

Revelation 3:10 and the Rapture

Introduction

Revelation 3:10 is often cited in support of the pre-tribulational rapture. It is often argued that this verse, which contains the words of Jesus, “*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 on the earth.*” is the proverbial “elephant in the room” in the rapture debate. Although, at first glance, the verse does appear to support the pre-trib position, when analyzed more thoroughly, it and its surrounding context best support a post-tribulational rapture. This article offers a brief summary of the exegetical reasons why this is true.

The Promise to Keep Believers from the Hour of Testing

The most hotly debated phrase of the verse is “*I will also keep you from the hour of testing.*” Advocates of the pre-tribulational rapture argue that the Greek preposition “*ek*” (i.e. from, out of) indicates that believers will be *physically* removed (i.e. raptured) from of the “*hour of testing.*” However, the most similar verse to 3:10, which happens to be the only verse in the Greek New Testament where the Greek phrase “*tereo ek*” (i.e. keep/guard/preserve from) is used, is John 17:15, and this verse clearly implies *preservation in, not physical removal from*, the world and the power of the evil one. Furthermore, there are only three other places in the Greek NT where the verb *tereo* (i.e. to keep, guard, or preserve) is used with God or Christ as its subject and believers as its object (John 17:11, 12, 15), and each of these verses strongly imply *spiritual preservation, not physical removal*. Therefore, on the basis of the grammar, it is not only possible, but plausible that the apostle John used the language here in the same fashion as he did in his gospel account. Given this, the better translation would be “*I will guard/preserve you from the hour of testing.*”

Those who Dwell on the Earth

Another key phrase that receives much less attention is the phrase “*to test those who dwell on the earth.*” We tend to gloss over this phrase. However, it is quite significant. Who are “*those who dwell on the earth?*” Does this phrase modify “*whole world*” in the previous clause? If so, we must conclude that the hour of testing which will come upon the whole world has been specifically designed to test every single person alive on the earth at that time. If this is the case, then a pre-tribulational, or at least mid-tribulational rapture,¹ would have to be in view, because physical removal would be the only sensible option given this construction. However, is it possible that “*those who dwell on the earth*” is not a reference to all of humanity? Although the plain English reading appears to suggest every person without exception, we must understand whether or not the apostle John intended it to be understood as such.

¹ Pre-trib advocates understand the “*hour of testing*” here as a reference to the entire seven-year tribulation period, and mid-trib advocates understand the referent to be only the Great Tribulation (the last 3½ years).

A simple word study in Revelation on the combination of the Greek terms *katoikeo* (i.e. participle meaning “one who dwells or inhabits”) and *ge* (i.e. earth or land), yields an extremely interesting, informative, and air-tight conclusion. We find that John uses this phrase to exclusively refer to unbelievers. Notice, for example, that “*those who dwell on the earth*” are contrasted with the godly in 6:9-10 and promised God's vengeance and judgment. In 13:8 and 17:8, “*all those who dwell on the earth*” are defined as those whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life. These are the ones who worship the beast (13:12), make the image of the beast (13:14), rejoice over the death of the two godly prophets (11:10), and are made drunk with the wine of the immorality of Babylon (17:2). Another key verse is 8:13, where three woes are pronounced to “*those who dwell on the earth.*” Immediately after this pronouncement, the fifth trumpet sounds and the locusts come upon the earth with the command to hurt “*only the men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads*” (9:4). The categorizations are clear: “*those who dwell on the earth*” are the unbelievers, and those with the seal of God on their foreheads are the believers.² This short passage is a clear portrayal of God fulfilling His promise to “*keep you [i.e. believers] from the hour of testing...to test those who dwell on the earth [i.e. unbelievers]*” (3:10).

Given this important insight into John's unambiguous use of language, we can be certain that the phrase “*those who dwell on the earth*” is not a reference to everyone alive during the time of testing. Although this testing will be global in a geographic sense, since it will “*come upon the whole world,*” it will by no means affect all men without exception. God has designed His punishments during this time specifically for unbelievers. Therefore, the knowledge that this testing will only be directed toward “*those who dwell on the earth*” (i.e. unbelievers) eliminates the notion that Revelation 3:10 necessitates the physical removal of believers from the earth. On the contrary, God's statement here that He will not turn His anger toward believers is in itself the explanation of the clause, “*I will also keep you from the hour of testing...*” By definition, those who are not recipients of the testing (i.e. not unbelievers) are kept/guarded/preserved from it. In other words, if the testing is solely directed toward unbelievers, then all one must do in order to avoid it is believe. Given this additional information, a paraphrase of the verse would be: “*Because you are believers, I also will guard/preserve you from the hour of testing that is about to globally come upon all unbelievers in the world.*”

Who is Kept and How are they Kept?

All who identify themselves as pre-millennial agree that there will be some believers present during the Great Tribulation. Regardless of whether they belong to the church,³ all can at least agree that there will be some people on earth with faith in Christ.⁴ Given this agreement, there is no need to provide proof for this assertion here. However, the presence of believers during the “*hour of testing*” (3:10) raises a few very interesting questions.

² This is not to say that the reference to the 144,000 who receive the seal of God in chapter 7 is a necessary reference to the church. The church *already has* the seal of God at this point, since they were sealed at conversion. The account of the sealing of the 144,000 servants of God in 7:3-8 is likely a depiction of the conversion of the first fruits of the population of Jews who will be saved prior to Christ's coming (cf. Romans 11:25-26).

³ Traditional and Revised Dispensationalists believe that the organism known as the church began at Pentecost and will cease to exist on earth when the rapture occurs. Accordingly, those who come to faith in Christ after the pre-tribulational rapture will not be a part of the church.

⁴ In the pre-tribulational schema, these are the ones converted *after* the rapture.

First, if we take 3:10 to be a promise of *physical removal*, as pre-trib advocates suggest, then why are these tribulation saints “left behind” after they are converted? Wouldn't that amount to a breach of God's promise in 3:10? If the promise was truly that all believers would be *physically removed*, then it would only be legitimate if every tribulation saint was raptured at his/her conversion. Of course, we know that is not the case. Therefore, the pre-trib interpretation is inconsistent at this point.

Second, if these tribulation saints are not raptured immediately upon being saved, can we conclude that God will guard/preserve them from His judgments during the Great Tribulation? Interestingly enough, both pre-trib advocates and pre-wrath advocates both answer “yes” to this question. It is good that they do, because there are clear indications in Revelation that this is the case. For example, consider the fifth trumpet (9:4) as mentioned above. Another good example is 16:2, because only unbelievers are affected by the first bowl. Notice also that in 16:6, the angel of the waters declares that the judgments on the waters have only been on the unbelievers. Similarly, the only people affected by the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh bowls will be unbelievers. So, it seems clear that God protects the saints from His judgments. If everyone agrees with this, then why is it so unfathomable to think that this could be a direct result of the promise given in 3:10? In fact, this is the only consistent way to understand/interpret 3:10.

One more note necessary before moving on. To whom did God give the promise in 3:10? The answer is found in the first phrase of the verse, “*Because you have kept the word of My perseverance.*” Notice the strikingly similar verbiage in 13:10 and 14:12, which refer to this perseverance of the saints alive during the tribulation. Is this a coincidence that these two verses are talking about the same people as 3:10? Notice also what is stated to the church in Philadelphia two verses after 3:10, “*He who overcomes...I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.*” (3:12). This is the same seal of protection received by the 144,000 in 7:1-8 and 14:1-5, and all saints as described in 22:3-4.

When will the Blood be Avenged?

Finally, let's take a quick look at the fifth seal. Revelation 6:9-11 states,

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained,¹⁰ and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"¹¹ And there was given to each of them a white robe, and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.

First, notice that these saints were slain for the Word of God and their testimony (6:9). This is parallel to the description of the saints in Philadelphia given in 3:8. Believers are also described

in the exact same manner in 1:9, 12:11, 12:17, and 20:4. Again, these parallels make it clear that the recipients of the promise in 3:10 will be there for “*the time of testing.*”

Second, notice the query of the saints under the altar. They ask the Lord how long He will wait to judge and avenge their blood against “*those who dwell on the earth*” (i.e. unbelievers). The answer to their question is a quite significant for understanding the book of Revelation. Thankfully, we find this answer explicitly stated in Revelation also. The two key words/phrases here are “*judge*” and “*avenge...blood.*”

The Greek words for “*avenge*” and “*blood*” are only used in conjunction with each other in one place in Revelation other than 6:10. In fact, this is the only other verse in the entire book where “*judgment*” and “*avenge...blood*” are used together. The verse is 19:2, where those who make up “*the great multitude*” praise God because “*He has judged...He has avenged the blood of His bond servants.*” So, here at the marriage supper of the Lamb, we find the explicitly stated answer to the question posed by the saints in 6:10. Their blood is only avenged when Christ returns bodily to destroy Babylon!

That brings us back to the promise to believers found in 3:10. We established that:

1. 3:8 describes the same saints as 6:9
2. 6:11 makes it clear that the saints in 6:9 are part of a larger group which will only be complete at the time when their blood is avenged
3. The time in which their blood is avenged is the physical return of Christ.

Therefore, the promise in 3:10 to the saints in 3:8 and 6:9 will be fulfilled at the second coming. This clearly points to a post-tribulational rapture.

The Rapture and the Resurrection

As we noted in the previous section, the promise given in Revelation 3:10 applies to the saints described by similar language in 6:9. Furthermore, Revelation 6:9 is strongly parallel in language to 20:4, indicating that these two verses are referencing the same group of people.

*When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar **the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained,** (Revelation 6:9)*

*Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw **the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God,** and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand, and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4)*

There are six clear parallel aspects in these two passages:

1. “*the souls*” (6:9) = “*the souls*” (20:4)⁵
2. “*those who had been slain*” (6:9) = “*those who had been beheaded*” (20:4)
3. “*because of the word of God*” (6:9) = “*because of the word of God*” (20:4)
4. “*because of the testimony which they had maintained*” (6:9) = “*because of their testimony of Jesus*” (20:4)
5. The souls in #1 are *of* those described in #2
6. The two reasons given in #3 and #4 are connected by the conjunction *and*.

It would be quite difficult for the ancient reader to miss such strong parallels. There is no reason to assume that these parallels were not intentional. Therefore, the only reasonable conclusion is to understand these two verses as referring to the same group of people. This conclusion aligns well with the fact that the blood of the souls under the altar will only be avenged when Christ physically returns (6:10, 19:2). So, the fact of the matter is that those who are “*souls*” in 6:9 are still in the same immaterial state in the first half of 20:4. This gives strong proof that the rapture could not have occurred between 6:9 and 20:4. This observation presents a significant dilemma for proponents a pre-wrath rapture. If the rapture occurs between 6:9 and 20:4 and bodily resurrection takes place at the rapture (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17), then how could it be possible for the souls in 6:9 to still be described as “*souls?*” in 20:4? If the rapture occurred between these two accounts, we would expect the souls who have been under the altar since 6:9 to have bodies in 20:4, since saints receive resurrected bodies at the rapture. The only way out of this dilemma for the pre-wrath advocate is to argue that these two verses represent two entirely different people groups. However, a very heavy burden of proof lies on the back of anyone who would argue, against the six clear parallels, that those in 6:9 and 20:4 represent two completely different groups.

Revelation 20:4 also presents a significant hurdle for mid and pre-trib advocates. When we look at the entire context of 20:4-6, we find that it is describing two universal resurrections, separated by a thousand-year period of time. From the text, we conclude that every single person who has ever lived will take part in one of these two resurrections. We draw this conclusion out of the text for four reasons. First, John saw two groups of people in verse 4: (1) those on thrones who were given authority to judge, and (2) tribulation martyrs. He then states, “*they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.*” The pronoun “*they*” refers to *both* groups, not just the latter, because it represents those who will reign with Christ in the millennial kingdom. From the immediate context, we cannot assume this will exclude those in the first group who are given authority to judge on thrones. Additionally, from the analogy of faith, we know that *all* saints will reign with Him in His kingdom (e.g. Matthew 19:28, 1 Corinthians 6:2-3, 2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 1:6, 3:21, 5:10). Second, this resurrection is called “*the first resurrection.*” This designation implies that there are no other resurrections prior to it. Some have argued unconvincingly that the first resurrection began at the rapture up to seven years previous and will end in 20:4. Although it is a theologically convenient explanation, there exists no explicit textual evidence to assign the first resurrection to an earlier time.⁶ Thus, it is best to take the text at face value and understand the first resurrection as the physical resurrection of all believers of all

⁵ These are the only two places this phrase occurs in all of Revelation

⁶ Dispensationalists reject covenants and types that are not explicitly named in Scripture. This same practice should be followed regarding the first resurrection.

times, which will fully take place during the time period in view in 20:4 (i.e. after Christ physically returns). The third reason why we can be sure that 20:4-6 portrays universal resurrection is found in verse 6. Here, the ones participating in the first resurrection are described as those who are “*blessed and holy,*” over whom “*the second death has no power,*” who are “*priests of God and of Christ,*” and who “*will reign with Him for a thousand years.*” It is abundantly clear that these four descriptions apply to *all* believers, not just tribulation martyrs (cf. 1:6, 5:9-10 for similar descriptions of believers). The fourth and final reason is in verse 5. Here, there is a parenthetical note that “*the rest of the dead*” (i.e. all unbelievers) will be resurrected physically after the thousand years. This is a sweeping statement designed contrast these two universal resurrections. All who will reign with Christ take part in the first resurrection, and all who will experience the second death in the lake of fire take part in the second resurrection. This verse presents a significant problem for proponents of a pre-trib, mid-trib, or pre-wrath rapture, who require the first resurrection to begin prior to 20:4.

Conclusion

Although Revelation 3:10 is often cited as support for the pre-tribulational rapture view, there are seven reasons why it provides much stronger support for a post-tribulational rapture.

1. On the basis of the apostle John’s use of grammar, the phrase “*tereo ek*” (translated as “*keep...from*” in NASB) is best understood to mean “*preserve/guard from.*”
2. In Revelation, John unambiguously used the phrase “*those who dwell on the earth*” in reference to unbelievers. Since the hour of testing which will come upon the whole earth will be specifically designed by God to judge “*those who dwell on the earth*” (i.e. unbelievers), believers can rest assured that they will be guarded and preserved through it and that they will in no way be the target of God’s anger.
3. Over and over again throughout Revelation, believers are assured that God will not break His promise and that they are safe from God’s judgments, because they have been sealed. If the promise in 3:10 guarantees physical removal from the “*hour of testing,*” then God would be guilty of not keeping His promise with respect to tribulation saints.
4. There are numerous *explicit* references throughout Revelation that only unbelievers will be affected by God’s judgments and saints will be protected.
5. Revelation 3:10 is a promise given to believers. The language used to describe these believers in 3:8-12 is used elsewhere in Revelation to describe tribulation saints.
6. One such parallel, Revelation 6:9-11, in conjunction with 19:2, indicates that the blood of the martyrs will be avenged when Christ returns for His church after the tribulation.
7. Those who are given the promise in 3:10 and are subsequently martyred are seen as souls in 6:9. These same people are still described as immaterial souls in 20:4. Since the physical resurrection will occur at the time of the rapture, and 20:4 describes the physical resurrection of not just the tribulation martyrs but all believers (i.e. “*the first resurrection*”), the rapture could not occur prior to 20:4.

These seven considerations provide compelling reasons to understand “the elephant in the room,” Revelation 3:10, as solid support for a post-tribulational rapture. In fact, this verse, which can be paraphrased as “*Because you are believers, I also will guard/preserve you from the hour of testing that is about to globally come upon all unbelievers in the world,*” contains an amazing double promise – not only will God judge unbelievers; He will guard and preserve believers through it. Of these blessed truths, we can be certain!