. I believe that millions of unbelievers will be saved during the terrible time of the Tribulation. For that we can all be thankful. Many of those who will be saved will include some who had heard the Gospel many times before the Rapture. In the meantime, we, as believers, should make every effort to preach the Gospel of God's grace *before* the Rapture so that as many as possible will be taken at the Rapture, thus escaping the horrors of the Tribulation. Even though we are intensely interested in seeing as many as possible come to Christ, the ends do not justify the means. We should not exceed the bounds of Scripture in our proclamation. Adding threats that God has not actually made will not result in a single individual being saved who would not otherwise come to faith. People are saved by the preaching of the Gospel in conjunction with the power of the Holy Spirit that only God can apply. The imminency of the Rapture should be used in conjunction with the preaching of the Gospel, but, again, we cannot exceed the bounds of Scripture. Maranatha!