

Wrath or Rapture?

If wrath seems to characterize more of the Tribulation period than just the last crisis, then either the church (1) must endure that wrath, or (2) be raptured out of it before the very end, or (3) be protected somehow during the Tribulation.

Option number one is not held by either Pre- or Post-Tribulationists (partial rapturists hold it). Pretribulationism opts for the second, and Posttribulationism for the third.

Wrath or Wraths?

To strengthen their case for removing the church from the wrath of the Tribulation period, Post-Tribulationists catalog the troubles of that time into three wraths: the wrath of Satan, the wrath of wicked men (both of which the church will experience), and the wrath of God (which will come only at the very end and from which the church will be delivered).

Post-Tribulationists point out that the word wrath is used in the Revelation for the wrath of God against the wicked, and the word tribulation refers to the persecution of the saints during the seven years. But that distinction does not also prove that the wrath of God is limited to the very end, or that it does not include the activities of Satan, Antichrist, or sinners - (see Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973], pg. 49). The wrath of God at Armageddon -(Revelation 19:15) will include the activities of Satan and demons -(Revelation 16:13-14). The wrath of God poured out in the bowl judgments will affect a place, the earth, and not just wicked people -(Revelation 16:1).

The righteous cannot be protected from all the fallout effects of the wraths of the Tribulation period. By no chronology can all of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments be relegated to the end of the Tribulation, nor is there any way to protect the righteous from worldwide war, famine, earthquakes, and destruction of all the green grass, for example. Indeed, we know that many righteous will be martyred throughout the period, so all of them will not be protected -(Revelation 6:10-11).

During the Tribulation, there will be wrath and wraths from many quarters, falling everywhere, and affecting everybody in some way or another.

When Will the Wrath of God Fall?

For the moment, however, let us assume the validity of the Post-Tribulational distinction between the wrath of God (at the end of the Tribulation) and other forms of wrath, judgment, and tribulation (throughout). Will the wrath of God be confined to the end only?

To answer yes, as the Post-Tribulationist must, then two verses will have to be interpreted in specific ways. Revelation 6:17 will have to be understood as meaning that the wrath of God (absent from the earth up to that point) is about to break forth. More normally, the word would indicate that the wrath of God has previously been poured out in the preceding judgments and continues to be poured out under the sixth seal judgment. In other words, the much more normal interpretation says that the wrath of God will not begin with the sixth seal but will start with the preceding judgments. And, of course, the preceding judgments will have occurred earlier in the Tribulation period, for they cannot all be bunched at the end.

Revelation 15:1 states that the last series of plagues (the bowl judgments) finish, or complete, the wrath (literally, anger) of God being poured out on the earth. No one debates that the seven bowl judgments must come to pass before God's anger can be finished. The question, then, is not, when will God's anger be finished? The question is, when will it begin? If something is going to be finished when certain events transpire, then by all the principles of normal understanding, something must have begun before those events. The seven bowl judgments complete the wrath of God; therefore, the wrath of God does not begin with those judgments but has to begin before. The wrath of God will be finishing, not beginning, at the time of the seven bowl judgments.

But the Post-Tribulationist needs to have the wrath of God begin only at the end of the Tribulation; otherwise the church will not escape, since the rapture will be the means of escape and does not come until the end. So the rapture and the wrath of God have to be at the end, and the wrath of God cannot begin before then (though other kinds of trouble can). But does not Revelation 15:1 negate the claim that the anger of God will be limited to the very end of the Tribulation? It must begin sometime previous to the pouring out of these last judgments. And any time is too much time for a Post-Tribulation Rapture that is a single event with the second coming.

Gundry thinks that the Pre-Tribulationist interpretation of Revelation 15:1 "overloads" the meaning of finish or complete (pg. 48). Judge for yourself whether it is an overload or just normal understanding.

Protection and/or Removal?

The general answer of the Post-Tribulationist to the question of how the church will survive the Tribulation is that it will be protected. More specifically the answer is: protected from divine wrath but subject to the wrath of Satan, Antichrist, and men. Actually the answer is both protection and removal. Protection during the entire Tribulation (in case the wrath of God falls before the finale of the Tribulation, Gundry, pg. 47), and removal at the end in the rapture.

Post-Tribulationists acknowledge that there will be martyrs during the Tribulation, so not all the redeemed will be protected. Actually, then, it will be a selective protection, not a universal one. On what basis will God protect some but allow others to die? Apparently a more

accidental basis than a divinely ordered one. Geography seems to be a factor, for it is suggested that those in and near Palestine will more likely be martyred. But those who escape and survive will be raptured at the end. Everything considered, it would seem to be a decimated church that will be given survival protection to live on until the Rapture.

Often this selective protection is likened to the protection Israel experienced when the plagues fell on the Egyptians. Now, of course, God can protect and preserve anyone's life anytime and anywhere He chooses. Israel was protected from the plagues that troubled Egypt. Of course, the Israelites lived apart in the land of Goshen. Saints during the Tribulation will live throughout the world, making it difficult to see how they will be able to escape the effects of the destruction of vegetation -(Revelation 8:7-8), or the death of creatures in the seas (Revelation 8:9), or the embittering of rivers and springs -(Revelation 8:10-11).

So the Post-Tribulation answer is: some martyred, some protected, all who survive raptured. The protection is partial; the rapture (of survivors) total. In other words, in the Tribulation the church will experience both wrath (at least the wrath of Satan and man, which will kill some) and rapture (of all who survive to the end).

The Promise of Revelation 3:10

"Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth." Post-Tribulationists have difficulty interpreting this promise in a straightforward way. One says that it "need not be a promise of a removal from the very physical presence of tribulation. It is a promise of preservation and deliverance in and through it" (George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956], pgs. 85-86). More particularly, the phrase "***I will keep you from the hour***" (***tereso ek tes horas***) is dissected in order to support a Post-Tribulation Rapture after preservation through the Tribulation. "From" (***ek***) is assigned the meaning "out from within," or "emergence," to indicate that the church will be in the Tribulation and then emerge from it at the end. "***I will keep***" (***tereso***) is understood as "I will guard," again indicating that the church will be protected on earth throughout the Tribulation. Thus the Post-Tribulationist understands the promise to mean that the church will be guarded through the seven years of Tribulation and then emerge from it at the close in the Post-Tribulation Rapture-Second Coming.

But remember, the protection will be partial and selective at best. From the wrath of Satan and Antichrist alone, many saints will die during the Tribulation and will in no way experience the promise of Revelation 3:10 if the worldwide time of testing refers to the entire Tribulation period. Some Post-Tribulationists, however, refer the hour of testing to only the very last crisis of the Tribulation and understand the promise to mean that the church will be raptured just before the last judgments and thus protected by removal.

Notice carefully, the Post-Tribulationist is involved in an inconsistency. If the promise means to guard throughout the entire period, then it is a promise only selectively and partially fulfilled. If the promise relates only to the last crisis, then the church is not promised protection during the almost seven full years prior to that last crisis. The promise then relates only to the Rapture at the end of the Tribulation. This understanding is more in accord with the Post-Tribulationist's interpretation of the beginning of the Day of the Lord. But, observe, that interpretation understands the promise to mean the same as the Pretribulationist says it means—deliverance by Rapture, not deliverance by protection. The only difference is that we disagree on when that deliverance will take place.

Post-Tribulationists say that "from" (*ek*) refers to protection of the church while within the Tribulation. Pretribulationists understand it to mean preservation by being absent from the time of tribulation. One is an internal protection (while living through the Tribulation); the other is an external protection (being in heaven during that time). Which meaning does "from" (*ek*) support?

The answer is either, if the preposition is considered alone. But for the record, let it be said that *ek* does denote a position outside something without implying a prior position inside and then emergence from within.

The Pretribulationist's understanding of *ek* is supported by a number of verses that have nothing to do with the Rapture and therefore do not beg the question. Proverbs 21:23 says, **"He who guards his mouth and his tongue guards his soul from troubles."** Guarding your mouth and tongue is not the means of protecting yourself in the time of trouble; rather, it is the means of escaping trouble you are not presently in. In the Septuagint translation the *ek* indicates an external, not internal, preservation. *Ek* also is used in the same way of external protection in Joshua 2:13 and in Psalms 33:19; 56:13. Likewise in the New Testament, *ek* clearly has the same meaning. In Acts 15:29 Gentile believers were asked to keep themselves from certain practices that were offensive to Jewish believers. The only way they could do that would be by abstaining entirely from the practices. They must withdraw, not somehow protect themselves while practicing those things. In James 5:20 we are told that if a sinning Christian can be turned away from his backslidden state he will be saved from physical death. There is no way *ek* could mean he will be protected in the midst of physical death and then emerge from it in some kind of resurrection. He will escape a premature death by being exempt from it. (For an excellent discussion of these and other points related to Revelation 3:10, see Jeffrey L. Townsend, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July 1980, pgs. 252-266).

The same phrase, keep from, occurs in John 17:15: **"I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one."** Post-Tribulationists point out that this promise is fulfilled not by removing believers from the world but by protecting them from Satan while they live on the earth. Then they assert that, similarly, believers will live during the Tribulation but be kept from its wrath.

Such an analogy fails to answer the basic question, How are believers kept from Satan's power? True, it is not by removing them from this world, but a removal is involved. Paul described it this way: "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" -(Colossians 1:13). John said the same thing when he wrote that "**the evil one does not touch** [cling to] **him** [the believer]" -(1 John 5:18). Believers have been transferred from one domain (Satan's) to another (Christ's), and that is how we are kept from the evil one.

However, the promise of Revelation 3:10 not only guarantees being kept from the trials of the Tribulation period but being kept from the time period of the Tribulation. The promise is not, I will keep you from the trials. It is, I will keep you from the hour of the trials. Post-Tribulationists have to resort to finding means to "undercut stress on the term 'hour'" (Gundry, pg. 59) by insisting that "hour" means the experiences of a time period but not the time itself. In other words, the church will live through the time but not experience (some of) the events. But if the events of the Tribulation are worldwide and directly and indirectly affect everybody, how can the church be on the earth and escape the experiences? If our Lord had been saved from the hour of His atoning sacrifice -(John 12:27) by living through that time but not experiencing the events of His passion, there would have been no atonement.

Granted, it is possible to live through a time and miss some of the events (like being present at a social function but missing some of the activities), but it is not possible to miss the time without also missing the events.

To summarize, Post-Tribulationists teach unclearly the meaning of the promise of Revelation 3:10. (1) Some seem to say that it means protection (for some believers who escape martyrdom throughout the Tribulation) and then rapture at the end. (2) Some seem to say that it means protection from the last crisis (which includes Armageddon and the "lull" of peace and safety that supposedly precedes it) by rapture just before that last crisis. (3) Some seem to say that it means the church will live through Armageddon, be guarded during that time, and emerge (all believers unscathed?) in the Rapture-Second Coming. One thing is clear to Post-Tribulationists: it cannot mean deliverance before the Tribulation begins.

But how clear and plain the promise is. "**I ... will keep you from the hour of testing.**" Not from just any persecution, but the coming time that will affect the whole earth. (The only way to escape worldwide trouble is not to be on the earth.) And not from just the events, but from the time. And the only way to escape the time when events take place is not to be in a place where time ticks on. The only place that meets those qualifications is heaven.

Perhaps an illustration will help keep the promise in its clear, uncomplicated form. As a teacher I frequently have to give exams. Let us suppose that I announce to a class that I am going to give an exam on such-and-such a day at the regular class time. Then suppose I say, "I want to make a promise to students whose grade average for the semester so far is A. The promise is: I will keep you from the exam." If I said nothing more by way of explanation, I expect that the A students would puzzle over that promise. "Does it mean we have to take the

exam or not?" they would ask. And just to be safe, I would expect, they would show up at the appointed time because they would not have understood clearly what I meant.

Now I could keep my promise to those A students this way: I could pass out the exam to everyone, and give to the A students a sheet containing the answers. They would take the exam and yet in reality be kept from the exam. They would live through the time but not suffer the trial. This is Post-Tribulationism. Protection while enduring.

But if I said to the class, "I am giving an exam next week. I want to make a promise to all the A students. I will keep you from the hour of the exam." I very seriously doubt if the A students in that class would spend any time debating what I meant or whether or not they had to show up at the time of the exam. They would understand clearly that to be kept from the hour of the test exempts them from being present during that hour. This is Pretribulationism, and this is the meaning of the promise of Revelation 3:10. And the promise came from the risen Savior who Himself is the deliverer from the wrath to come -(1st Thessalonians 1:10).

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