

# The Church and the Great Tribulation

by Arno Clemens Gaebelein

*Arno Clemens Gaebelein preaches about the blessed hope of the coming of our Lord, emphasizing the revival of the study of prophecy and the separation of believers based on sound doctrine. He delves into the distinction between the Coming of the Lord for His Saints and with His Saints, addressing the controversy surrounding the church's relation to the great tribulation. Gaebelein explores the origin and destiny of the church, highlighting its heavenly calling and the love-relation as the bride of Christ. He also discusses the nature of tribulation, distinguishing between personal tribulations faced by believers and the future punitive tribulation upon the world and Israel.*

## Description

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## Transcript

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 sermonType: "teaching" topics: - name: "Eschatology" slug: "eschatology" - name: "Church Doctrine" slug: "church-doctrine" bibleRefs: - text: "Jeremiah 30:7" bookId: "JER" chapter: "30" verse: "7" - text: "Matthew 16:18" bookId: "MAT" chapter: "16" verse: "18" - text: "Acts 14:22" bookId: "ACT" chapter: "14" verse: "22" - text: "Romans 8:35" bookId: "ROM" chapter: "8" verse: "35" - text: "Romans 12:12" bookId: "ROM" chapter: "12" verse: "12" - text: "Ephesians 3:1" bookId: "EPH" chapter: "3" verse: "1" - text: "1 Thessalonians 5:9" bookId: "1TH" chapter: "5" verse: "9" - text: "2 Thessalonians 1:4" bookId: "2TH" chapter: "1" verse: "4" - text: "Revelation 3:10" bookId: "REV" chapter: "3" verse: "10" outline: - heading: "I" points: - '{A: 'The church is a New Testament institution.', 'B: 'The distinction between Israel and the church.', 'C: 'The church's heavenly calling and relationship to Christ.'}" - "What is the Church and the Destiny of the Church?" - heading: "II" points: - '{A: 'Understanding tribulation in the context of sin and

persecution.', 'B': 'The nature of the great tribulation as a judgment.', 'C': 'Biblical prophecies regarding tribulation and its implications.}') - "What is the Tribulation?" - heading: "III" points: - '{A': 'The church's exemption from the great tribulation.', 'B': 'The role of Jewish believers during the tribulation.', 'C': 'The ultimate destiny of the church and Israel.}') - "Important Conclusions" faq: - q: "What is the church according to the sermon?" a: "The church is a New Testament institution, distinct from Israel, called out to fulfill a heavenly purpose." - q: "What does the sermon say about the great tribulation?" a: "The great tribulation is a time of judgment and distress that does not involve the true church, which is promised exemption from it." - q: "How does the sermon define the relationship between the church and Israel?" a: "The church and Israel are separate entities; the church has a heavenly calling, while Israel has an earthly destiny." - q: "What is the significance of the tribulation for believers?" a: "While believers face tribulation in their lives, the great tribulation is a specific period of divine judgment that the church will not experience." - q: "What hope does the sermon provide for the church?" a: "The sermon emphasizes the blessed hope of Christ's return and the church's ultimate glory with Him." quotes: - "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ." - "The church is the bride of Christ. He loved the church and gave Himself for it." - "In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." applicationPoints: - "Understand the unique calling of the church and its relationship to Christ." - "Recognize the importance of biblical prophecy in understanding current events." - "Embrace the hope of Christ's return as a source of encouragement in times of trial." keywords: - "Church" - "Great Tribulation" - "Premillennial" - "Israel" - "Destiny" - "Judgment" - "Hope" - "Salvation" ---

Nothing should unite God's children into a closer fellowship than the blessed hope of the coming of our Lord. This was the case, when the Holy Spirit, almost a hundred years ago, restored to His people this hope, and brought about a revival of the study of prophecy. The midnight cry, "Behold the Bridegroom! Go ye forth to meet Him," was then sounded, and those who heard and believed the blessed hope separated themselves from all which is not according to sound doctrine, and in so doing manifested once more the oneness of the body of Christ, the church, and the fellowship of the Saints. Such ought to be the results of a real faith in His coming.

One of the questions which has agitated believers in the premillennial Coming of our Lord is the question of the relation of the true church to that final period of our age, which is designated as the great tribulation. When the blessed hope was first again brought to light, clear distinction was made between the Coming of the Lord for His Saints (1 Thess. iv:13-18) and the Coming of the Lord with His Saints (Zech. xiv:5; Rev. xix:14). The imminency of His Coming was a prominent part of the prophetic testimony of those bygone days. Then the teaching was introduced by some that the Lord cannot come at any time, that the church is destined to pass, like the rest of the world, through the great tribulation, suffer under Antichrist and experience the judgment-wrath of God. This theory has caused much division and strife among believers in the Return of our Lord, and does so still.

In taking up this question concerning the church and the tribulation, we shall first see what the church and the destiny of the church is, and then examine the teaching of the Word as to the tribulation.

## I. What is the Church and the Destiny of the Church?

The church is an altogether New Testament institution. Nowhere in the Old Testament Scriptures is there said anything about the church, the expression so often used, the Old Testament church, or, the Jewish church is therefore incorrect. It springs from the view that Israel, the seed of Abraham, was the church in the past and that since Israel has rejected Christ, the Christian Church has become Israel and all the

promises made to Israel are now being fulfilled in a spiritual way. This theory plays havoc with the Word of God and leads into confusion. The presentday condition of Christendom is to a great extent the result of this erroneous view. Israel is not the church, nor has the church taken the place of Israel. All who believed in Old Testament times were saved by grace, in the same way as believing sinners are saved during this dispensation. They were Saints, as we are Saints. But where is there in any portion of the Scriptures of the Old Testament (so-called) a statement that these Jewish believers formed the church of God, the body and the bride of Christ? Israel was not the church in the past and it is equally impossible that the people Israel in their future day of restoration and blessing can become the church. Israel's calling is earthly; the calling of the church is a heavenly calling. Israel will some day possess the earthly Jerusalem while the church will be in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Our Lord mentioned the church for the first time. In the Gospel of Matthew xvi:16-18 we find the following words:

"And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Peter had made his great inspired confession of Christ as the Son of the living God. Upon this confession the Lord said, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona." Each believer in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God shares this blessedness. He called Simon by a new name, "Thou art Peter;" which means "a stone." Then the Lord announced that upon this rock He would build His church. He did not mean Peter, or else our Lord would have said, "Upon thee will I build my church." He speaks of "this rock" which is He Himself, the risen and living Son of God. He, and not Peter, is the rock upon which the Church of Christ is built. We see that the Lord speaks of the church as something in the future at that time. It was not then in progress, but He said, "I will build my church." The word church means "to call out" (ecclesia), and denotes a company of people who are called out and called together for a certain purpose. The Lord calls this outcalled company "my church." The formation of this church could only begin after the work of redemption on the cross had been accomplished. He had first to suffer and to die; He had to rise from the dead and ascend upon high; the Holy Spirit had to come from heaven before this church and its building could begin on earth. Therefore He said "I will build my church;" not I am building it now, or it has been building since Adam's day, but "I will build."

The day on which the Holy Spirit was poured out marks the beginning of this church on earth. The company of believers who were waiting for the promised baptism with the Spirit (about 120-Acts i:15) were on the day of Pentecost by that baptism united into a body, the church. Ever since then all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and are born again, are put by the same spirit as members into that body. Of this we read in 1 Cor. xii:13: "For by our Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free, and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." On the day of Pentecost nothing was made known of the beginning of the church. Peter did not mention a word about the church. The full revelation concerning the church was given through the Apostle Paul. Of this we read in Ephes. iii:1-7:

"For this cause I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you ward; how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the

mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel; whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power."

The Apostle Paul states in these verses that he was made the channel of a revelation concerning a mystery which was not made known in former ages unto the sons of men. This mystery is that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body. The body of which he speaks, is the church. In that body Jews and Gentiles are gathered into one, as the one new man "where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all and in all." Of this bringing into one we read in the Gospel of John (chapter x) where our Lord spoke of entering the sheepfold (Judaism) and leading out His sheep. Then He mentioned other sheep, which were not of His fold (Gentiles): "Them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." He came and led His first sheep out of the Jewish fold. On the day of Pentecost these Jewish believers were constituted the Church. That Gentiles should be added to that body was not made known then. It was revealed to the Apostle Paul. But the Lord indicates this fact here when He speaks of the other sheep. This He mentioned likewise in His prayer: "That they all (who believe on Him) may be one; as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John xvii:21). The Epistle to the Ephesians, in which the Spirit of God reveals this mystery, makes known the glory of the church, the body of Christ. He is the head of that body and as such the church is His own fulness, "the fulness of Him who filleth all in all" (Eph. i:23). Every member in that body shares the life of the risen, glorified head. Every member is quickened together with Christ, raised up and seated in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus (ii:5-6). And furthermore we read that the members of this body, that is, all true believers, saved by grace and born again, are made nigh by the blood of Christ, and have access by one Spirit unto the Father. "Now, therefore, ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord. In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (ii:19-22). Such is the church the body of Christ. Every member in Christ and Christ in every member, each believer made nigh by blood, accepted in the beloved One, indwelt by the Holy Spirit and one Spirit with the Lord. The church is therefore the temple of God, the habitation of God through the Spirit.

Besides this life-relation of the church to the Head in glory, there is also a love-relation. Of this Ephesians v:21-33 bears witness. The church is the bride of Christ. He loved the church and gave Himself for it. She is part of that travail of His soul which He saw, the joy which was set before Him, for which He endured the cross and despised the shame. He also sanctifies the church and cleanseth it with the washing of water by the Word, and finally He will present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish. She is the pearl of great price for which He gave all. Her destiny is to be with Him in glory, to be like Him and to share His glory. For this true church there is no condemnation and no wrath, nor anguish and tribulation, but glory, honor and peace (Rom. ii:9-10). Wrath is coming for the world, but the Lord Jesus delivers His church from the wrath to come (1 Thess. i:10). "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. v:9).

II. What is the Tribulation?

The Word of God speaks of tribulation. Tribulations, distresses and all that goes with it are in the world on account of sin. Believers, though saved and no longer of the world, but delivered from this evil age, have tribulation and persecution likewise. Our Lord said to His disciples and to all who are His followers, "In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John xvi:33). "If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John xv:20). "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (1 Tim. 12). What a record Paul wrote of his own tribulations and persecutions. How great was his affliction, persecution, distress and manifold tribulation! (2 Cor. xi:16-32). "Through much tribulation we must enter into the Kingdom of God" (Acts xiv:22). The believer is exhorted to glory (or boast) in these tribulations (Rom. v:3). Triumphantly in faith he can say, "Who shall separate us, from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Rom. viii:35). "Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation," is another exhortation (Rom. xii:12). To the Corinthians Paul wrote, "I am filled with comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation" (2 Cor. vii:4). The Thessalonian Christians suffered greatly, but met it all victoriously so that Paul wrote them, "We ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure" (1 Thess. i:4). If we today know but little persecution for Christ's sake, it is because we do not manifest in our lives separation from the world. "For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil. i:29). Tribulations, persecutions, sufferings for Christ's and for righteousness' sake belong to the church. They are really blessings, for all these things must work together for good to them that love God.

But there is another tribulation revealed in the Word of God which is of totally different nature. It is a tribulation which God permits as a judgment to come upon all the world, a tribulation in which Satan is concerned, in which he manifests his malice and his wrath. This tribulation has an altogether punitive character. In different portions of the Prophets we read of a great time of distress, such as the sword, famine and pestilence and other tribulations and judgments, which precede the visible manifestation of the Lord to deliver His earthly people Israel. This tribulation is always predicted to come upon Israel and upon the nations of the earth. It is mentioned in the New Testament, as we shall see directly; but the Old Testament gives us the full history of these tribulation judgments. The time when this tribulation takes place is "the end of the age," which, strictly speaking means the Jewish age. Every student of prophecy knows something of that all important revelation in Daniel ix, the seventy-week prophecy.[1]

The last prophetic week of seven years has not yet been. We are still between the 69th and the 70th week. Those coming last seven years of that interrupted Jewish age will bring these predicted judgments and the great tribulation. The last 3-1/2 years (or 1,260 days, 42 months) are the great tribulation itself.

We quote a few passages: "Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it, it is even the time of Jacob's trouble, but he shall be saved out of it" (Jer. xxx-7).

"And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince who standeth for the children of thy people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time. And at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book" (Dan. xii:1).

It is clear beyond controversy that both passages reveal that this great time of trouble comes upon Daniel's people at the time of the end. It is a wrong interpretation to say that "thy people" means the church. As stated before, the prophets have nothing to say about the church. For what will take place in that time of trouble see Dan. vii:21-25. We turn next to Matthew xxiv. The great prophecy of our Lord contained in this chapter has nothing to do with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. It is a prophecy

which relates to the time of the end and covers the same seven years of unfulfilled Jewish history. His disciples had asked concerning the end of the age and the Lord answers this question. Significant it is that He calls special attention to Daniel the prophet. This is the key. When our Lord speaks of a time of trouble He means the same trouble of which Daniel wrote: "For there shall be great tribulation such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no nor ever shall be" (Matt. xxiv:21). There is nothing in the words of our Lord to indicate that the true church is then on earth. The preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom as a witness to all nations during this time of trouble is the message which the Jewish remnant gives before the coming of the King.[2] When this great tribulation ends the Lord Jesus Christ comes back to earth again "in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matt. xxiv:29-30). What takes place then is revealed also by our Lord. "And He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." Superficial teachers of prophecy explain this as being the gathering together of Christian believers when the Lord comes at the close of the great tribulation. We have seen from 1 Thess. iv:13-18 how the Lord comes for His Saints. He does not send angels to gather His church from the four winds, but He gives the shout from the air and instead of being gathered the church-saints are caught up in clouds, together with the risen saints to meet the Lord in the air. The elect people who are to be gathered when the Lord returns after the tribulation are the people Israel (see Isaiah xxvii:13). Their hour of deliverance has come. This is the same deliverance of which Daniel speaks in chapter xii:1. It is also significant that our Lord after He announced the gathering and restoration of Israel mentions at once the figtree, which is Israel.

The book of Revelation bears the same witness as to the church and in relation to the tribulation to come. The church is only mentioned in the first three chapters. In the church message to Philadelphia (Rev. iii:7-13) a promise is given to the true church which is important: "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial which shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold I come quickly, hold that fast which thou hast that no man take thy crown." The hour of trial for all the world is the tribulation period. Here, then, is a definite promise that true believers are going to be exempt from that coming time of trouble. Laodicea marks a final phase of Christendom; it is apostasy. Chapters iv and v in Revelation reveal what will take place in heaven in the future. We behold in these two chapters the redeemed in glory, singing the new song. These redeemed include all the church saints as well as the Old Testament Saints. Beginning with the sixth chapter we find in Revelation the future things, that is, what will take place after the Lord has come for His Saints. Here the judgments, the tribulation and the wrath are made known which will visit the earth during the last seven years of the age. Revelation vi-xviii cover the history of the last week of Daniel. In these chapters we read nothing of the true church as still on earth.

Another important fact as to the tribulation period must be dealt with. During this time of trouble there are those on earth who suffer and whom God owns as Saints. Satan through his instruments, the little horn and the Antichrist is persecuting these Saints and they pass through this awful time of trouble. Daniel wrote, "I beheld, and the same horn made war with the Saints and prevailed against them ... and he (the little horn) shall speak great words against the Most High and shall wear out the Saints of the Most High" (Daniel vii:21, 25). These suffering tribulation Saints will receive the Kingdom on earth (Dan. vii:22, 27). In the great vision of John in Revelation chapter xiii, the same beast which Daniel saw is described. Here again we read of Saints: "And it was given unto him to make war with the Saints, and to overcome them" (Rev. xiii:7). Now as the church is no longer on earth, who are these Saints? They are Jewish believers who have turned to the Lord and whom He now owns as Saints. Their sufferings at that time, as well as their faith, their prayers and their deliverance is the subject of many of the Psalms. They are the sealed

ones of Revelation vii.[3] Many of them refusing to worship the beast suffer martyrdom and are raised up.

### III. Important Conclusions

We have seen what the church and her destiny is. We have learned the character of the tribulation. It is evident that the true church has nothing whatever to do with this time of trouble. We add some important conclusions with further proofs that the church will not pass through the tribulation.

1. The tribulation is a judgment period. When this predicted trouble comes for the world, for Jews and Gentiles, the church is no longer here, but possesses its promised rest and glory. The Thessalonians had been disturbed by a rumor as if that tribulation preceding the day of the Lord had come. In the second Epistle to them the apostle makes it clear that this was not the case, and points out the fact that those who troubled and persecuted them would have as a recompense tribulation, while the troubled believers would have rest (2 Thess. i:4-9). Nowhere in the Epistles of Paul addressed to the church, and unfolding church truths, is there a word said about that tribulation. If the church would pass through this judgment period with which the ages closes, the Spirit of God would certainly have mentioned it and given His exhortations so suited for such a time. But inasmuch as nothing is said in these church epistles it is a logical conclusion that the true church will not be in the tribulation.

2. Not alone will the church not be in that time of trouble, but that time, the last prophetic week of Daniel, cannot begin as long as the true church is on earth. This is made clear by one of the great prophecies of the New Testament. In the Second Thessalonians chapter ii the statement is made that the day of the Lord (His visible manifestation) cannot come till there be first the apostasy and the Man of Sin, the son of perdition (the Antichrist) be revealed. It is during the last seven years that both of these conditions are reached. But the apostle also states that there is One who hinders the complete apostasy and its leader, the Antichrist. Something is in the way which keeps back the full manifestation of the mystery of lawlessness. This hindering One must be first taken out of the way. The hindering One is the Holy Spirit. He dwells in the body of Christ, the church. As long as He is here on earth in and with the true church the two conditions necessary for the final seven years of this age cannot be fulfilled. Before the tribulation can come the church must have been called away to her heavenly abode.

3. If the church were to pass through the tribulation period all the exhortations to wait for the Coming of the Lord, to watch for Him, to be ready, would have no meaning. It would be more correct to exhort to wait for the coming of the beast. The blessed hope to meet Him, would lose its blessedness. Instead of being a bright outlook to be with Christ in glory, it would be the worst pessimism, for believers would not face immediate glory, but tribulation, judgments, and the persecutions of the beast from the pit. Everything in Scripture is against this teaching, which has been accepted by not a few, that the church must pass through the tribulation, and after all it is an important truth for the spiritual life of a believer. If the Lord cannot come for His Saints till the Roman empire is again in existence, and the two beasts have made their appearance to do their work, if He cannot come till the Jews are back in Palestine and have rebuilt their temple, then the real power of that blessed hope in the daily life of a Christian is gone. The danger then is to say, "My Lord delays His Coming," and with it drift into worldly ways.

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