

15. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NOT THE CHURCH

You're worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, for you were slain, and with your blood, you purchased people for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation. You enthroned them as priests for our God, and they'll reign over the Earth (Rev 5:9-10).

The connection between the kingdom and the Church

The word 'church' is usually used in the NT to refer to a local assembly of Christians. They didn't have church buildings, so a church was simply a community of believers. Church with a capital C, can refer to the body of all Christians who comprise a third of the world's population. It can also refer to a large, organized denomination like the Catholic or Lutheran Church. In the Church, there are true believers and nominal Christians. Many are invited but few are chosen (Mt 22:14). The latter group is Christian by name only and may constitute most people who call themselves Christian. Paul said: Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ (Rom 8:9) and: Those who are led by the Spirit of God are God's children (Rom 8:14). The Lord knows those who are his (2 Tim 2:19). So, in talking about the Church in its relation to the kingdom of God, it must be understood that we're talking about born-again believers, those referred to in Scripture as the righteous, because they have been made righteous through faith, or the elect, because they are chosen by God. They are also called saints or God's servants.

John Bright in 'The kingdom of God' (p. 236) says: There is no tendency in the NT to identify the visible church with the kingdom of God, and: The church is indeed the people of the kingdom of Christ, but the visible church is not that kingdom.

The Church is related to the kingdom of God, but the connection is not obvious. Most Bible dictionaries and books about the kingdom of God do not define the precise connection. There are many theories, but they are vague and short on Scriptural backing. The common

problem is that the authors begin with the premise that the kingdom of God is God's rule, and they have no monarchy for the saints to enter. They know that Jesus is the King, and that there are verses that describe the kingdom as 'the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ', or 'the kingdom of Christ', or 'the kingdom of his beloved Son', and yet they persist with the belief that the kingdom of God is God's rule. They don't appreciate the fact that the kingdom of God, as Jesus used the term, typically refers to his future reign on Earth. Acknowledging that fact helps us understand that while the Church is a present reality, the kingdom of God is not, so connection between the two is less obvious. John Bright was correct when he said, the true church, meaning the elect and not the organization, are the people of the kingdom of Christ. I would go a step further and say that they are the royal household in the Messiah's kingdom. Bright also hinted at this on p. 220, when he said that those who heed the call have entered the kingdom, nay, they are the kingdom.

Hebrews 3:6 states that the Messiah is a son in charge of God's household, and we are his household (family) if we persevere. Entrance into the kingdom comes through being born again or being born from above. Peter said, because of God's great mercy, he's granted us a new birth, resulting in an immortal hope through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah from the dead and to an inheritance kept in heaven for us that can't be destroyed, corrupted, or changed. Through faith, we are being protected by God's power for salvation that is ready to be revealed at the end of this era (1 Pet 1:3-5).

That all happens when Jesus the Messiah is revealed (verse 7). The Church community that Jesus said he would build, are sons of the kingdom, and one day, they'll come to life, or be raptured, and they'll reign with the Messiah. James said that, having willed it, God fathered us through the true message (the gospel truth), so that we might become his most special creatures (Jas 1:18).

The royal household

Jesus is building his Church, his community, God's household. The idea of building a community is found in Ruth 4:11, where reference is made to Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah, who, through bearing children, built up the house of Israel. The community that Jesus is

building constitutes his household, his royal family, who will reign with him over the Earth.

The Church is the body of the Messiah, the totality of believers from every location and every age stretching from Pentecost to the day the Messiah returns in power and glory, the day when he'll defeat his enemies and establish his kingdom. How do people enter the monarchy? The keys (means of entry) were given to the apostles whom Jesus trained to establish the early Church. They did this by preaching the gospel, writing the NT books, and through prayer. Jesus said: This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Mt 24:14). What a responsibility Christians have! The Pharisees had the keys once, but they shut the door of the kingdom in people's faces. They didn't enter themselves, and they refused those who wanted to enter (Mt 23:13). The preaching of the gospel to the lost is the Church's number one mission in the world.

The connection between the Church and the kingdom is this: True believers are the monarchy in the Messiah's kingdom. They gain that status when they believe, and they'll exercise their authority when the Messiah returns and establishes his kingdom. His community will be resurrected and raptured, they'll inherit the monarchy, and they'll reign with the Messiah as the royal household. By faith, we are saved and become part of the Messianic community. By adoption, we become God's children, princes in his kingdom. We're sons of the kingdom, co-heirs with Christ.

Jewish and Gentile saints are united

Jesus said that many will come from East and West and take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom. Abraham was a great man of faith and the first patriarch, but he and Isaac and Jacob and other OT people of faith are not part of the Church, which began at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out. If born-again Christians are the royalty in Messiah's kingdom, and if they are going to take their place with Abraham at the feast in the kingdom (Mt 8:11, Lk 13:28-29), it means that the patriarchs, and all who are called saints or elect or righteous in the OT, have become one

body with the Christian saints. In fact, they are the original root, and we have been grafted into their tree (Rom 11:24).

Jesus' followers were eventually called Christians, and he brought about their eternal redemption through the cross. God planned something better for them in this dispensation of the gospel. Believers of all other times, whether they lived before or after the flood, or before or after the law of Moses, are only perfected when grouped with the Church (Heb 11:40). It is thanks to this dispensation of grace, which includes the Messiah's death for all nations on the cross, his resurrection, and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all believers, that past believers will be included at the resurrection. Many prophets and righteous people longed to see and hear about these things that the disciples were seeing and hearing from Jesus, but they didn't (Mt 13:17). Thanks to the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, we have a fuller understanding. At the resurrection of the righteous, we'll all be raised as God's people, in union with the Messiah.

Man was created to rule

It should not surprise us that we'll be given the privilege of ruling with the Messiah. When God created man in his own image, he installed humanity as the Earth's rulers saying, let them be masters over the fish, the birds, the livestock, everything that crawls on the Earth, and over the Earth itself (Gen 1:26). This role is reiterated in Ps 8:3-6 where the psalmist muses:

When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon, and the stars that you put in place,
what is man that you consider him,
the son of man, that you pay attention to him?
You made him a little less than divine,
and you crowned him with glory and honor.
You gave him dominion over the works of your hands,
you put all things under his feet.

In the NT, the glorious fulfillment of man's sovereignty over the earth is revealed. God did not put the coming world under the control of angels, he put everything under the dominion of humanity and left nothing outside his control. At present, we don't yet see everything put under him, but we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor and with

everything in subjection to him. God has made the pioneer of our salvation perfect through suffering as part of his plan to glorify his many children (Heb 2:5-10). As Jesus has been crowned with glory and honor, so will redeemed mankind be crowned in the life to come, regaining the original purpose for which God created them.

Teaching about the church is concerned with relationships within the church, between the church and God, and between the church and the world. It is also concerned with the ministry of Christians under their Lord. The kingdom of God should not be thought of as being equivalent to church life. Teaching about the kingdom is concerned with the return of Jesus the Messiah to Earth, his millennial reign over the Earth together with his saints, and his political power over his enemies. The present age is the church age, because in it, God is calling out a people for himself, building his Church. Believers are united to the Messiah through his shed blood; they are justified and set apart as the holy children of God. The age to come (Mt 12:32, Lk 18:29-30, 20:34-36), or the coming age (Eph 2:7, Heb 6:5), is the resurrection age; the new world where righteousness reigns. It is the kingdom age in which the Messiah will rule the nations with an iron scepter. The saints should eagerly await the kingdom age, because they'll reign over the Earth with him, and then together with the Father and the Son on into the future. The kingdom is the big picture of the Messiah's victory. The whole world will see and understand who Jesus really is, and that Israel and the Church are God's people.

Some theologians say the kingdom of God was inaugurated at the resurrection of Jesus, and that he can be envisaged now, sitting on the throne in heaven in his majestic glory. But that is not the kingdom of God. Messiah's kingdom is an earthly kingdom and it cannot be inaugurated until the Messiah returns to Earth on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory and sits on his glorious throne. Without Jesus' earthly presence, there is no messianic kingdom. Jesus said that in the future he would sit on his throne (Mat 19:28, 25:31). Zebedee's wife asked that her sons might sit at his right and left in his kingdom. The criminal on the cross asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom (Lk 23:42). Jesus promised the overcomers at Laodicea that they would sit with him on his throne just as he sat down on his Father's throne (Mat 3:21). The Messiah's throne will not be in a palace, but in the temple. Jerusalem will be called The Throne of the

Lord, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the Lord (Jer 3:17). Many peoples will go to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob (Isa 2:3). Ezekiel heard someone speaking to him from the millennial temple saying that this is where his throne is, where he places the soles of his feet, and where he will live among Israel forever (Ezek 43:7). God has anointed us and set his seal of ownership on us and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing that we will reign with the Messiah.

The Church's future glory

Who are the subjects in the future kingdom of God? As a kingdom of priests, the monarchy must rule and judge others. When the believers rise to life in the first resurrection and reign with the Messiah on earth, they can't reign and be subjects at the same time. The bulk of the armies that will gather around Jerusalem at Armageddon will be destroyed at the Messiah's coming, and then Satan will be bound for 1000 years so that he cannot deceive the nations that remain. It is these remaining unbelievers from all over the world, those who survived, who will be the subjects of the kingdom during the millennium (Ps 22:27-28, 86:9, Isa 66:23, Zech 14:16). The Messiah will reign for a long time, renewing what was destroyed, restoring the world and its society to a God-fearing condition and liberating the earth from its bondage to decay. With Satan's evil influence negated, he'll remove all opposing dominion, authority, and power. Romans 8:18-23 enlightens us on this glorious era. Paul said that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us. The creation is eagerly awaiting the revelation of God's children because it has temporarily lost its purpose. But it'll be set free from its bondage to corruption, to share the glorious freedom of God's children who eagerly await the redemption of their bodies. The deliverance of this world from frustration and bondage to decay resulting from the curses of Genesis 3 will take place during the millennium, after which the physical creation will be destroyed (Rev 20:11).

The millennium is a time when Satan is banned from the earth, and peace is restored to God's creation. Wildlife will no longer be wild, disease will be eliminated, people will live longer, justice will be restored, all who are opposed to God will be eliminated, and every false religion and ideology will be banished. The Messiah and the

Church will rule the Earth during this time. There will be one Lord, and his name, the only one (Zech 14:9).

The government will be a benevolent theocracy. There will be no more evil dictatorships, corrupt communism, liberal democracy, or greedy capitalism. Daniel says the time will come for the saints to take possession of the kingdom (Dan 7:22). The kingdom, authority, and magnificence of all nations of the Earth will be given to the saints of the heavenly realms (Dan 7:27). This is the future reward for God's people, and their vindication. They'll reign under the Messiah.

At the last judgment, the remaining evils: Satan, death, and Hades will be eliminated forever. The unbelievers, forever stubborn in their unbelief, will die in a final rebellion. They'll be judged and cast into hell, pictured in Revelation as a lake of fire. They're described as being outside. They are outside of New Jerusalem, outside of salvation. After 1000 years, at the Last Judgment, Jesus will surrender his earthly kingdom to God the Father (1 Cor 15:24). Creation will be dissolved, but New Jerusalem, in which is the throne of God and of the Lamb, will continue forever, and the Church will continue to worship him and rule with him forever and ever (Rev 22:3-5).

The gospel

The gospel that Christians believe is the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God (Mk 1:1). The phrase 'Son of God' is at least an honorary title for God's regent, the Messiah. At most, it attributes deity, as several OT prophecies seem to do (2 Sam 7:13-14, Ps 2:7, Mic 5:2). The gospel is qualified in various ways: It is the gospel of God's grace (Acts 20:24), the good news that salvation depends on God's grace alone, or his unmerited favor towards us human beings who are so undeserving.

It is the gospel of our salvation (Eph 1:13). Our salvation consists of so much: the forgiveness of sins, peace with God, regeneration, election, justification, being made righteous before God, union with the Messiah, being conformed to his image, and adoption into God's family. As for the future, it is a promise of resurrection, eternal life, and being made a kingdom of priests to reign with the Messiah on Earth and throughout eternity. That is a glimpse of our salvation. Good news!

It is the gospel of peace (Eph 6:15). This good news results in peace with God for individuals, and it will result in peace on Earth during the millennium, and the regeneration of all creation.

It is the gospel of the kingdom (Mt 4:23). Jesus preached that the kingdom of God (the Messiah) was near, and people must repent and believe this good news (Mk 1:15). It is the news that the Messiah has arrived in the person of Jesus. All who believe in Jesus are heirs of his coming kingdom because they'll reign with the Messiah. The kingdom is the goal of all history.

That is the crux of Jesus' message. The kingdom is the big story. The good news is that the world is finally going to turn out well. Satan, sin, death, sickness, suffering, sorrow, deception, and corruption will all be banished. It is good news for all people.

The Church and Israel

When we think about the future, the coming of the Messiah, and what follows, a necessary aspect to consider is where Israel fits in. The OT Messianic prophecies are all about the future of Israel, so they are an important stakeholder. Is Jesus coming back as the awaited Messiah to re-establish the Davidic kingdom over Israel according to the Jewish understanding of OT prophecies? Or has God finished with Israel? Or is the Messiah setting up a kingdom on Earth that will somehow involve both Israel and the Church as separate peoples?

These are big questions for which Christians have different answers. Premillennialists believe Jesus will rule over an earthly kingdom after he returns, while others mostly believe he will not. And in the latter group are some church fathers and most of the Reformers, like Luther and Calvin. Throughout history, there has tended to be an anti-Semitic sentiment which has been strong in some periods, resulting in prejudice that hasn't enabled theologians to think impartially.

Our authority is the Bible, and we don't need to go past Romans 11 to find the answers. Romans 9-11 is about the nation of Israel, their election to be the people of God, and their relationship to the Church. God chose to reveal himself to the world through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants, the twelve tribes of Israel. Not all his descendants had faith, so not all are eligible for personal salvation.

Paul said a person was not a Jew because of his appearance, nor was circumcision something just external and physical. Being a Jew, and being circumcised, were matters of the heart, brought about by the Spirit, not by a written law (Rom 2:28-29).

The nation of Israel is a chosen nation, but currently, only a faithful remnant is saved, and as believers in Jesus, they are part of the Church. The majority turned their backs on the grace of God. People must be born again. Paul said that if a person doesn't have the Spirit of the Messiah, he doesn't belong to him.

Israel and the Church have the same purpose; they are both called a kingdom of priests, and they were both chosen to spread the knowledge and salvation of God to the nations. The culmination of their vocation is world government. Israel had the promise spoken by the prophets of ruling the world under the Messiah, and Christians also have the promise that they would rule with the Messiah. When Paul winds up his argument in Romans 11, he teaches us that stubbornness has come to a part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles comes to faith, and then all Israel will be saved, as it is written, the Deliverer will come from Zion and remove ungodliness from Jacob (Rom 11:25-26). The key point of this quotation from Isa 59:20-21 is that Jacob, Israel as a nation, will be converted at Jesus' return. God will renew his covenant with them as he promised through the prophet Jeremiah. The new covenant that God will make with Israel after those days is that he'll put his law in their hearts. He'll be their God and they'll be his people (Jer 31:33). Jesus referred to this new covenant at the Last Supper when he said the cup represented the new covenant in his blood. It was initially promised to Israel and Judah, but in 2 Cor 3:6, Paul applied it to the Church. In Hebrews, the writer lays stress on the fact that the new covenant with Israel has made obsolete the old covenant of the law. But the new covenant will also be made with Israel on the day when the Messiah returns and pours out the Holy Spirit on them. They will look to Jesus, the one whom they pierced, and at that time, a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness (Zech 12:10, 13:1). It is during the millennium that all Israel will know the Lord and not need to teach their neighbors to know him.

The unbelieving nation became enemies of the Church as far as the gospel is concerned, but they are still loved by God because of election. God's call is irrevocable, unalterable. All of Israel will be saved after the Messiah's return, including those who are not living in Israel. Romans 11 has in focus the nation Israel, so there is no way that all of Israel can be spiritualized and referred to the Church. 'Jacob' can only refer to Israel.

The Messiah's salvation is for all, Gentiles as well as Jews, and they all have to find salvation through faith in Jesus. The apostles and other early Jewish believers formed the basis of the early Church. In recent decades, there have been many more Jews believing in Jesus and forming messianic churches, especially in the United States. Jesus said that the gospel of the kingdom would be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations (including the Jews), and then the end would come. The two witnesses of Revelation 11 are Christian preachers who will come in the spirit of Elijah and Moses to preach repentance to Israel in the last days.

God has already gathered and will continue gathering the scattered nation of Israel in these last days. It is already a miracle that nearly seven million Jews, who had been scattered among the nations of the world for nearly 2000 years, have returned to the promised land in these last days. Their language Hebrew has been revived! According to Wikipedia: The process of Hebrew's return to regular usage is unique. There are no other examples of a natural language without any native speakers subsequently acquiring several million native speakers, and no other examples of a sacred language becoming a national language with millions of first language speakers. Israel, as a nation, will be saved, and the Messiah will rule over them as his people during the millennium. They won't be ruling with the Messiah as part of the New Jerusalem community; that privilege is only given to the Church, the people of all nations who surrender to Jesus before his return.

The name 'Israel' occurs three times in Revelation (2:14, 7:4, 21:12), but none of these references specify Israel in the last days. The book has about 500 allusions to the OT, estimates ranging from 200 to 1000, and Jerusalem is mentioned three times, but only when referring to New Jerusalem, which has Israel's tribal names on its gates. The book

of Revelation was written for Christians, and it was addressed to seven churches. So, most of what we know about Israel in the last days is found in the prophecies of the OT prophets.

The saints are from different backgrounds, but they are not divided, whether in the Church today or the kingdom tomorrow. The government of the world during the millennium will be upon the Messiah's shoulders, and his saints will rule with him. His royal household will consist of saints from all ages up to the time of the Messiah's return.

During the millennium, the nations will have their own social and political structures; their 'kings' (leaders) are often referred to in the prophecies. Israel will also have its structure as outlined by Ezekiel (Ezek 44-45). Their leader is called 'the prince'. We are not given details about the Messiah's administration of the kingdom, but the redeemed may rule the world under the Messiah in the areas where they previously lived or served the Lord.

The salvation of all Israel prophesied by Paul after the full number of Gentiles comes in is hinted at in Revelation 11 when the two witnesses prophesy in Jerusalem. After the witnesses are murdered, brought back to life, and taken to heaven, there is a great earthquake, and the terrified Jerusalem survivors give glory to the God of heaven (Rev 11:13). This suggests repentance. There is a stark contrast between their response and that of the unbelieving Gentiles who curse the name of God in response to the plagues. They refused to repent and give him glory (Rev 16:9).

The Jews who survive the Great Tribulation will continue as a redeemed nation on the renewed Earth, but they will not be resurrected. As long as the renewed heavens and earth endure, so will Israel's descendants and their name endure on Earth (Isa 66:22).

Jesus promised the apostles that they would rule over the twelve tribes of Israel in the new world (Mt 19:28), which makes it clear that the Church and Israel will both exist during the millennium as separate entities. The resurrected apostles will be part of the bride of Christ, ruling from New Jerusalem. The newly converted nation of Israel will be enjoying life on the restored Earth. They will be the head of the nations, who will come year after year to worship the Lord.

When will Jesus return to his Church?

Jesus and his friends were sitting on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem when Jesus prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. His friends asked him when this would be, and what would be the sign of his coming and the end of the age (Mt 24:3). Jesus told them about false prophets, wars, and persecutions, and then he gave them the first real clue. He said the good news of the kingdom would be proclaimed throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end would come (Mt 24:14).

Most of the unreached people groups are in Asia, where 80% of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus do not personally know a Christian. As for Bible translation, there are 670 Bibles and 1,450 New Testaments in the 7,100 languages of the world, covering 90% of the world's population. Many other languages have incomplete Bibles. Wycliffe Bible Translators plan to eliminate Bible poverty throughout the world within the next decade! The Jesus film has been translated into 1600 languages, which are understood by 97% of the world's population.

Jesus referred to 'the abomination of desolation' or 'the destructive desecration', spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (temple), which is generally interpreted as something idolatrous, possibly an image of the Antichrist (Mt 24:15). Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, as Jesus predicted, but the nations will gather against it again before Jesus' return (Zech 12:3, 14:2). This will be during the Great Tribulation, which is also called the time of Jacob's Trouble. Jesus said that Jerusalem would be trampled on by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Lk 21:24). There will be false prophets who will perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect, if that is possible (Mt 24:24). Immediately before Jesus' return the sun and moon will be darkened and stars will fall from the sky as graphically portrayed in a vision seen by John (Rev 6:12-14).

Israel captured West Jerusalem in 1948 and East Jerusalem in 1967, but in 2018 the Temple Mount remains in Muslim hands. In 2008 the Jerusalem Post reported that the Temple Institute had begun making garments and vessels to be used in the third temple when it's built. The United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2018.

Jesus hinted at what generation would see his return when he said that there would be signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and on Earth distress among the nations that are confused by the roaring of the sea and its waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding because of what is happening to the world when the powers of heaven are shaken. Then they'll see the Messiah coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Jesus said: When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption (the resurrection of your bodies), and the Messiah's kingdom are near ... you know that the kingdom of God (the Messiah) is near (Lk 21:28, 31).

At the start of the 20th century, there were only a few dozen independent sovereign states on the planet; today, there are about 200! Israel became a nation in 1948. Most of the world's countries were born during this time; 41 states gained sovereignty from the UK and France between 1956 and 1966, and 18 from the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia between 1990 and 1992. No wonder Jesus told us to look at the fig tree (Israel) and all the trees. As soon as they come into leaf, we can know that summer, with its connotation of harvest and judgment, is near. The coming of the Messiah will be preceded by terribly destructive events: war, earthquake, and the wrath of God.

According to the theses discussed in this book, the saints are heirs of the Messiah's kingdom. The saints include many Jews who were believers in OT days, Jewish Christians in the early church, and messianic believers to this day. The nation of Israel will be converted after Jesus' return, but too late to be included in the Church. Their conversion will occur after the rapture of the saints, so that they remain on Earth as subjects in the Messianic reign. Their inheritance is therefore somewhat different from that of the Church. As believers, they will be grafted back into the olive tree, the patriarchs being the original olive root, representing God's elect people. Israel was broken off because of their unbelief, and the Gentiles were grafted in because of their faith. Israel will be grafted back in again, because God's gifts and calling are irrevocable, beyond recall. But their resurrection will not occur until the final judgment. The Messiah will reign over all nations and Israel will be given top place among the nations, because Israel will be his own people, and the Messiah will rule on David's throne from Jerusalem.

God made two covenants with mankind, the old covenant with Israel and the new covenant with the Church. Individual Gentiles were integrated into Israel in the old dispensation, and individual Jews have always been part of the Church. Their destiny is the same. The old covenant Jews are included, and the new covenant Jews will be included. Jesus said that many will come from East and West and will feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in his kingdom (Mt 8:11). The Church, which is comprised of believers from all nations, is hardly a parenthesis in God's plan, as some maintain. Rather, the Church is God's primary redemptive purpose, God's way of extending the offer of his salvation to all nations.

Suffering and the kingdom

The Church needs to take seriously what Paul meant when he said that God has given us (as a favor), not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for him (Phil 1:29). Every year of the Church age, thousands of Christians have had to face persecution and martyrdom and the last generation of Christians is destined to pass through enormous suffering. The Antichrist is going to wage war against the saints throughout the whole world and conquer them (Dan 7:21, Rev 13:7). We'll certainly be protected from the wrath of God that is poured out on the world in the last days, but I am not convinced by pretribulation rapture arguments that exclude the Church from the persecution that the Antichrist and his dictatorship will bring. If the Church is raptured before the Great Tribulation begins, who will the Antichrist wage war against? The NT says nothing about a new group of believers called tribulation saints. Peter said: If you suffer as a Christian, don't be ashamed, but praise God that you bear Christ's name, for it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God's household (1 Pet 4:16-17). God will give us courage to suffer for him, and we must commit ourselves to the care of our faithful Creator.

Our attitude to martyrdom should be positive. The times will be unbelievably evil, and death will be preferable to life, knowing that in a very short time the Messiah will arrive, and the Church will be resurrected, never to suffer or die again. If we are called upon to give our lives for the Lord, we will emulate our Savior who gave his life for us, and we should count that as a privilege. If we are God's children, we are his heirs and co-heirs with the Messiah, provided we

share in his sufferings, so that we may also share in his glory (Rom 8:17).

The following are verses from Revelation that warn us about the *sufferings of the saints* during the Great Tribulation.

1:9 I'm John, your brother and *partner in the tribulation*, and the kingdom, and the patient endurance that is ours in Jesus.

2:10 Don't be afraid of what you are going to *suffer*. The devil will throw some of you into prison, so that you may be tested. For ten days you will have tribulation. *Be faithful until death*, and I'll give you the crown of life.

3:10 Because you have obeyed my command to *endure*, I'll keep you through the hour of testing that is coming on the whole world to test those living on the earth.

6:9-11 I saw under the altar the souls of *those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne*. They cried out in a loud voice, 'Holy and true Sovereign, how long will it be before you judge and take revenge on those living on the earth who *shed our blood*?' They were told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers was completed, *who would be killed as they themselves had been*.

12:17 The dragon became angry with the woman and went off *to wage war on the rest of her children, those who keep God's commandments and bear testimony to Jesus*.

13:7, 10 *The Antichrist was allowed to wage war on the saints and to conquer them*. He was also given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation. *If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he'll be killed*.

14:12-13 Here is a *call for the endurance of the saints*, who hold fast to God's commands and their faith in Jesus. *How blessed are the dead, those who die in the Lord from now on!*

16:6 You gave them blood to drink because *they spilled the blood of saints and prophets*.

17:6 The woman was drunk *with the blood of the saints and the blood of Jesus' witnesses.*

18:24 *In Babylon was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who were slain on earth.*

20:4 John saw *the souls of those who had been beheaded for bearing witness to Jesus and the word of God.* They didn't worship the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or hands. They came to life and ruled with the Messiah for a thousand years.