

The Way of Escape

Divine Protection in the Last Days

Your Bible foretells a time of global turbulence such as this world has never known—a time when men’s hearts will fail them for fear—a time when humankind will appear to have become an *endangered species*! And from all indications, we are living on the brink of that time! Is all hope of survival lost? Or is there a *way of escape*?

Jesus Christ commands His true disciples to “*Watch*”—to remain alert, awake, *vigilant*—“for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore *be ye also ready*: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh” (Matthew 24:42–44). Because we do not know the hour of His coming, says Jesus, we are to live our lives in anticipation of His return to this earth, *regardless* the conditions we see around us!

While we cannot set dates or pinpoint the precise time of Christ’s return, we *can* see trends and conditions—even specific events in some cases—that indicate we’re moving closer and closer to the turbulent *time of the end*. It may well be that we are living in that time just preceding the prophesied Great Tribulation! “For then shall be *great tribulation*,” Jesus warned, “such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be!” (Matthew 24:21).

No other time in human history will compare with the coming “tribulation” period! Religious persecution, war, famine, and massive disease outbreaks—all pictured in the famous “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” (Revelation 6)—will reach an all-time high, claiming *millions* of lives!

How utterly *terrifying*! If we find ourselves in that prophesied time of distress, will it be too late to turn to God in heart-rending *repentance*, with hope that He will deliver us from the horrors of that time? Is there any hope, any promise in God’s Word, that He will provide *protection* to His people during the coming Great Tribulation and Day of the Lord?

Listen! To the House of Israel, God says: “When thou art *in* tribulation, and all these [horrible] things are come upon thee, *even in the latter days* [perhaps

the days just ahead], if thou turn to the LORD thy God, and shalt be obedient unto His voice; (for the LORD thy God is a merciful God;) *He will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee*, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which He sware unto them” (Deuteronomy 4:30–31).

Yes, there *is* a promise of protection! But notice: That promise is given to those who are willing to turn to God with their whole hearts—those who will *REPENT* of their sins and *OBEY* God!

But let’s understand what God’s Word says about divine protection during the coming tribulation period—for some have misunderstood.

The Church of Prophecy

Many evangelicals believe that the seven churches of Asia (Revelation 23) represent seven successive “eras” of ecclesiastical history, beginning with the apostolic era and ending with the “Laodicean” era. The seven churches have been matched with important persons, groups, and movements—the apostolic church, the pre-Nicene church, the Waldenses, the Reformation, and so on—and have been interpreted variously.

Some believe the “Laodicean era” began in 1900; others believe the Philadelphia and Laodicean “eras” will exist together in the end-time, but the Laodicea church, because of its “lukewarm” condition, will be forced to endure the horrors of the tribulation period, while the Philadelphia church will dwell in a “place of safety.”

But the “church eras” concept is purely speculative. A more likely explanation is that all seven churches—not just one or two—are a *type* of the true Church of God in the end-time.

Notice that end-time language is found throughout the letters to the seven churches:

To the church of Ephesus, Christ says, “[R]epent, and do the first works, or else *I will come unto thee*

quickly" (Revelation 2:5). To the church in Pergamos, He says, "Repent; or else *I will come unto thee quickly*, and will fight against them [the Balaamites and Nicolaitanes] with the sword of my mouth" (2:16).

To the Thyatirans, Christ says, "Behold, I will cast her [Jezebel] into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into *great tribulation*, except they repent of their deeds" (2:22); and, "But that which ye have already, hold fast *till I come*" (verse 25).

To the church in Sardis, He says, "If therefore thou shalt not watch *I will come unto thee as a thief*, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee" (3:3). And to the Philadelphia church, Christ says, "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the *hour of temptation [trial]*, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth" (3:10).

Consider the following: (1) The book of Revelation is a book about the end-time; it does not present a gradual unfolding of history. (2) End-time language—references to Christ's coming, to "great tribulation," and to the "hour of trial"—is found throughout the letters to the seven churches. (3) The seven churches of Asia existed side-by-side—at the same time—when John received the Revelation. Logically, the seven churches represent the true church, with its strengths as well as its weaknesses, in *the time of the end*. (While the seven churches serve as a type of the church in the end-time, the messages to the churches were obviously meant for all God's people, from the apostolic period onward.)

As you read the letters to the churches, you will note that Christ promises protection to some, but warns others of loss of protection. Those who are not "watching"—those who are allowing themselves to slip into spiritual slumber and compromising with sin—are sternly warned of loss of protection, while those who "hold fast" and keep "the word of [His] patience" are promised protection.

So, yes, God does promise protection to the faithful—to those who are willing to turn to Him with their whole hearts. But understand this: *Divine pro-*

tection does NOT mean immunity from all pain, suffering, and death! The church will NOT be "snatched out," or "raptured," at the beginning of the Great Tribulation! Nor will it (the global church) "flee" to some single "place of safety"!

The message to the seven churches reveals that there will be strongly convicted Christians as well as false Christians in the end-time; that there will be divine protection as well as loss of protection; that some will suffer as Christians, and some will die as Christian martyrs.

During the tribulation period, the true church will be—as it has always been—*scattered* throughout the earth! Both Christ's Olivet prophecy and the book of Revelation reveal that true Christians—*deeply converted* Christians, not "lukewarm Laodiceans"—will endure much persecution *during* the tribulation period!

Yes, some will *suffer* for a time! Some will *die* as martyrs! But there is NO reason to assume that those who suffer and die for Christ's sake are spiritually inferior. In fact, the faithful witnesses who endure suffering will doubtless be those who are *able*

to endure—for God "will not suffer [allow] you to be tempted [tested] above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make *a way to escape*, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Christ calls Antipas (of the Pergamos church) "*my faithful martyr*" (Revelation 2:13), and counsels the *loyal* Smyrna church (note that nothing is said against this church!) to "*be faithful unto death*" (2:10). And remember, these examples are for the *end-time church!*

In Revelation 6, John sees the loosing of six of the "seven seals." The "fifth seal" pictures the Great Tribulation and *martyrdom of saints*. Notice: "And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a

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little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that *should be killed as they were*, should be fulfilled" (verses 9–11).

Are these martyrs the "Laodiceans" who did not "qualify" for some "place of safety"? If so, then Stephen must have had a "Laodicean attitude," for he was killed for Christ's sake (Acts 7). Peter, too, must have been a bit "lukewarm," for he died a martyr's death (John 21:18–19)—and, apparently, so did the other apostles, with the possible exception of John.

But John, though he apparently escaped martyrdom, experienced his share of suffering. He calls himself "your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9).

Paul wrote, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are *killed* all the day long: we are accounted as sheep for the *slaughter*. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us" (Romans 8:35–37).

Who are the "we" and "us" who are "killed all the day long" and are "more than conquerors"? Are they the sick Laodiceans, the "lukewarm" Christians who have their minds on worldly things? NO! OF COURSE NOT! They are the *faithful* servants of God whose *convictions* are so strong they are *able* to endure suffering, and are willing to lay down their lives for Christ's sake and for the gospel!

The "two witnesses" (Revelation 11) are such persons—and they will lay down their lives for Christ's sake!

Speaking of things to expect in coming days, Jesus said, "Then shall they deliver *you* up to be afflicted, and shall kill *you*: and *ye* shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake" (Matthew 24:9). He was speaking to the apostles—those who would do the *work of God*—and, by extension, to those who would do the work of God in the end-time!

All true Christians will rise to meet the returning Christ, but notice which group John singles out in his description of the "first resurrection": "And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshiped the

beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived [were made alive—resurrected] and reigned with Christ a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4).

These faithful martyrs are men and women of *conviction!* They are not "slumbering" Laodiceans; they are people of *strong faith*—people who have the wherewithal to stand up for the truth, to say "No!" to the "beast" and his evil cohorts!

So, let's seek a proper balance as we approach this subject. God *does* and *will* provide protection for His people. But many scriptures reveal that God's people are not immune to suffering and death. The following are a few:

Revelation 14:12–13: "Here is the *patience* of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus. And I [John] heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, *Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord* from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may *rest* [in the "safety" of death] from their labours; and their works do follow them."

James 1:2, 12: "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.... Blessed is the man that endureth temptation [trial]: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him."

Romans 8:16–18: "[W]e are the children of God: And if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we *suffer* with Him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the *sufferings* of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

1 Peter 1:7: "That the *trial of your faith*, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."

Matthew 5:11–12: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for *so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.*"

Hebrews 11:35–38: "Women received their dead

raised to life again: and others were *tortured*, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection. And others had trial of cruel mockings and *scourgings*, yea, moreover of *bonds and imprisonment*: They were *stoned*, they were *sawn asunder*, were tempted, were *slain* with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being *destitute, afflicted, tormented*; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”

We could go on with scripture after scripture showing that the faithful have always suffered under the hands of wicked men. Their faith has not been weakened, but has been strengthened and perfected through the “refining fires” of trial and tribulation. And their suffering has served as a powerful *witness* to a Godless, unbelieving world.

Peter, Paul, and Stephen were killed! James, brother of John, was killed! Countless Christians of the first century were imprisoned, tortured, murdered! Later, pagan Rome persecuted the church, killing thousands. And still later, false Christians, Muslims, and atheistic Communists persecuted the true people of God.

Many are the martyrs of Jesus! And God’s Word plainly reveals that another martyrdom of saints is coming!

As we have noted, *there is a promise of protection for God’s people*—BUT, let’s understand that God’s promise of protection does *not* mean that the faithful saints will be immune to persecution and martyrdom! There is *no* promise of a secret hideaway, desert kingdom, or wilderness wonderland that will shelter the “good” saints from all pain and suffering.

The Woman in the Wilderness

Now, turn to Revelation the twelfth chapter, and let’s note an example (though highly symbolic) of divine protection:

John writes, “And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars” (verse 1).

Who is this “woman”? Some point out that (1) the sun, moon, and the stars match Joseph’s dream in Genesis 37:5–11—the sun and moon representing Joseph’s parents, the stars representing the sons of Jacob; that (2) God calls Israel a “woman”; and that

(3) it was Israel (Judah) that “brought forth a man child [Christ]” (Revelation 12:5). The woman, then, seems to represent Israel.

Others, however, point out that the New Testament church is described as a woman (Galatians 4:26); that Christ, the “Sun of Righteousness,” clothes the church (Romans 13:14); and that the twelve stars correspond to the twelve apostles. According to this interpretation, the woman represents the church.

Actually, it makes no difference which interpretation you agree with—for the *literal* woman, Mary, who gave birth to the “man child,” was an Israelite. She symbolizes the “Israel” (the righteous remnant) to which Christ was born.

Once the “man child” was “caught up unto God” (verse 5), the woman (Mary) became a part of the New Testament Church of God.

Therefore, regardless which interpretation we agree with, the “woman” who “fled into the wilderness” (verse 6) represents the New Testament church—*spiritual* Israel.

Now, notice what happens to the church: “And the woman [church] fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days” (verse 6).

Some say this 1,260-day period refers to 1,260 *years*—from AD 554 to 1814—a period of intense persecution, when the true church was “underground.” During this time, the church’s “place” was not a single place in some remote corner of the world, but involved lands in many countries. Verse 6 is a symbolic confirmation of the promise of Jesus in Matthew 16:18: “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” In other words, God will always provide a means of preserving His true church.

While God did preserve His church during the 1,260-year period, *martyrdom continued to occur!* Can we expect that the coming tribulation period will be any different?

Verses 7–11 (Revelation 12) tell of the celestial war and resultant casting out of Satan. This is yet future—at the very beginning of the Great Tribulation.

Where are the saints at this point? Are they hidden away in a “place of safety”? Have they been “raptured” from the earth? *No!* The next verse shows that they are still here on Planet Earth, and

are still having to contend with the devil:

“And they [the “brethren”—see verse 10] overcame him [the devil] by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and *they loved not their lives unto the death!*”

Notice verse 13: “And when the dragon [the devil] saw that he was cast unto the earth, he *persecuted* the woman [the church] which brought forth the man child.”

Throughout this entire scenario, there is no mention of the church being “snatched out.” Rather, we find that when the devil is cast down, the church is still here—in plain view—and is persecuted by the devil!

But God will not allow the devil to destroy His church—for He has promised that the “gates of hell” would never prevail against it. Notice the next verse:

“And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle [symbolic of God’s protection—Exodus 19:4], that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent.”

Did you notice the similarity between verses 6 and 14? The “time, and times, and half a time” doubtless refers to the final three-and-one-half years before the Second Coming; but both verses *may* refer to both the 1,260-year period as well as the 1,260 *days*, or three-and-one-half years, of the end-time.

Obviously, both accounts are symbolic. We all agree that the “woman” and “eagle” are symbolic. Why should we assume that the “place” is a *literal* place confined to certain, very limited, geographical boundaries? If the church’s “place” during the 1,260 years was not a single, literal place, why should we assume that the “place” during the 1,260 *days*—the three-and-one-half-year period preceding Christ’s return—will be any different?

In verse 17, the devil, following another failed attempt to destroy the woman (verses 15–16), turns his attention elsewhere. “And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the *remnant of her seed*, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

What people “keep the commandments of God” and have “the testimony of Jesus Christ”? The Muslims? Buddhists? No! This can only be describing *Christians*—members of God’s true church!

The “woman” and the “remnant of her seed” (or “rest of her offspring”—the “man child” being her first) are the true church and her children. These descriptions of the serpent’s attempts to destroy the woman symbolically portray the devil’s efforts throughout history to destroy the true church. The dragon’s pursuit of the woman’s children symbolically describes the devil’s pursuit of true Christians in the last days.

Make no mistake about it, the end-time remnant—the “rest of her offspring”—is *not* a group of lazy, weak-kneed milquetoasts who cry uncle at the first hint of discomfort. These are the FAITHFUL—those who keep God’s commandments and hold tenaciously to the truth of God’s Word *in spite of severe persecution!*

Perhaps the scenario of the “woman” and her flight to safety alludes to the flight of the Nazarenes (Jewish Christians) from Jerusalem to Pella (in AD 67) as a *type* of the events of history wherein God prevented the advancing “gates of hell” from prevailing against His church. In any case, the Revelation 12 depiction of the woman and her children refers to the church universal (the Bride of Christ) and individual members that make up the true church.

Verses 6 and 14 tell us clearly that God does provide protection for His people, but by no means prove that the global church will flee to a single “place of safety.” When Christ comes, He will “send His angels...and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matthew 24:31)—*not* from a single area!

Divine Protection: How? From What?

Many people do not realize that there is a difference between the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord. The Great Tribulation, pictured in the “fifth seal,” begins when Satan is cast down to the earth. “Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! For the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a

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short time" (Revelation 12:12). The Day of the Lord is pictured in the "seventh seal," and follows the "heavenly signs" (sixth seal). It is the day of God's wrath, when He will pour His fury upon unrepentant, sinful humanity.

In Revelation 7, the Day of the Lord is delayed until the 144,000 are "sealed...in their foreheads." The 144,000 are defined as "the servants of our God" (verse 3). They are the true "Israel of God," the church militant, or church in a world ruled by wicked principalities and powers. The scenario draws from the imagery of Ezekiel 9:1-6, where those who "sigh and cry" over the "abominations" committed in Jerusalem receive a mark on their foreheads to set them apart for protection during the time of divine retribution (see Revelation 9:4)

The Day of the Lord is *corrective* in nature; its primary purpose is to bring men to repentance. Obviously, God will not pour out His fury upon His own people. This time of God's wrath—which will probably begin about one year before the Second Coming—is mentioned many times in Bible prophecy, and is possibly the end-time manifestation of the "hour of trial" of Revelation 3:10. (The divine visitations of history foreshadow the final Day of the Lord.)

God's promise of protection, then, certainly applies to the time of God's wrath—the great and terrible *Day of the Lord!*

Now, let's turn our attention to a scripture that, when understood, will give us important information on *how* God will protect and deliver His people during the coming tribulation period.

Jesus Christ said, "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted *worthy to escape* all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man" (Luke 21:36).

Some claim that the "unworthy" will be left out when the church "flees" to a "place of safety." But is this what Jesus meant when He spoke of being "worthy to escape"?

The Greek word *kataxioo* means "to count worthy," and is translated accordingly in Luke 21:36. However, according to Vine, the word *katischuo*, rather than *kataxioo*, appears in the "most authentic" manuscripts (W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 891). *Katischuo* means

"to be strong against," or "prevail." Many translators render Luke 21:36 accordingly.

The *New American Standard Bible* renders the verse this way: "But keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

The *New English Bible* reads similarly: "Be on the alert, praying at all times for strength to pass safely through all these imminent troubles and to stand in the presence of the Son of man."

Note that carefully! We are to watch and pray so that we will have *strength* to escape the turbulent times ahead! If God's people are going to be whisked away in a "secret rapture," why do they need *strength*, or *prevailing power*, to escape the coming troubles? The use of "strength" (*katischuo*) suggests that Christ's end-time followers will be called upon to endure a certain amount of the trying times ahead.

When all is said and done, there is only one real "place of safety," only one Source of permanent security—and we can count on Him every time!

Further, "escape," when defined as "to flee out of a place or condition," suggests that one has to first be *in* the place or condition. In this sense, escaping suggests "making it to the other side," which involves a certain degree of ability, or strength, on the part of the one attempting the escape. Perhaps the *New English*

Bible most adequately captures Jesus' intent: "praying at all times for strength to *pass safely through* all these imminent troubles" (emphasis added).

In AD 67, God enabled the entire Jerusalem church to flee the doomed city before it was too late. He has provided similar help throughout the ages, and will do so again in the time of the end. But sometimes *escaping* tribulations involves *enduring* them to some extent.

God is faithful to give us the strength—everything we need—to endure such troubling times. *This is one of the ways God delivers us from evil!*

Clearly, "escape" does not mean to be "snatched out"; nor does it suggest that the church, or any part of it, will be immune to persecution or martyrdom. In the time of the end, God's people—as they have in all other periods of history—will be empowered to "endure to the end" in the face of hatred, lawlessness, persecution, and trials of various sorts.

So, how does God protect and deliver His people?

Let's briefly review:

(1) In certain cases, God directly intervenes and shields His people from harm, or from certain levels of pain and suffering. He will not allow His people to be tested with more than they can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13).

(2) God says, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord" (Revelation 14:13). In some cases, the state of death is a "place of safety."

(3) God delivers us from turbulent times by giving us the strength we need to *pass through* them.

(4) God will protect His own from divine wrath by "marking" and "passing over" them, as He did for the children of Israel in Egypt (Exodus 12). The Day of the Lord is the day of God's wrath. Obviously, He will not pour out His fury upon His own Spirit-begotten children.

As we have seen, God will preserve His people throughout the tribulation period; will not allow the "gates of hell" to prevail against His church. But, as

we have noted, some will be called on to provide a powerful witness and a warning to the world. Many of these—as the prophets of old, the apostles, and countless disciples from the first century onward—will lay down their lives for Christ and His gospel.

We all want divine protection during the turbulent times ahead, but let's *never forget* that the most important deliverance God offers is not deliverance from pain and suffering in this life, but deliverance from the bondage and penalty of *sin!*

Where do *you* stand? Is *physical* salvation more important to you than *spiritual* salvation? Jesus says, "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:25).

When all is said and done, there is only one *real* "place of safety," only one Source of *permanent* security—and we can count on Him every time!

"I am with you always," He says, "even unto the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

For further reading...

Should You Expect a Secret Rapture? (ESR)

The Church of God In Prophecy (CGP)

The Seven Churches of the Apocalypse (SCA)

Can You Understand Bible Prophecy? (UBP)



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