

PRETRIBULATION RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH

It is apparent from study of the Bible that God judges sin. Not only does God's holiness demand it, but certain passages of Scripture reveal such judgment. Old Testament prophets such as Joel, Daniel, Malachi, and Isaiah spoke of a time when God would execute great judgment upon the sin of the world. This time is called "tribulation" by John in the Book of Revelation.¹

Evidently the Christians at Thessalonica knew of this coming judgment and wondered how their new faith in Christ would affect their place in that judgment. This concern, was addressed by the Apostle Paul in the first epistle to the Thessalonians.

The primary focus of 1 Thessalonians is Christ's revelation and reign. In chapter five, Paul instructed the Thessalonian believers to prepare for the great judgment that would precede the reign of Christ in the millennium.

"The gospel preached in the epistle to the Thess. is that of Christ's coming kingdom rather than the cross; for the former best met the Messianic hopes which won Jewish believers to the Christian faith; it also especially comforted the infant church under trials, and in the sacrifice of worldly pleasure and gain."²

Answering the concerns about the tribulational state of the believer, Paul said, "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do."³

It is evident from this statement that it is not God's plan for the believer in Christ to experience the wrath of God during the tribulation period preceding the millennium. An examination of the passage reveals that the *wrath* here is that of the tribulation period, and that God has not appointed the believer to that wrath. God has, however, appointed the believer to a saving possession through Jesus Christ.

¹ Revelation 2:22; 7:14.

² Fausset, A.R.. Bible Encyclopedia, pg.682., Funk and Wagnalls, New York, NY., 1889.

³ 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11.

The word translated *wrath* in this passage is *οργην* (orgain). Its basic definition is anger, indignation, or wrath. It is used in scripture in relation to both man and God. When used to express the wrath of God, it refers more to the *judgment* of God rather than His *emotion*.

As the divine reaction toward evil; it is thought of not so much as an emotion as in terms of the outcome of an angry frame of mind (judgment), already well known to OT history, where it sometimes runs its course in the present, but more often is to be expected in the future, as God's final reckoning with evil.⁴

The definition of Arndt and Gingrich fits well within this context. It is clear that the "wrath" here is "the day of the Lord" mentioned in verse two.⁵ The phrase *the day of the Lord* is used in both the Old and New Testaments to describe a future judgment of God. The Zondervan Bible dictionary defines "the day of the Lord" as follows:

"An eschatological term referring to the consummation of God's kingdom and triumph over His foes and deliverance of His people. It begins at the second coming and will include the final judgment. It will remove all class distinction (Isa. 2:12-21), abolish sins (2 Peter 3:11-13) and will be accompanied by social calamities and physical cataclysms (Matt. 24; Luke 21:7-33).⁶

Some of the other passages of scripture which use "the day of the Lord" are: Joel 2:31; Malachi 4:5; Isaiah 13:9-11; 34:8; and Obadiah 15. These passages all reveal the nature of the *day of the Lord* as a future time of God's judgment upon the sin of the world. Both Matthew and Luke spoke of a wrath yet to come, as did Paul in 1 Thessalonians.⁷

Although Paul in first Thessalonians chapter five, equates the *wrath* of verse

⁴ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 2nd. ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 579.

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:2

⁶ Merrill C. Tenney, The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), p. 204.

⁷ Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7; 1 Thessalonians 1:10

nine with the future *day of the Lord* of verse two, there is another aspect of *οργην* to consider. Not only is there a future wrath, but there is also a wrath of God upon the world *today*. John wrote in his gospel, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.” (John 3:36) That the “wrath” mentioned is currently present and active is evidenced by the tense of the verb *abideth* of John 3:36. John used the Greek word *μενει* (mene), which is the present, indicative, active form of the verb *μενω* (meno), which means “to remain or abide.” The present tense indicates that the unbeliever is currently abiding under the wrath of God.

Not only, then, is the wrath of God a future judgment which will come upon the entire world, but there is also a measure of the wrath of God extended upon every unbeliever of this present age. It is a blessed truth that God is Holy, and that any wrath He may chose to execute will be in line with His holiness and have its end in the ultimate glorification of God.

The significance of the wrath in relation to the Christian is that the Christian is *not appointed unto wrath*. An examination of the Greek word *εθετο* (etheto), translated in this passage “hath appointed”, will reveal the Christian’s relationship to the wrath of God.

The word *εθετο* is the aorist, passive form of the verb *τιθημι* (tethami) which means, “to set, with design, in a certain arrangement or position.”⁸ Arndt and Gingrich define it thus: “Destine or appoint someone to or for something.”⁹ Vine gives “appointed” the more contextual specific definition of “appointment to punishment,” and makes reference to Matthew 24:51 and Luke 12:46.¹⁰

In the passages from the gospels of Matthew and Luke, the word “appoint”

⁸ The Analytical Greek Lexicon, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, n.d.), p. 404.

⁹ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich p. 816.

¹⁰ W. E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words with their Precise Meanings for English Readers (Old Tappan, NJ: Flemming H. Revell Company, 1966.), p. 68.

is used in relation to judgment. Matthew stated that the lord of an evil steward would “appoint *him* his portion with the hypocrites,” where there would be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”¹¹ Luke, in a parallel passage wrote that a master or lord of an unprepared steward would “appoint him his place among the unbelievers. And that servant, . . . shall be beaten with many stripes.”¹² Paul spoke of a similar “appointing” unto judgment.

Paul used the particle οὐκ (ouk) with ἐθετο to negate the action of the verb. Grammatically, the οὐκ ἐθετο is at the beginning of the sentence. This position emphasizes the verb, and makes it clear that the appointment is *not* unto wrath. The conjunction ἀλλ’ (a contracted form of ἀλλὰ), meaning “but,” shows a very strong contrast to the *non-appointment to wrath*. The contrast is that there is an *appointment to obtaining salvation*.

The tense and voice of ἐθετο also reveal some important characteristics of this “appointment.” The verb is in the aorist tense and, though it is translated as an English past-tense, it has greater focus on the *fact* of the appointment than the *time* of the appointment. It is best viewed as a culminative aorist which emphasizes the results existing after the appointment has been made. The voice of ἐθετο is passive indicating that some outside agent is doing the appointing. The context clearly shows that this agent is God.

It is significant that the use of θεος here is articular. When used with the article, a noun is specifically identified, and in this case, Paul made it very clear that the one true God would be the agent of the appointment.

The object of the appointment made by God is man. The spiritual state of the man who is to be appointed determines the appointment that is made. As already seen from John 3:36, all unbelievers abide under the wrath of God. The saved man on the other hand is *not* appointed unto wrath, but is appointed unto a

¹¹ Matthew 24:48-51

¹² Luke 46-47

possession. Paul included himself with the Thessalonian believers saying, “God hath not appointed us to wrath.”¹³

The nature or character of the appointment is either *εις οργην*, “unto wrath” discussed above, or *εις περιποιησιν* “to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul used the same Greek preposition *εις* (*eis*) with both *wrath* and *obtain* so there would be no question about the result of the appointment.

The Greek word translated “obtain,” is the word *περιποιησιν* (*peripoieisen*). It is a noun which Vine defines as “denot[ing] the act of obtaining anything, as of salvation in its completeness; a thing acquired, an acquisition, possession.”¹⁴ As the object of the preposition *εις*, *περιποιησιν* has the more clear meaning of “a possession.” The believer, then, is appointed not unto wrath, but unto a possession.

The possession for the Christian is not just any possession though. It is a possession characterized by its saving nature. The word *σωτηριας* (*soterias*) is used to modify *περιποιησιν* and reveals the quality of the possession. It is a saving possession, and one which comes through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The fact that the possession comes through Christ is clear from Paul’s statement, “*δια του κυριου ημων ιησου χριστου.*” This phrase is translated, “by our Lord Jesus Christ.” That it is a purchased possession is revealed by the phrase, “Who died for us.” Christ, having died for all men redeemed or *purchased*, those who would believe.¹⁵ Though the appointment to the possession is made only for Christians, as they believe, it is clear that it is available all men.¹⁶

For the unsaved man, the appointment has been made. He does, and will

¹³ 1 Thessalonians 5:9

¹⁴ W.E. Vine, p. 126.

¹⁵ 1 Peter 1:18-23; Revelation 5:9

¹⁶ 2 Peter 2:1

continue to experience, the wrath of God. His appointment to wrath was made at conception as he is a sinner outside the family of God.¹⁷

The saved man's appointment occurs at salvation.

Because the wrath of God in the tribulation is sure to come, and He does not intend for the Church to experience that wrath, God must remove the Church from the earth before the tribulation begins. This will be accomplished as the Church is "caught up" to meet the Lord in the air.¹⁸ This "catching up" of believers *before* the tribulation, is called by Bible scholars the *pretribulation rapture of the church*. Author W.E.B. wrote, "Now, as it [tribulation] covers the whole earth, there is no way of escape from it, but to be taken out of the world, and this is accomplished by the Rapture. Acts 15:14, and 1 Thessalonians 4:17, which thus presents a glorious deliverance for the Church."¹⁹

The viewpoints opposing the pretribulation rapture, are erroneous in that they either deny the fact of the future tribulation and millennial reign of Christ on earth, or they deny the teaching of 1 Thessalonians 5:9 and have Christians experiencing the wrath of the tribulation period. Extensive treatment of the various eschatological views of the rapture can be found in Walvoord's Things to Come, where he makes this statement concerning the post millennial and posttribulational views of the rapture: "If either of these two views - the postmillennial or the posttribulational - is correct we must give up the doctrine of the imminent coming of the Lord and must look instead for either a millennium on earth or a time of great tribulation."²⁰ The pretribulation rapture of the church is not only the teaching of Paul from 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11, but of the Scriptures as a whole.

¹⁷ Psalm 51:5

¹⁸ 1 Thessalonians 4:17

¹⁹ W.E.B., Jesus is Coming, (n.p.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1932), p. 79.

²⁰ John F. Walvoord, The Return of the Lord, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Dunham Publishing Co., 1955), p. 49.

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