

“COME UP HERE!”

We have been considering the popular claim that the Church is going to be snatched up, up, and away, before the Great Tribulation (GT) begins. We have examined three planks in the floor this bed of hopeful dreams is resting on and found them unable to bear the full weight of Scriptural revelation. Today we look at the fourth plank in the pre-tribulation rapture theory. Perhaps this board will do what the previous ones have failed to do!

Fourth Plank in the Pre-Tribulation Rapture

Simply stated the idea is that God rescues His people before He judges the world: Enoch was translated before the Flood; Noah and his family were in the ark before the Flood; Lot was removed from Sodom before the fire fell; the firstborn of the Hebrews in Egypt were sheltered from the Death Angel before Egypt was judged; the spies were safely out of Jericho before the walls crumbled, etc. Will not God do that for His Church before He unleashes His wrath in the GT?

It is argued this principle of rescue before judgment is symbolised when John is called to

“come up here” in Revelation 4:1. John, who represents all believers, is suddenly caught up into heaven by a voice with trumpet call ...

“Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things” (Rev. 4: 1).

Thus, after John has been shown the 7 churches in Revelation chapters 2 to 3, a new phase for the Church begins. The Church --- in the person of John --- is snatched up and away to the Heavenly banquet, the Great Marriage Supper of the Lamb with His bride, and is in this way delivered from the Great Tribulation. John is allowed to watch from Heaven the horrible tribulation events unfold down upon earth. In this way the Church will also escape the Great Tribulation; she is no longer mentioned from the beginning of chapter 4 all the way through to the Coming of Christ in chapter 19.

See (we are assured) God always rescues His people from the world before His judgment strikes the wicked!

Is Revelation 3:10 a Proof Text?

Let's take a closer look at this proposition. The idea that God is going to take His church out of

the world before the GT, it is argued, has already been introduced for us in Revelation 3:10,

“Because you have kept the word of my perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of trial that is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth” (Rev. 3:10).

Can we reasonably extrapolate a world-wide pre-tribulation Rapture of the Church on the basis of this specific promise by the risen Lord Jesus to the local church at Philadelphia? Is this really a promise that God is going to rescue the Church before the Great Tribulation by calling us up and away to Heaven?

Ron Rhodes thinks so and he is representative of this school of thinking. He categorically states,

“This verse promises that only church saints will be kept out of this hour of trial coming on the whole world. Those who become believers during the hour of trial itself, whom we might call tribulation saints, will go through the remainder of the tribulation.”
(1)

Dr Arnold Fruchenbaum likewise is confident this is a proof-text stating the principle that God

is going to pull His Church out of the world before His judgment hits the unbelievers during the Great Tribulation. He states,

“In the context of the Book of Revelation, it is the Tribulation found in chapters 6-19 that is this period of trial that is to fall upon the whole earth. It is from this period of trial that the Church is to be kept. This verse does not say that the Church will be merely kept safe *during* the trial, but it will be kept *from the very hour* of the trial, that is, from the very *time* of it. This requires a removal before the Tribulation ever occurs. If Revelation 3:10 only means that the Church will be kept safe during the Tribulation, then something goes terrible wrong. Throughout the Tribulation, saints are being killed on a massive scale (Rev. 6:9-11; 11:17; 12:11; 13:7,15; 14:13; 17:6; 18:24). If these are Church saints, they are not being kept safe and Revelation 3:10 is meaningless. Only if Church saints and Tribulation saints are kept distinct does the promise of Revelation 3:10 make any sense.” (2).

Is this really a solid proof-text for a pre-tribulation rapture? Let's answer the question in general terms first, then in specific terms.

The first general principle to note is that nowhere in Scripture are Christians promised immunity from trouble. Tragedies, disasters and accidents, hit believer and non-believer alike. For example, whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian in an aeroplane whose engines fail, guess where all aboard are going? The law of gravity works alike for all. We are all on "aeroplane" earth, which is a fallen planet away from its Creator and His original intention. Good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people. This is an empirical, (shall we say?), scientifically observable fact. Everybody has trouble and gets hurt in this life.

The second general principle is that Christians are promised more than our fair share of trouble in this world. Jesus promises, "In the world you shall have tribulation ..." (John 16:33). Again he warned we would be delivered "up to tribulation, and they will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of my name" (Matt. 24: 9). The apostles instructed their new converts they must not lose heart but continue

in the faith knowing that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Peter told his fellow-believers, “do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you” (I Pet. 4:12). This also is an empirical, observable fact, and will be increasingly evident as we head towards the close of this present evil age. Christians can expect more than our fair share of trouble because we belong to Christ.

The third general principle is that we Christians are living in a world that is *already* experiencing the wrath of God ...

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness ... therefore God gave them over ... to degrading passions ... (and) to a depraved mind...”(Rom. 1:18f).

Therefore, as the world abandons God and His truth He removes His restraining hand from them with the result that all kinds of abuses flourish. Because we Christians live in this toxic environment we suffer the general effects of this

wrath of God on His world now. True, we know we are not personally being punished by God's wrath because "God is for us" and redeemed us by the blood of His Son's atoning sacrifice at Calvary. The salient point remains: We Christians are already living in a world experiencing the wrath of God. The Great Tribulation wrath is going to be one of degree rather than one of kind. This also is an empirically observable reality right now.

What then of the promise to the church at Philadelphia in Revelation 3:10 that Jesus, "will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world"? Remember, Fruchtenbaum says, that if the Church saints are not kept safe then the promise of Revelation 3:10 is meaningless. This argument on the surface sounds convincing. I mean, God forbid that any one of His promises should fail.

However, the argument fails for a number of reasons. First, the argument fails because it presupposes the point it wants to prove. It assumes the only way God can keep His church safe is by rapturing them away to heaven before the GT starts. It must be categorically stated that the text in Rev. 3:10 does not mention the

Rapture at all! And one of the elementary rules of reliable Bible interpretation is that we must not read our ideas into the text. The idea has to be there for us to draw it out ... not pencil it in! So those who read a pre-tribulation rapture of the NT Church into Rev. 3:10 break a fundamental hermeneutic ... their argument therefore fails because it is circular.

But hang on a minute (I can hear somebody object), doesn't the Greek preposition *ek*, translated "from" in Rev. 3:10 carry the idea of separation from --- "I will keep you *from* the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole world"? Rhodes himself points out, "This means that believers will be completely separated from the hour of trial by being raptured before the period even begins." (3).

What Rhodes and those of his school fail to mention is that many expert Greek scholars translate *ek* to mean the Philadelphian church will be preserved throughout the hour of tribulation. For example, Moffatt translates,

"Because you have kept the word of my patient endurance, I *will keep you safe through the hour of trial* which is coming

upon the whole world to test the dwellers on earth.”

Goodspeed likewise,

“...I also will keep you *safe in* the time of testing...”

Faussett says the Greek means,

“...so as to deliver thee *out of*, not to exempt *from*, temptation.

Hard to believe such a fuss can arise from one little Greek preposition, isn't it? How do we untangle these locked horns? Well, maybe the key is found in this very Book of the Revelation where there are examples of exactly how God delivers His people from tribulation. For example, the Woman in Rev. 12 is protected from the persecution of the Antichrist so that not all the power of Satan can touch her. God exempts her from the fiercest of the GT, not by taking her away to heaven, but by preserving her *on earth* through that hour (Rev. 12:14f).

It should not be objected that the Woman represents the Jews and so would not have been in the pre-tribulation rapture anyway. The Woman's identity is quite immaterial to the

example, because the point is that she is kept from persecution without any thought of her being snatched up to heaven.

We can also compare other similar texts where the Greek construction is the same as Rev. 3:10 and where the subject matter is identical. Jesus himself prays to his Father for his Church,

“I do not ask You to take them from/out of (*ek*) the world, but I ask You to keep them from the Evil one” (John 17:15).

Here Jesus specifically prays for his Church to be kept *from* the Evil one but at the same time it will be while that Church remains in the world! To be *kept from* tribulation does not mean to be immune from it by escaping to heaven. It means to be preserved from denying their Lord. This one parallel example shows how tenuous it is to argue that the preposition *ek* demands a rapture out of the world in order to escape Satanic trials.

Others might become apostate and deny the Faith under persecution, but based on their current determined steadfastness, the Christians at Philadelphia will be upheld to remain loyal to Christ through trial.

A second reason Rev. 3:10 fails to prove the NT church is raptured away into heaven before the GT is because it is an argument out of context. The careful reader will observe Rev. 3:10 is a promise given to one specific church congregation in Asia Minor, the Philadelphian church. This is a church commended by Jesus for their faithful obedience to His word in spite of opposition by certain unbelieving Jews. Jesus commends them highly, and as a result of their proven track record of faithful perseverance, they receive the promise to be kept from the hour of trial soon to break out on “those who dwell upon the earth”.

When John wrote the Book of Revelation (the consensus is he probably wrote it towards the end of the First Century A.D.), “the hour of trial” soon to hit the entire Christian world was the imperial Roman persecutions of the Second and Third Centuries. The original readers of the Revelation would have so understood it.

So how did Jesus keep his promise to the Philadelphians in that original setting? He certainly did not rapture them away from the earth before Rome’s wrath erupted over them! Perhaps the promise was kept because for some

amazing reason the Philadelphian civil authorities did not persecute the church in that city at that “hour”? I am not sure. But as David Pawson cogently argues,

“The church at Philadelphia has long since disappeared altogether! Is that the way Jesus fulfilled the promise? If so, it has nothing to do with the ‘secret rapture’. If not, how can Jesus possibly keep what doesn’t exist from the ‘Great Tribulation’? It just doesn’t make any sense to the original hearers to whom the promise was given. But it does make sense if the ‘hour of trial’ is understood to mean the imperial persecutions that spread throughout the Roman Empire during the second and third centuries.” (4).

But why can’t we stretch this local promise to the church at Philadelphia and apply it to all the Church just before the GT erupts on “the whole world”? Couldn’t we logically apply it to the universal church in this 21st Century? After all, recall that Jesus in speaking to his 12 apostles addressed them personally, “when *you* see these things”, then “*you*” are to know, and “*you*” are to do thus and thus (Matt. 24; Mk.13, Lk. 21). The

apostles too are long dead yet we do not doubt those words are universally addressed to Christians right up to the very end of this age. Isn't it inconsistent to now say a local promise given to the Philadelphian church that is no longer with us couldn't also be applied to Christians universally right up to the start of the GT? Great point, and thanks for raising it!

The obvious reason the promise of Rev. 3:10 cannot be stretched to include a secret rapture out of this world before the GT is because that is not what Jesus promised the Philadelphians! They were not promised *that*, so it's a long exegetical hop, skip and jump to think we should be!

Furthermore, the purpose of the whole book of Revelation was to help the saints get ready and be prepared to persevere to the very end. The theme of the whole book is to prepare for what is coming. Even the Philadelphians are exhorted to continue to "hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown" (Rev. 3: 11). That very church is given the commission (also given to each of the other churches) that 'He who overcomes' will receive an eternal reward of glory (Rev. 3:12). This is proof the

Philadelphians were to continue to keep themselves loyal to Christ even as they saw their fellow brothers and sisters elsewhere being horribly persecuted. The promise is that they will overcome if they continue loyal to Jesus and in this way be kept true. That is the context of Rev. 3:10.

The exhortation for Christians during the GT to “persevere” and to continue to “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” must surely mean the church is in the thick of the Great Tribulation (Rev. 14:12)?

There is another general Scriptural principle to be borne in mind here. Yes, throughout the history of His Church, God has often miraculously delivered his faithful saints from dreadful persecutions and the hostility of wicked men. Hebrews 11 catalogues this mighty story of miraculous deliverance. But don't forget an equal part of the story is that many faithful ones were *not* rescued by God. There is a host of people who have been martyred whom God did not deliver. These “others” were stoned, were chained and gaoled, were beheaded and cut in two, they were tested, they were exiled and ill-treated and had to survive like wild animals in

caves and holes in the ground (Heb. 11: 36-38). Scripture testifies that God's *modus operandi* of miraculously delivering some and not delivering others of His children will continue right up to the end of this wicked age.

Remember that, "God spared not His own Son, but delivered him up for us all" (Rom. 8: 32). Remember they persecuted our Lord and Master and that the servant is not above his lord (Matt. 10:24). There is therefore, no solid Biblical reason to think God's sheep will not continue to be slaughtered "all day long" right up to and right through the Great Tribulation until the Second Coming of our Saviour. If there is any message that comes to the church in Revelation chapters 6 through 18 it surely is to prepare for terrible tribulation and to "endure to the end"?

Delivered from the Lake of Fire.

Do I therefore deny the Church will be finally and completely delivered from the wrath to come? God forbid. The one fact pre-tribulation rapture theory does not address is that "the wrath of God" we are gloriously delivered from, is not the Great Tribulation, but is rather the

Lake of Fire, which is the Second Death, or *Gehenna*.

Blessed are those who take part in the “first resurrection” for these believers will not suffer that last and final manifestation of God’s wrath. That is called “eternal wrath”, or the wrath of the age to come. *That* is the wrath Christians are delivered from by God’s grace through Christ.

In a previous lesson we saw that it is a false deduction to call the Great Tribulation the wrath of God. We saw that in fact, the Great Tribulation is the *Devil’s wrath* upon God’s saints and all who refuse to conform to his world system. Nowhere are Christians promised to escape Satan’s anger in the GT! But we are promised ultimate deliverance from God’s final wrath which is the Lake of Fire, the Second Death, *Gehenna*.

The Saints Meet Jesus in the Air to Escort Him Back Down to Earth.

There is one more little piece to the puzzle worth mentioning at this point. Pre-tribulation rapture proponents often make a distinction between our meeting Jesus “in the air” (and then doing a U-turn back up to heaven) and the

Second Coming of Jesus when He returns to earth in glory with his saints after the GT.

Perry Stone is a popular teacher of the pre-tribulation rapture position. He is on record as saying that his ministry is blessed to have over 20,000 Second Coming books in their library and that he himself has put in over 50,000 plus study hours on the subject.

I admire both the man's resources and his zeal! Anyway, Mr Stone teaches that we are to make a distinction between the pre-tribulation rapture of the saints to meet Jesus in the air (and then zip back up to heaven for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb while the Great Tribulation erupts over the world) and the Second Coming of Jesus with his saints after the GT to reign with Christ on earth. For Mr Stone, this distinction proves that Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 4: 15-18 are talking about two entirely different events: The secret rapture of the Church into the air and the glorious Second Coming back to the earth after the Great Tribulation. One event concerns "the air" and the other concerns "the earth". Is this a valid distinction?

The first fact to note is that both Matthew 24 and I Thessalonians 4 have as their subject the Coming of the Lord (i.e. His Presence or *Parousia*, Matt. 24: 3, 27, 30, 39 & I Thess. 4: 15). Unless we can find “two comings” of Jesus Mr Stone’s theory is already in trouble.

Next, we note the word “meet” (*apanteesis*) in I Thess. 4: 17 is significant. There are only three other times it is employed in the NT. Twice it is used of the “virgins” who go out to “meet” the bridegroom (Matt. 25:1,6). It is also used in Acts 28:15 where “the brethren” came out to meet Paul and his travelling party.

On each of these other three “meetings” the person or the party that is met, continues after the meeting to travel on in the direction in which they were already moving. The “virgins” (or at least the five wise ones) accompany the groom to the wedding and Paul continues on into the city of Rome with the retinue.

The next thing to note is that this word “meet” is a technical word with political overtones. It was the word used of citizens going outside their city to meet an arriving dignitary, and then accompanying him and escorting him onto his

original destination. It is the word used in the political records of the day when the citizens of a city or region went out to meet the Roman Emperor and then escorted him onwards in his journey, whether to their own city or beyond.

So in every occurrence of this word in the NT, and of the secular records of the day, nobody is “taken away” or removed from the scene. This ought to give us cause for pause when Mr Stone suggests a differentiation be made between meeting the Lord in the air and when he comes at His Second Coming.

Far from escaping the world the rapture of the church is so the saints can “meet” the Lord in the air with the purpose of then escorting him onwards (downwards!) to inaugurate his reign in the Kingdom of God over this planet.

The consistent and unified message of all Scripture is that the glorified Church of God will judge the nations and rule this world under Christ. This is the moment Daniel the prophet says the stone from heaven smashes into the feet of the great statue to put an end to all corrupt government(s). This is the grand movement of all God’s promises in His Messiah moves

towards: The setting up of God's everlasting Kingdom on earth (Dan. 2:36f; 7: 13f). This is the Gospel word of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus and his apostles. Our glorious hope is not to escape from earth but to enjoy the Kingdom reign of God through His Messiah right here!

As we conclude this mini-four-part series on the Rapture Question, as always, let's listen to Jesus himself give the final word.

THE FINAL WARNING OF JESUS

In Matthew 24 Jesus warns us to beware of men who teach:

1. **That His coming will be *secret* ...** “If therefore they say to you, ‘Behold, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe them. For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be” (v. 26-27).
2. **That His coming was *imminent* and unrelated to observable signs ...** “And you will be hearing of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not the end yet ... and this gospel of

the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then shall the end come” (v. 6,8,14).

3. **That His coming would *precede* the revelation of the Antichrist**

”Therefore, when you see ‘the abomination of desolation which was spoken through Daniel the prophet, standing “where *he* should not be” (note the masculine participle in Mk. 13: 14) in the holy place (let him who reads understand)...(Compare 2 Thess. 2: 3, “Let no one deceive you, for [the Day of the Lord] will not come unless ... the Man of Sin is revealed...”).

4. **That His coming would *precede* the Great Tribulation ...** “For then there will be Great Tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall ... But *immediately after the tribulation of those days ...* the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of

the sky with power and great glory” (v. 21, 29-30f).

Beware of any man or woman who teaches anything different to Jesus! According to Jesus himself here are the four solid planks the Church should be leaning on as this Age draws to its climax. The current dream of being raptured out of the world before the Big Trouble is a deceptive bed of dreams sitting on rotten planks. The crash thereof will be devastatingly tragic for all who are hoping on them!

Listen to Jesus then. Church, get ready to enter the Great Tribulation! If we are in the generation that sees these things, may we be found faithful. It's a good time to practice hearing the Son of God every day now, so that we too, like the Philadelphian church, may be kept through the Great Tribulation so as to see the Son of Man coming in power and the clouds of great glory!

Oh, What a Day that will be when the Son of Man is revealed to the world at his Coming and Presence. What a day when the dead in Christ will be raised first and then those who are alive will be caught up together with them to meet the

Lord in the air. What a Day it will be when we all together, the saints of all generations, then continue on down to the earth and escort King Jesus to take up his throne in Jerusalem. The Kingdom of God will have come.

May it be soon when Jesus will call us, “Come up here into the air so we all can go down there together!” This is how we will be forever with the Lord.

Comfort one another with these words.
Hallelujah! Amen.

1. Rhodes, Ron, *The 8 Great Debates of Bible Prophecy: Understanding the Ongoing Controversies*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, Oregon, 2014, p. 87.

2. Fruchtenbaum, Dr Arnold, *The Footsteps of the Messiah*, San Antonio: Ariel Ministries, 2004, p. 153 (italics original).

3. Rhodes, Ron. Ibid p. 86).

4. Pawson, David. *When Jesus Returns*, Hodder & Stroughton, London, Sydney, Auckland, 1995, p. 196.