

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Seven Churches in Revelation	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	11	Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Revelation 3:7-13	
Date:	October 25, 2020 (a.m.)	

### THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA AND THE QUESTION OF THE RAPTURE

It is argued by Pretribs that the only way that God can effectively exempt/protect believers from his wrath during the Tribulation is to remove them from the earth to heaven before it begins, hence, the *pretribulation* rapture. In the first place, as I have already said, what about believers *in* the Tribulation? Are we to suppose that at the very moment they are saved God raptures them one by one from the earth to heaven?! But, responds the Pretrib, does not Rev. 3:10 explicitly teach just such a Pretrib rapture of the Church? Let's look at the text. "*Because you have 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.*" An immediate question to be answered is this: Is it the *hour* itself which is emphasized, i.e., the period of the Great Tribulation (cf. Matt. 24:20-22), or is it the *testing* which falls within that hour? Is it "I will keep you from the hour or period which contains testing?" or "I will keep you from the testing of which is to come in a special period of time?" Probably the latter is correct. The word *hour* appears many times in the gospel with reference to the passion of Jesus (Matt. 26:45; Mark 14:35, 41; John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). The emphasis falls on the *experience* within the time, not the period as such. In the request, *Father save Me from this hour*, Jesus would not have been praying for deliverance from the period of time, through which He would have gone even had He not died. Rather, He contemplates asking for deliverance from the *events* within the period of time (John 12:27). "This is a common way of not to ask that one should be taken out of the world before he becomes ill – he is already ill – but that the Lord should preserve and bring him safely out of the period of time *per se*, but upon the prominent characteristics of the period."<sup>1</sup> It should also be noted that the text specifically says that the testing of that hour will come *only* upon the "earth-dwellers," i.e., unbelievers. The Pretrib argues that the only way in which God can "keep" his people from the testing of that hour is by spatial evacuation (the Rapture). It should be noted that the Rapture itself is not mentioned in the text; the words "keep from" merely describe God's protective activity. The Pretrib argues, however, that the only way God can "keep" his people "from" the events of that hour is by prior physical removal from the earth. Walvoord argues, "Most interesting is the message to the church in Philadelphia, a church with spiritual strength that kept the commandments of God. To the Philadelphians Christ gave a specific promise, *I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth* (3:10). This command harmonizes with the expectations of the church that the Rapture will occur before the troubles of the end time. The church will be kept from the coming worldwide Tribulation, not kept through it. To *keep from* differs significantly from *keep through*. This verse thus serves to reinforce the expectations of a pretribulation Rapture."<sup>2</sup> Is this true?

- I. **REV. 3:10: WHAT DOES "KEEP YOU FROM" MEAN?** That prior physical removal from the earth is not necessary to be "kept from" the wrath of God in the Tribulation is proven by the fact that there will be untold numbers of believers *on* the earth during that period whom God will effectively protect and preserve from said wrath. This point has already been established.

Therefore, we immediately see that the Pretrib argument, that only by physical removal can God's people be "kept," is false. How in fact God will protect His people is vascally irrelevant . . . He did it for the people of Israel while in Egypt, He will do it for His Church during the Tribulation. But what of the phrase "keep from?" Does it not demand the idea of physical removal? No. In the first place, I believe far too much stress has been placed by both Pre-and Posttribs on the precise nuance of the words *tēreō ek*. By saying this I do *not* mean that the words are unimportant, only that it can be effectively demonstrated that the preposition *ek* ("from," "out of") can support *either* position. How, then, are we to decide what does the text mean? In using these words does the passage refer to *evacuation out of* or *preservation within*? The answer is found by noting the *only* other place in all of the NT where the two words, *tēreō* and *ek*, occur together. The significance of this other usage is bolstered by the fact that in *both* instances it is *Jesus Christ* who speaks and *John the Apostle* who records his words! The text John 17:15 – *I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to **keep them from** the evil one.* **Note:** In this text not only does *tēreō ek* (translated "keep . . . from") *not* mean physical removal, indeed it is set in *direct contrast with* that idea! Our Lord specifically prays *not* that they should be taken out of (*aireō ek*) the world (physical removal) but that *while yet in the world* (physically/spatially) God should "keep them from"/"protect them from" (*tēreō ek*) the evil one (Satan). Gundry thus rightly asks: "how then can *tēreō ek* refer to the rapture [in Rev. 3:10] or to the result of the rapture when in its only other occurrence the phrase opposes an expression which would perfectly describe the rapture?"<sup>3</sup> The point, therefore, is that our Lord has promised His people *not* that He will physically/spatially remove them from the Tribulation, but that he will effectively preserve/protect them while they yet remain *on* the earth during that Tribulational period. (Again note, God has *never* promised *any* Christian that he will be kept from the persecution and wrath of Satan, the antichrist, and unbelievers, but only from *His* wrath!). The most obvious problem for Pretribs is the glaring fact that the believers at Philadelphia were NOT raptured – they were protected by the Lord, but were not caught up in the air to meet him.

II. ***THE ARGUMENT FROM THE ABSENCE OF THE WORD "CHURCH" IN REV. 4-19.*** This argument proceeds as follows: In Rev. 1-3 the word "church" abounds (19 times). But it is wholly absent in chapters 4-18, chapters which all describe events of the Tribulation. Therefore, the church (i.e., all Christians of this present age) must be in heaven, having been raptured before the Tribulation begins. Henry Thiessen, a popular dispensational theologian of a past generation, writes: "There is no mention of the church in Rev. 4-19. The term never occurs in this section. This is worthy of note because of its frequent occurrence in the first chapters and its appearance again in 22:16. If the church were on the earth, we would expect it to be mentioned frequently."<sup>4</sup> This argument is invalid as a defense of Pretribulationism. And for several reasons:

***First***, let the reader understand full well the nature of the Pretrib argument. Again, it may be reduced to syllogistic form:

***Major Premise:*** The word "church" is not found in any text in Rev. 4-18 that describes an earthly scene;

***Minor Premise:*** Rev. 4-18 describes events of the Great Tribulation that will occur at the end of the age;

***Conclusion:*** therefore, the "church" is not on the earth during the Great Tribulation, having been physically/spatially removed by the rapture.

It should be obvious to all that this is an argument from silence (most, if not all, Pretribs will admit this). The argument is simple: since the "church" is not referred to as being present on earth during the Tribulation, it must be in heaven (via the rapture). The problem for the Pretrib

with this kind of reasoning is that it can equally be used to prove the *Posttrib* position. Note the following syllogism:

**Major Premise:** The word “church” is not found in any text in Rev. 4-18 that describes a heavenly scene;

**Minor Premise:** Rev. 4-18 describes events in heaven that will occur while the Great Tribulation is in process on the earth;

**Conclusion:** Therefore, the “church” has *not* been physically/spatially removed to heaven by means of the rapture but is still on earth during the Great Tribulation.

Gundry summarizes: “Although in chapters 4-18 John does not mention the Church as on earth by means of distinctive terminology, neither does he mention the Church as being in heaven or in air by means of distinctive terminology. Yet the setting of most of these chapters and visions is in heaven. Thus, the omission of the Church as in heaven cancels out the omission of the Church as on earth. It may do even more, viz., create the presumption that the last generation of the Church is still on earth in these chapters since John has described no rapture.”<sup>5</sup> In a word: such an argument from silence (i.e., an argument based on the absence of the word “church”) can cut both ways, and thus serves no conclusive purpose.

**Second**, if the Pretrib insists on using the argument from silence in spite of the above point, let us note some further implications. His argument is that since the word “church” is not found in Rev. 4-18, the Church as a body of Christ is no longer present. But note: the word “church” is not found in Mark, Luke, John, 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, Jude, and not until the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans. Therefore, unless one is prepared to dismiss large portions of the NT as irrelevant to the Church, the absence or presence of the word “church” cannot be made a criterion for determining the applicability of a passage to saints of the present age.

**Third**, the word “church” as a denotation of the universal body of Christ considered in its totality *does not occur at all* in the book of Revelation. All 19 occurrences of the word in chapters 1-3 are references to particular *local* congregations of Christians. In point of fact, it is somewhat rare in the NT for the word “church” to be used in the generic sense of the body of Christ universally considered. Of the 114 instances where the word “church” occurs, at most only 20 refer to the “church” in that sense (i.e., as the universal body of Christ). Therefore, it is quite unreasonable to demand that it appear with that meaning in Rev. 4-18, and even more unreasonable to construct the doctrine of the Pretrib rapture on such grounds.

**Fourth**, “common terms for Christians are used throughout the book, including chapters 4-18, thus identifying the people adequately. The term “servant” . . . is used in the very first verse of the book to describe the recipients of the epistle and to describe John himself: . . . Pretribulationists admit that the term is used of Christians here. The term is used again of Christians in 2:20, where false teaching is said to “seduce my servants.” By what canon of interpretation, then, can the servants of 7:3 who are protected from tribulation, the servants of 11:8 who are about to be avenged by God be thought of as “tribulation saints,” not Christians? There is not the slightest indication in the flow of the argument of the book that these are not the same servants. Since the term “servant” is such a common New Testament designation for Christians, one would have to demonstrate clearly that a new meaning is now being attached to the term if a different interpretation is to be accepted. No such evidence is available. Only pretribulationist presuppositions can justify the switch in reference. The same continuity can be observed in the usage of the term “saint” . . . Throughout the picture of the Tribulation, it is the saints who are praying (5:8, 8:3-4), suffering (13:7, 16:6, 17:6, 18:24), and patiently enduring (13:10, 14:12). But then when consummation comes, when the prayers of the saints are finally answered, and Christ returns to avenge them against their persecutors and to reward

them for their faithfulness in persecution (19:8), the saints are now the church – no longer the saints described in the previous passages. This total disregard for the word usage, context, historical significance, and the principles of hermeneutics generally is astonishing. Whatever else may be said of such an interpretation as being necessitated by pretribulational presuppositions, it can hardly be called exegesis. Not the slightest exegetical evidence is available to support any such shift in meaning as the pretribulationalist suppose.”<sup>6</sup> In a word, the Posttrib can demonstrate conclusively that there are believers *in the Tribulation* (called “saints,” servants,” etc.). The Pretrib, therefore, must provide a substantive reason why these believers are not members of the Christian church, and we have shown above that the mere absence of the word “church” *cannot* be that reason.

III. ***THE NATURE OF CHRIST’S APPEARING.*** In order to make their case for pretribulationism, dispensationalists must and do separate Paul’s “rapture pericope” (1 Thess. 4:13-18) from the immediately following pericope dealing with the Christian’s behavior as “sons of light” in view of the approaching “Day of the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:1-11). The events of the former pericope, according to dispensationalists, occur seven years before the Day of the Lord, which comes later as a thief in the night. But such a chronological division between the pericopes finds no support in the text. The concern which prompted Paul’s “rapture pericope” (1 Thess. 4:13-18) in the first place was the issue of the state of the Christian dead, a concern troubling the Thessalonica believers. He begins his pericope by stating: “We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep” (4:13). Then he treats the Lord’s “appearing” (4:15), a term descriptive of Christ’s second coming (2 Thess. 2:8), stating that Christians will be alive and remain on the earth “until” his “appearing,” and assures them that Christ will raise the Christian dead at that time and that they will accompany the living (glorified) Christians into his presence. He then concludes this section by urging his readers to “encourage each other with these words” (4:18). Then with no discernable shift in subject matter, he immediately reminds his readers that “the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night (5:2) and urges them until that day to live alert and self-controlled lives as “children of light.” He then returns to his original concern and states that Christ “died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him” (5:10). He then repeats his earlier admonition that his readers should “encourage one another and build each other up” (5:11). The unity of this entire section (4:13-5:11) is transparent. Because of the several ideas that parallel each other in these two pericopes, there is no scriptural warrant to rend them apart and make them refer to two separate chronological events. Many years ago noted Biblical scholar O. T. Allis made these helpful observations regarding Paul’s terms: “*Coming (parousia)* is used by Paul 14 times, 8 of which refer to the coming of Christ. 1 Thess. 4:15, which speaks of the catching up of living believers, clearly refers to the rapture; likewise, 2 Thess. 2:1, which speaks of our *gathering together unto him*. On the other hand, 1 Thess. 3:13 speaks of the *coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints*. If *saints* means or includes the Church, as all dispensationalists believe, this verse speaks quite as plainly of the appearing. In 2 Thess. 2:8, which clearly refers to the appearing, since it speaks of the slaying of Antichrist, the expression used is *the manifestation (or brightness, epiphany) of his coming (parousia)*. Consequently, we must recognize that Paul uses *coming* both of the rapture and of the appearing and even combines the two expressions in 2 Thess. 2:8 to describe which is apparently one and the same event.”<sup>7</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** In bringing our discussion of the Rapture question as it is found in the book of Revelation to a close, Gundry writes: “For the Church, *by far* the most important event shortly to take place is the pretribulational return of Christ. For the most part, the book of Revelation becomes an anachronism under pretribulationalism. It is incongruous that the major book of prophecy in the NT, written to churches for the express purpose of instructing them regarding final events, should not contain a full description of the hope of the Church and yet to pretribulationalism have no direct bearing upon the Church.”<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>R. Gundry, *The Church And The Tribulation* (Zondervan, 1973), p. 59.

<sup>2</sup>J. F. Walvoord, *End Times: Understanding Today's World Events in Biblical Prophecy* (Word, 1998), p. 126.

<sup>3</sup>Gundry, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup>H. C. Thiessen, *Lectures In Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 378.

<sup>5</sup>Gundry, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup>W. Bell, Jr., *A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine of Christian Eschatology* (Ph.D. dissertation, New York Univ., 1967), p. 319.

<sup>7</sup>O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and The Church* (P&R, 1945), p. 182.

<sup>8</sup>Gundry, p. 69.