

Who Will Be Kept From The Hour Of Trial?

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As human beings we have an aversion to pain. We try to avoid the uncomfortable, the unpleasant, and the hurtful. Equipped with the capacity to feel both physically and emotionally, we are continually taking stock of what could injure us in our environment. When we know something painful is approaching, our natural tendency is to draw back, skirt around, or run past it—to do almost anything to avoid it.

When we look at the state of the world, considering what is prophesied to happen during the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord, our minds quickly become occupied with thoughts of how we might avoid having to experience those things. Protestantism comforts itself with the myth of a secret rapture—the idea that everyone who has professed Jesus Christ will be spirited away before things grow too bad. Knowing what the Bible says, however, to us that notion is an empty one.

Yet God does make promises of physical protection, so we do have hope. The letter to the church of Philadelphia contains one of the best known: "Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth" (Revelation 3:10).

Before examining this promise, it may be helpful to understand what it does *not* say. Note how conventional wisdom would paraphrase this verse:

Because you consider yourself to be a Philadelphian, and because you are with the church organization that is doing the most to preach the gospel to the world, I will keep you from the hour of trial and will take you to the Place of Safety where you will be protected while all those who disagree with you will go through the Tribulation.

"Conventional wisdom" is not actually wisdom but what is generally held to be true by many, yet it may, in fact, be fallacious. This rendering of Revelation 3:10 is the conventional wisdom in some circles, illustrating how many take narcissistic liberties with this verse. It also shows why there is such an emphasis today on which church group is the best: because we are averse to pain and tend to try to avoid it. Thus, some convince themselves that they will be safe from what lies ahead because they are with the right *church*—rather than being right with *God*. This is extremely dangerous, as it indicates that they trust in the wrong thing.

Patient Endurance

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 are written in large part from a perspective of "if the shoe fits, wear it." In each, Jesus concludes with "he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches"—plural—meaning we should glean all that we can from *each* letter rather than focus on our favorite one.

In this light, a way to approach Revelation 3:10 is that *perseverance* is part of what Christ uses to define who a Philadelphian is. Thus, an individual is a Philadelphian *because* he keeps His command to persevere, in addition to exemplifying the other things He says, such as keeping His Word and not

denying His name (Revelation 3:8). In short, a person cannot conclude that, just because he is fellowshiping with a particularly faithful group, he will be carried along in its positive momentum and benefit from the promise of protection and other blessings. An unfaithful individual in an overall faithful group will reap what *he* sows, not what the rest of the group sows.

Christ says similar things in other places, as in Matthew 10:22: "And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But *he who endures to the end will be saved*" (emphasis ours throughout). He makes no mention of group membership but addresses the enduring individual. Similarly, in Matthew 24:12-13 and Luke 21:36, He emphasizes what we do as *individuals*—our personal faithfulness and endurance—rather than the merits of a particular group. Just as Laodiceanism can be found in each of us regardless of the church we attend, so each of us can persevere and courageously endure no matter where we fellowship.

Revelation mentions patient endurance seven times. At the book's beginning, John sets the tone by introducing himself as "I, John, your brother and companion (sharer and participator) with you in the tribulation and kingdom and *patient endurance* [which are] in Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9, *Amplified Bible*). The construction here is peculiar, but John uses three words to describe one thing—namely, the tribulation that is connected with the Kingdom and which requires patient endurance (see Acts 14:22; II Timothy 2:11-12).

In the letters to the seven churches, several recurring phrases or themes appear. They all contain "I know your works" and "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Five letters contain the command to repent, and "patience" appears four times in three of them, a good indicator of the importance of patience to God's church, especially at the end time.

In addition to the mention in Revelation 3:10, Christ commends the church at Ephesus for its patience:

I know your works, your labor, *your patience*, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and *have patience*, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. (Revelation 2:2-3)

Perseverance—patient endurance—is also a part of the praise that Christ gives to the Thyatiran church: "I know your works, love, service, faith, and your *patience*" (Revelation 2:19).

Patience of the Saints

As the prophecies of the end time unfold, the patience of the saints is highlighted twice more. The first is in Revelation 13:9-10: "If anyone has an ear, let him hear. He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints."

In the preceding verses, John describes the Beast, his power, and his blasphemy. God allows him to make war with the saints and overcome them. This is part of what the saints will have to endure. Some translations, like *The Amplified Bible* and the *English Standard Version* (ESV), end verse 10 with "Here is a *call* for the endurance and faith of the saints," which fits exactly with Christ's "command to persevere" (NKJV) or "[keeping] the word of [His] patience."

The first part of verse 10 can be confusing because, even though the book was written in Greek, John is actually using a Hebrew idiom that signifies the *certainty of approaching judgment*. This can be seen in Jeremiah 43:11; 15:2.

This Hebraism means that it is *so certain* that the Beast will carry out these things that none will escape being involved in some way. Thus, God calls for endurance and faith.

Revelation 14:12 contains another reference to the perseverance of the saints: "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."

The saints are defined as those who keep God's law *and* maintain and give attention to the faith of Jesus. Again, the context is the time when the world will worship the Beast and receive his mark. As in Revelation 13:10, translations such as the ESV render the first part as "Here is a *call* for the endurance of the saints," meaning that, when the saints see this occurring, their endurance and perseverance will be in greatest need.

In Jesus Christ's promise in Revelation 3:10, the core issue is perseverance. The King James reads, "Because you have kept the word of My *patience*," and "patience" is likewise used in the other verses in Revelation. But "patience" tends to make us think of passive activity, which is not what the underlying Greek word, *hupomoné*, actually means. Greek scholar Spiros Zodhiates describes it as "constancy under suffering in faith and duty," and commentator William Barclay defines *hupomoné* as "having the quality to stand, facing the storm, struggling against difficulty and opposition."

Obviously, *activity* is involved; it is not just passively waiting. It describes active, spiritual *resistance*—against Satan, this world, and our own carnality. The most succinct rendering of *hupomoné* may be "courageous endurance." "Cheerful or hopeful endurance" is another good rendering, as it includes a degree of optimism—and when we remember Who is on our side and how this story ends, we have every reason to be optimistic while persevering.

The Hour of Temptation

To put this command into perspective, we must imagine what the world will be like at the time when this letter will be most applicable. A great false prophet will be active, and deception will be so widespread that it will threaten even God's elect. A powerful and blasphemous tyrant will encourage or even command worship of himself, and he will institute financial controls, such that commerce will be essentially impossible without paying homage to him. Yet, it will be our responsibility to be constant and unwavering under the suffering imposed by that system.

Further, it does not appear that the church of God will be unified at that time. Given the various prophecies that describe seven lampstands and seven letters to seven churches, it seems that division will be the norm within the church. Some of the letters in Revelation 2 and 3 indicate a low level of faith and a high level of carnality.

As Jesus says in Matthew 24:12, "Because lawlessness will abound, the love [*agapé*] of many will grow cold." The world does not have any *agapé*, so He must be speaking of the church! True Christians will have to persevere through encroaching sin and dying love *within the church*. The temptation may be great to throw in the towel, to withdraw, to separate from the brethren because of offenses, but doing so would be the opposite of *hupomoné*—of courageously enduring.

The New King James speaks of "the hour of trial," but the King James calls it "the hour of temptation." This is a fitting rendition because during that time it will be tremendously tempting to give up, to give in, to compromise, to let down just a little, to sin (just a little!) in order to make life easier. It will be a time of pressure like never before and thus very easy to become distracted, not just because of the blatant idolatry and religious deception, but also because of the world's increasing attractiveness and pervasiveness.

It does not have to be just a time of fascism and concentration camps. People will be eating and drinking and marrying—having a great time. Revelation 18's description of Babylon focuses on luxury and ease and the avoidance of suffering. Jesus warns in Luke 21:34, "But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and *cares of this life*, and that Day come on you unexpectedly." Distraction leads to idolatry.

Whatever the reality of that time, "persevering" or "courageously enduring" without compromising will certainly be no small accomplishment. Yet Christ says that because some of His people *have been keeping* His command to persevere, He will keep them from the worst of it. They have already proved their faithfulness to Him; He knows where they stand, He sees their track record with Him, and He will not require them to experience *everything* that the rest of humanity will suffer.

In colleges and universities, some professors make the final exam at the end of a semester optional. This means that students take the final only if they need to bring their overall average up. But if a student already has an *A* from other tests and class work, the professor figures the student has already proved himself, and does not require him to take the final exam.

This approach is analogous to Revelation 3:10. If the Christian is already faithfully persevering and resisting the spiritual foes, God may not require that he endure the very hardest test to prove what is in his heart. He has *already* proved it consistently through the course of his life. However, if, like a stereotypical first-year college student, he has frittered away his time, becoming involved in matters having nothing to do with college (even if they are not altogether bad things), he will have to prove where he stands. The final exam in this case is the Great Tribulation and Day of the Lord, so it is in our best interest that we students demonstrate to the Teacher that we are serious *before* the end of the semester.

Perfect and Complete

The word translated "kept" or "keep," used twice, plays into this. This word means "to attend to carefully; to maintain; to guard; to hold fast," and the way that it is used indicates reciprocity. We certainly want *God* to guard, hold fast, and carefully attend *to us*. We would prefer that He guard us and hold us fast *far away* from the destruction and torment that will come upon the world! But the flipside is that He wants *us* to do the same thing—keep, guard, hold fast—with regard to our responsibilities to the covenant.

In other words, if we want God to take an active interest in our well-being during that time, we should understand the principle of reciprocity and take an active interest in Him at *this* time. If we diligently guard the things He has committed to our trust, He will do the same for us.

Jesus' brother, James, provides insight into the perseverance that Christ wants us to have: "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:2-4).

The perseverance that we will increasingly need as the end approaches cannot be developed all at once. Goofing off all semester and then cramming for the final exam rarely works in college, and it certainly will not work where our covenant and relationship with God is concerned. James counsels us to be thankful when our faith is tested, because all of those little exercises of faith not only prepare us for substantial trials, but also make us spiritually complete.

The upshot is that no man has the strength to endure and persevere through what lies ahead. Without God, we are all dead men, physically and spiritually, but because "power belongs to God" (Psalm 62: 11), we can tap into the source of true strength through our relationship with Him. He decides the circumstances of our lives. He alone knows what we need to survive the trials and temptations at the end. More importantly, He knows what we need to be prepared for eternal life.

Remember that God desires godly offspring (Malachi 2:15). He is creating sons and daughters in His image (Genesis 1:26; Romans 8:29). He is using His perfect creative genius to engineer the experiences and circumstances that we need to take on His image and have His eternal character formed in us.

For some, walking with God through the very depths of the end time is what they will need to become "perfect and complete, lacking nothing." A large part of that may be a result of the choices that they make now, and their tendencies toward apathy, complacency, or compromise.

For others who are already keeping His command to persevere, He will keep them from the hour of trial. It does not mean they will not see hardship: They *must* see hardship to endure courageously. But because of their constancy under duress—because God is not a stranger, and they are *already* accustomed to walking through life with Him and drawing upon His strength—they will be given a blessing of protection.