

Excursus on Rev. 3:10
“. . .I will keep you from the hour of trial . . .”
10.04.16
mdb

In His letter to the church at Philadelphia (Rev. 3: 7-13) our Lord, Jesus Christ, gave a promise to the church that, “*Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will **keep you from the hour of trial** that is coming on the whole earth, to try those who dwell on the earth*”. There has been much discussion about this promise, its meaning and the time of its fulfillment. Some view this promise as a promise of physical deliverance from the trial mentioned in verse 10 by way of a ‘secret rapture’ of the church just prior to the time of testing mentioned in the verse. Others see this promise as a promise of protection during this time of testing. Which understanding is the right understanding of this promise? And when is ‘the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth’?

In answering these questions, it seems wise to take each question individually so this is the approach taken in dealing with these questions. Let’s take these questions one at a time:

“. . .I will **keep you from the hour of trial** . . .”

A) In answering the question about the meaning of the phrase, “. . .I will keep you from the hour of trial . . .” it is best, first, to consider the phrase itself and compare how this same phrase is used elsewhere in the New Testament. In Revelation 3: 10, the phrase in question in Greek is, “*tereso ek*” (keep from). There is only one other place in the entire New Testament where “*tereso*” is used with “*ek*” and that is in John 17: 15, where Christ prays for his disciples:

“I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one”. In His prayer, Jesus “denies a physical removal from tribulation and affirms a spiritual protection from the devil” (Gundry). The exact Greek phrase in John reads “. . .tereses autous ek tou ponerou”.

Clearly, in this passage, Jesus did not intend that his disciples be delivered out of the world - a world where they would surely face many trials, as he had promised them. Rather, this was a prayer to the Father requesting these disciples be kept through the times when the evil one brought to tests and trials to them. By comparing these two passages, we gain a bit of insight into meanings; and the comparison suggests that Jesus words to the church at Philadelphia in Revelation 3: 10 reflect the same meaning as Jesus words in John 17: 15 - protection spiritually in the midst of the time of testing that is coming on the whole world.

B) When we consider that Rev. 3: 10 has as its OT parallel Daniel 12: 1, 10 LXX, it also seems clear that spiritual protection is in view as believers pass through the time of testing (tribulation). The Daniel passage speaks of the ‘hour of distress’ - the time of tribulation or ‘great tribulation (ESV; NKJV) - when many are tested, with the double affect that believers are purified while sinners go on sinning still. Believers must be present in order to be purified by the trial, in the same way sinners must be present in order for the trial to test them. (For further insight on this see Carson, Beale, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, pg. 1097, note in Rev. 3:10)

Addressing this same question, **Robert Mounce’s** comments on this phrase are helpful. Mounce writes:

“The major question is whether Christ is promising deliverance from the period trial or safekeeping through the trial. The preposition “from” (Gk. ex) is inconclusive. Walvoord holds that “if this promise has any bearing on the question of pre-tribulationism, however, what is said emphasizes deliverance from rather than deliverance through” and “implies the rapture of the church before the time of trouble referred to as the great tribulation”.

The thrust of the verse is against this interpretation. It is precisely because the church was faithful to Christ in time of trial that he will in turn be faithful to them in the time of their great trial. The promise is consistent with the great high priestly prayer of Jesus. . .” (see Jn. 17:15, quoted above).

Mounce continues:

“It is their preservation in trial that is taught. That the martyrs of 6: 9-11 are told to wait for vindication until their full number would be killed indicates that the issue is not physical protection. The spiritual protection of the church is presented elsewhere in Revelation under such figures as sealing (7: 1ff) and flight to the wilderness (12: 6)” (Mounce, The Book of Revelation, pg. 119).

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Further, this understanding fits with other themes found elsewhere in the gospel of John and the Revelation. To this point, **G.K. Beale** observes:

“Other parallels could be mentioned in support of [this understanding]: 1) John 16:33; like Revelation 2–3, uses the ‘overcoming’ theme ironically. Even though believers will experience “tribulation” in the world, they will have “peace” in Christ because he “has overcome the world” (cf. Rev. 3:10, 12a). 2) John 17 also speaks of Christ spiritually protecting or “keeping” His followers “because they have kept your word” (cf, John 17: 6, 11-12; Rev. 3: 8-10). Furthermore, it is unlikely that Rev. 3: 10 is referring to a protection of believers’ physical lives since the preceding letters have focused only on spiritual perseverance, even at the cost of one’s physical life (see 2: 8-11; 2: 13). If 3: 10 is referring to a promise of physical preservation before final resurrection, then it is the only text in the whole book that does.” (Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGNTC, pg. 291

For the reasons given above, I am convinced that the meaning of the phrase in question refers, not to the Philadelphian Christians being removed from either earth or from the area of the trial but rather, that it is a promise that they be kept, as they pass through the trial. This is also the view of most commentators. The exception is found in commentaries written by those who approach this text with a certain pre-supposition. The result of that approach is to attempt to fit this and other texts to their respective eschatological view instead of allowing the scriptural and historical evidences to speak for themselves.

Our next question is, **What is the timing of the phrase “. . . the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.”** What ‘hour of trial’ is Jesus referring to in His letter to the church in Philadelphia?

In considering this phrase, **who is in question** is certain while **the timing of the actual trial referenced** has been debated. What is certain is that the tribulation/testing mentioned refers to tribulation/testing brought about by God, **to test or to punish the ungodly who live on the earth at the time of the test/trial.**

The phrase “those dwelling on the earth” is a term used technically to refer to unbelieving idolaters, who suffer under various forms of retribution, throughout the book of Revelation. For examples, consider Rev. 6: 10 w/ 8: 13; 11: 10; 12: 12; 13: 8, 12, 14; 14: 6; 17: 2, 8. See also Daniel 12: 10. Thus, the trial in view in Rev. 3: 10 refers to **a test or trial which will come upon unbelievers** throughout the world - whether the then known world or the whole planet is in view. In other words, the unbelieving world will be tested according to in Rev. 3: 10.

When will this trial take place? There have been four answers given to the question, “When will this trial take place”.

1st, preterists see the trial as having *already taken place*, at the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This view sees the whole of the book of Revelation as happening in the past (from our perspective). The trials developed in the book took place in the near term future for the churches in Revelation 2 and 3, with the destruction of Jerusalem and dispersion of the Jews by the Romans. This understanding of the Revelation and of the time spoken of in Rev. 3: 10 requires an early composition date for the book of Revelation - a date in the mid-60’s, which would be prior to the destruction of the Temple and of the city of Jerusalem. Because the evidence for a late date of writing - the mid-90’s - is overwhelming, this view is not likely;

2nd, some see the trial mentioned in Rev. 3: 10 as **entirely future**, meaning the trial mentioned in the letter to the church in Philadelphia has yet to be fulfilled; and though many in the US today hold to this particular understanding, this view is also highly unlikely. The letter to the church of the Philadelphians references a trial that those alive in the church in Philadelphia at that time would face. To place the trial mentioned by Jesus as entirely future is illogical at best. Thus view doesn’t fit the context of the letter. .

3rd, some see the trial as **referring to a time of testing which was soon to take place in the late first and early second century**, and which was localized - that is, which came upon the civilized world of that day - the Roman Empire, or even the region in and around Asia Minor. This understanding of the trial of Rev. 3: 10 fits the context of the letter. Understanding the phrase ‘the whole world’ in the sense of the civilized world of the time also parallels Luke’s use of the same phrase in Luke 2: 1, where Luke records how ‘the whole world was required to be registered’.

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In this scheme, the time of trial referenced here referred to **“the terrible persecutions against Christianity on the part of the pagan Roman Emperors who seized ‘all of the world’, as the Roman Empire was then called”** (Archbishop Avery Taushev, *The Apocalypse in the Teachings of Ancient Christianity*, pg. 95). Like the first and second view above, this view has it’s weakness. If this understanding is correct, the time of testing referred to in Revelation 3: 10 is also past tense to us, and ended with the Edict of Milan (c. 313 A.D) by Constantine, which brought an end to the persecution of Christians by granting religious tolerance to the Christian religion.

4th, some see the trial as referring to **the trials and tests which had already begun, and which would continue throughout the present age**, *culminating* in a time of intensified tribulation (known as the great tribulation) just prior to the return of Christ. In this view, the church of Philadelphia was given a promise that they would be kept during the time of trial soon to come upon them. However, the time of trial soon to come upon this church would also characterize the trial, tests and tribulations of the whole church through out the present age.

I would say, then, that the time of trial mentioned in the letter to the Philadelphian church was to *a specific time of trial* that would come upon them shortly after the letter was sent by John to the angel of that church. At the same time, however, this time of trial would be a reflection of the trials and tests of the church throughout the present evil age, culminating in a terrible time of trial which would come upon the whole earth just prior to the return of Christ. Regarding this final period of trial, G.K. Beale observes:

“The tribulation is probably to be seen as having universal effect, since it is to come upon “the whole inhabited earth” (the same phrase has universal reference in 12: 9; 16: 14). It may refer to that final period of escalated tribulation depicted in 11: 7ff and 20: 8ff., in which universal persecution is unleashed against the church (wpa [hour] in 17: 12 is to be identified with this period). Possibly the allusion is to the final downfall and judgement of the ungodly world system at Christ’s last advent, which is also referred to as occurring in an “hour” (see 11:13; 14:7,15; 18:10, 17, 19). Or, it could refer to a trial to come imminently on all Asia Minor or in the limited known world of that time.”

In light of all this, let me leave you with three insights to take home with you tonight. Three truths are certain from Rev. 3: 10ff.:

1st, the time of testing which would come upon the whole world, referenced in Rev. 3: 10 is NOT speaking of the great tribulation per se, though that time of testing was also reflected in Rev. 3: 10;

2nd, the testimony of scripture, whether referring to the great tribulation or to times of trial leading up to the great tribulation, is that Christ *promises to keep the faithful from the evil one and from the times of trials spiritually* as they *pass through times of trial*, and NOT that He promises to remove Christians secretly from the world BEFORE the trial comes. In other words, in the same way the faithful passed through the trials spoken of by the prophet Daniel, so the faithful will pass through the times of trial spoken of in the Revelation, while being cared for and protected By Christ during those periods like Daniel and his friends were in Babylon in Daniel’s day. We therefore have no need to fear times of trial and persecution - Jesus’s words come into play here, where he told his disciples NOT to fear those who could kill the body but had no power over that. Rather, we as His followers are to FEAR He who after He has killed has power to destroy both soul and body in hell.

3rd, Jesus’s words to all the churches provide for us the keys to always be a state of preparedness so that, as we face tribulations in the world, we can persevere in them. What are the keys to preparedness Jesus gives us?

1st, keep up your first love, as a church and as individual Christians (Rev. 2: 4-5);

2nd, Turn away from compromise with the world (2: 14-17; 24);

3rd, Overcome fear by walking close to Christ in prayer, meditation, and intake of the Word (2: 10 cp/w Heb. 12: 1-4);

4th, Stay awake to the times we live in and make Christ and His cause your priority; and make sure your sins are confessed and forsaken by his grace (3: 2-4);

5th, maintain a fervent witness to Christ and the gospel, enduring trial and hardship by the grace God (3: 8b, 10). For the reward from Christ is great indeed.

Consider the words of Christ at the close of letters one to six again (see 2: 7, 11, 17, 26; 3: 5, 12). He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says, to all the churches. Amen!