

Good Examples

1 Thessalonians 1:6—10

The Thessalonians enthusiastically accepted Paul's preaching as he traveled on his second missionary journey. Having just come from Philippi, where he was beaten and jailed without cause, he came to Thessalonica and preached in the synagogue. According to Acts 17:2 he was there for only three weeks before unbelieving Jews banded together and chased Paul and his traveling companions out of Thessalonica into Berea.

During this short time many Thessalonians came to believe and formed a strong bond with Paul. Their enthusiasm for the Lord didn't waiver in spite of going through tribulations for their belief (verse 6). In spite of being persecuted in the name of the Lord, they never waived but continued to joyfully serve Him. Joy can only come from the Holy Spirit as can be seen from Galatians 5:22. Joy is a decision based on our inward condition, our relationship with Christ. Happiness is born out of exterior events. True joy can only be experienced by a believer. These Thessalonians had a genuine and growing faith that resulted in an inexplicable (to outsiders) joy. This is the same joy we can experience if we so desire (Romans 14:17; 15:13).

As Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians he was likely headquartered in Corinth and the Thessalonian believers were probably spiritually no more than a year old. Yet, Paul was holding these young believers up as examples for believers throughout Greece and beyond to imitate. Many of them were idol worshippers. This was all they knew until Paul introduced them to the Gospel of Grace. It seems obvious that they realized their dead idols were not able to give them what a living Savior could. They recognized immediately that Jesus Christ was no match for their impotent idols. They latched on to Paul's presentation of a resurrected Savior and continued their Christian growth, so much so that their faith was well known throughout the whole region.

The wrath to come

As always, there are a number of ways people interpret this verse. These interpretations often have more to do with ones' core belief system than what Scripture actually says about it. There are two main groupings in fundamental Christianity, Covenant (reformed) and Dispensational. Those who adhere to a reformed theology (such as R. C. Sproul, John Piper, Wayne Grudem, James Kennedy) tend to view God dealing with mankind through covenants. They often see Israel's promises being transferred to today's church. From an eschatological standpoint, the next event on the prophetic calendar is the Second Coming. At Christ's coming, the Church will be caught up to meet Him then brought back down to earth, the Great White Throne Judgment will occur and believers will live forever in the Kingdom. This is a very simplified and general view of their beliefs and they do vary somewhat on the details.

Dispensationalists stand in contrast to the reformed viewpoint. They see God dealing with mankind in different ways at different times. In general, a Dispensationalist sees a distinction between how God deals with Israel and how He is dealing with the Church today. They also often understand the order of future events to include a Rapture, the Tribulation, the Millennial Kingdom, the Great White Throne judgment and the eternal state (in that order).

It should be obvious that while Dispensationalist often understand the wrath to come is the Tribulation, Reformed Theologians would reject this because they reject the idea of a seven-year Tribulation. They interpret the wrath to be hell. Both groups claim Scripture backs up their particular belief system. When Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 that Jesus rescues us from the wrath to come then emphasizes the point in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 by saying that God did not destine us for wrath but

for obtaining salvation, should we be thinking of the Tribulation or of hell? The answer, I believe, is found by comparing Scripture with Scripture.

John the Baptist was well aware of the wrath that was to come. He asked the self-righteous Pharisees and Sadducees that had come out to where he was baptizing if they were trying to escape the wrath to come by claiming Abraham was their father and therefore their savior (Matthew 3:7). In reality, all of Israel was going to go through the coming wrath. This was brought out in Matthew 3:11 when John said he baptized in water but Christ will baptize them in fire—a hint of the coming Tribulation.

Peter warned Israel of this coming Tribulation in Acts 2. Those events were connected with the prophetic events of Joel 2. It is described as a day of darkness and gloom, of clouds and thick darkness. It is an event that is so catastrophic that it has no comparison. But Joel says following this will come the Day of the Lord, the Second Coming (verse 31). By comparing Joel 2:31 with Matthew 24:29 there is no doubt that the cosmic events will be a sign of the Second Coming. This coming tribulation is pictured in Isaiah 60 and described as a deep darkness but a great light will shine after this in the Millennial Kingdom. These verses give a clear order of events.

Jeremiah 30:11 gives a synopsis and purpose of the Tribulation. It is about God pouring out His wrath on the world because they are evil and a time of chastisement for Israel. It is a time of purging and purification getting them ready for the Millennial Kingdom (see also Ezekiel 20:36; Zechariah 13:8—9). Jeremiah 32:37 says that after pouring out his wrath on Israel that God will regather her into the land promised to her. Jeremiah 30 1—9 shows the final results of what God wanted to accomplish.

Refiner's fire

Malachi 3 gives additional details saying that God will send His messenger (John the Baptist) then the Lord will suddenly come to His temple (at the Second Coming). Verses 2 and three fill us in on what happens between these two events. The Tribulation will be characterized as a refiner's fire, taking all of Israel and purifying her so that they will be made righteous. Those in Israel who are not believers will be purged from Israel during the Tribulation. Notice that all of Israel will be going through this time of wrath but only a select few will come out the other end as refined Israel.

From the above, it's now possible to decide if the wrath is hell or the Tribulation. Notice that all of Israel, believers and unbelievers, are going to go through the wrath. If this wrath is hell then it would appear that all of Israel will be going to hell but believers will be taken out and brought into the Millennial Kingdom. This, of course, is bad doctrine whether Reformed or Dispensational.

What about the Church?

There are many who either think the Church will go through at least part of the Tribulation or they just don't know because they are so confused by conflicting doctrines. The answer, I believe, lies in separating truth given to Israel from truth given to the Church, the Body of Christ. It's only possible to show the Church will go through the Tribulation when doctrine intended for Israel is mixed in with doctrine intended for the Church.

For previous notes and additional mid-Acts materials please visit www.MidActsTruths.com