

“Not Appointed to Wrath”

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1 Thess 5:9

*9 For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,
NKJV*

Many pretribulationists make every attempt to paint a picture of the tribulation so horrible, no Christian could possibly survive it. The entire period is labeled, “the time of wrath.” Then, they introduce 1 Thessalonians 5:9, “*For God did not appoint us to wrath...*” Therefore, a pre-tribulation rapture must be implied. After all, “Jesus would never allow His bride to be dragged through the mud before the wedding!” So the reasoning goes.

This sounds good to modern Christians who have never missed a meal, or slept on the ground. It seems only reasonable, for believers who have service agreements on all their appliances, to be raptured before that awful time. But for the Thessalonian Christians who received this letter, life was not so easy. They were already being persecuted severely for their faith; many had been killed, (1 Thes. 2:14, 2 Thes. 1:4-6). Paul was not telling them they would not have to suffer. They were already suffering.

The Context of 1 Thessalonians 5

1 Thessalonians 5:9 must be interpreted within its context. Paul wrote in verse 2, the “Day of the Lord” is coming as a “thief in the night.” Since the sun and moon will be darkened, “after the tribulation” (Matt. 24:29) but before the “Day of the Lord” (Acts 2:20), it is clear that the “Day of the Lord” is not the tribulation, as pretribulationists claim, but follows it. It is the day of Christ’s coming to judge, after the tribulation. So the context in which Paul made this statement is the judgment that will overtake the wicked at Christ’s return to earth. Paul wrote that “sudden destruction” will overtake the ungodly at that time. The seven year tribulation cannot be characterized as “sudden destruction,” nor can it rightfully be labeled the “Day of the Lord.” During the tribulation the tension builds to the climax when Jesus is revealed from heaven, to destroy the ungodly. This is further developed in 2 Thessalonians 1.

2 Thess 1:4-10

4 so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure,

5 which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer;
6 since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you,
7 and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels,
8 in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.
9 These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,
10 when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.
NKJV

The wicked will be destroyed on the day Jesus is revealed from heaven. And this is when believers will receive “rest” from persecution and trouble. It is within the context of the “Day of the Lord” that Paul wrote, “For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We are not promised exemption from persecution, or even martyrdom. In fact we are promised persecution, (Luke 21:12-19, John 16:1-4,33, 2 Tim. 3:12). But we can be certain, as Paul reassured the Thessalonians, that God will destroy those who persecute us, and deliver His people from persecution. When He comes in judgment, we will be spared, because, “God hath not appointed us to wrath...”

The Wrath of the Tribulation

The tribulation is not exclusively God’s wrath. Some of the events are clearly the result of man’s own behavior. Wars, for example, are instigated by men. Much of the horror of the tribulation is the wrath of Satan (Rev. 12:12). Christians have no promise of exemption from the wrath of Satan or fallen man. No doubt, the great tribulation will be dreadful. Jesus said there has never been anything like it before, nor will there be anything like it again. But Revelation paints a picture of a large group of overcomers emerging from the hour of trial, (Rev. 7:14, Rev. 12:11, Rev. 20:4). Certainly, God's wrath will be unleashed during the tribulation on the followers of Antichrist. But this wrath is specifically said to be selective, not universal. (See: Rev. 9:4, Rev. 16:2, Rev. 16:10).

God's Wrath in the “Church Age”

In Daniel 9:26, Matthew 24:2, Mark 13:2, Luke 19:41-44, and Luke 21:20-24, the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was foretold. According to two of the above passages, Luke 19:41-44 and Luke 21:20-24, this was **God's wrath** on Israel. If it is true that 1 Thes. 5:9 teaches Christians cannot be on earth when God's wrath is unleashed,

why didn't the rapture come before A.D. 70? Forty years into the "Church age" we find God's wrath unleashed without a rapture to heaven of believers! Since God's wrath can be found prior to the tribulation within the alleged "Church age," and Christians were not raptured, there is no logical grounds for demanding a pretribulation rapture in order to keep Christians separate from "wrath" in the tribulation.

In Luke 21, Jesus prophesied about the events of AD70 as well as the end of the age. And He concluded His discourse with the following command to His followers:

Luke 21:36

*36 Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted **worthy to escape all these things** that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."*

NKJV

The clause, "all these things" in the context refers to both the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and the events preceding the second coming of Christ. The question is, what is meant by the word "escape?" This is a critical question, because whatever it means relates to Christians and the tribulation. The meaning of "escape" is clear from both the grammar and historical precedent.

The Greek word translated "escape" is in the active voice. It literally means "to flee." The active voice indicates that the subjects are doing the action of the verb. That is, they are fleeing to safety by their own action. If this referred to a rapture, it would have to be in the passive voice, with an outside force acting upon the subjects, performing the action of the verb.

Historical precedent also defines the word. Since it refers to both the events of AD70 and the events of the tribulation described in this chapter, simply observing what "escape" meant to Jesus' followers in AD70 defines what it must also mean for us regarding the tribulation events. Eusebius records that Jesus' followers living in Jerusalem fled to the mountains when they saw the Roman armies coming to surround Jerusalem. Christians were spared. The Jews who did not believe Jesus were not spared. Therefore, the "escape" promised in this passage to Jesus' followers is not a pretribulation rapture, but relocation on earth in order to survive. Also notice that the "escape" is conditional. We are commanded to watch and pray always, so that we may be found worthy to escape these events. If this referred to a pretribulation rapture, it would not be conditional upon our own actions of watching and praying. The fact is, some Christians are going to fare better than others in the tribulation depending on their attention to this command.

God's People in the Tribulation

The book of Revelation refers the followers of Jesus Christ in the tribulation several times. All rapture views place saints of God on earth during God's wrath. Whether we call them Israel, the Church, or "tribulation saints," is irrelevant.

Rev 12:10-12

10 Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.

11 And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.

12 Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time."

NKJV

Who are these who overcome Satan "by the blood of the Lamb" if not Christians? If a single child of God is on earth at that time, all of the pretribulationists' logic, about 1 Thess. 5:9 demanding a pretribulation rapture to spare believers from "wrath," is nullified. The only way to maintain this distinction is with an artificial (unbiblical) distinction between us and them, and a haughty elitist attitude that we are somehow superior to other saints of God, who are chopped liver and are "appointed unto wrath."

Old Testament Precedent

God has routinely judged the wicked while supernaturally protecting His children at the same time. The precedent set with the plagues of Egypt is important because it establishes God's normal method of judging the wicked. God protected His own people while pulverizing the Egyptians with a series of plagues identical to many of the plagues in Revelation. Other examples could be cited, such as Noah and the flood, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ezekiel 9 describes God's preservation of the righteous during Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem. God never raptured His people before to avoid His wrath, He has supernaturally preserved them through it, or given them the means to protect themselves, such as Noah's ark, the early warning given to Lot, or the Passover. He has even on occasion supernaturally preserved them from the wrath of the enemy. A case in point is the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace.

1 Thessalonians 5:9 means exactly what it says. And God's past precedent proves it to be true, all without any rapture to heaven. The pretribulation argument from this passage is a circular argument, and therefore illogical.