

Revelation 1:9 “Left Behind or Left Banished?”

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The movie, *Left Behind*, is an American apocalyptic thriller starring Nicolas Cage based on the best-selling novel, *Left Behind*. Some 50 million *Left Behind* items sold—books, videos, comics. The 2014 movie, however, was not as well-received. Indeed, critics slammed it. *Rotten Tomatoes* rated it as a 1 out of 10. *Entertainment Weekly* criticizes, “At best, *Left Behind* is shoddily made sensationalist propaganda—with atrocious acting—that barely registers as entertainment. At worst, it profoundly moronic” (Wikipedia). I could not agree more. The plot is about the end of time, focusing on the sudden disappearance of Christians around the globe due to a secret rapture. Christ secretly returns and whisks away His believers, taking them into heaven with Him. People everywhere simply vanish. The world is *left behind* in an uproar. A mother in the shower, gone, her jewelry *left behind* where she was just standing. Shoppers at the mall suddenly disappear, their clothes *left behind*. Cars driven by Christians are instantly driverless and plow through buildings. Passenger jets, flown by Christian pilots, are suddenly pilotless and crash. World-wide panic sets in.

Well in our text today, we find a man whom some would say is *left behind*. He, however, insists otherwise. He is not *left behind*, he is left banished. When we examine the text, we learn *since the tribulation is the present experience of the Church, then you should prepare to suffer for Christ*.

John’s Situation in Life

We are still establishing the context. The author and his life situation. We have alluded to the author, mentioned twice already, vv. 1, 3. Verse 9, I, John... Notice there is no other self-description. No introduction. He doesn’t claim that he is “John from Colossae, the friend of Epaphras.” No other identification but his name. Which indicates that this author is well known to his readers to the extent that he doesn’t need to introduce himself. Obviously, he is someone whom they all know. A man that possesses great authority in the early church. The author is not a random John. Important, some (Marcion) reject the *Apocalypse* as Scripture because they’re uncertain about the identity of this John. Speculation ranges from John the Baptist to an elder from the Ephesian Church named John. Others even suggest that the author is Cerinthus, the anti-Christ of apostles’ day. So it is important to note that the sender simply signs his name as *John*. Which means that the original audience, the seven churches to which he writes doesn’t need his bio. For the first century believers know that the author is no one less than John the apostle, the disciple whom Jesus loved. The brother of James, the son of Zebedee. The same author of the *Gospel according to John*, the three epistles that bear his name, *First John, Second John, Third John*.

The internal evidence is confirmed by the testimony of the early church. Irenaeus (AD 180) claims that this letter is written by the apostle. Why significant? Because Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, who in turn was a student of the apostle John. Polycarp grew-up in the apostle’s congregation. Polycarp’s student, Irenaeus, maintains that this letter was written by the apostle, late in the reign of Domitian AD 95-96. Here we find John the old man, the aged apostle toward the end of his life. Some 60 years after Christ ascended into heaven. Much has happened in these decades. All the events recorded in the *Book of Acts*: The conversion of Saul of Tarsus,

his missionary journeys, the expansion of Christianity from Jerusalem through Greece to the very heart of the Empire, the capital city of Rome. John, the elderly apostle is not in Jerusalem any more. Jerusalem was destroyed, leveled in AD 70 by the Roman General Titus, 25 years prior to this time. John long ago left Jerusalem and traveled to Ephesus where he lives his final years. Yet we don't find him in that cosmopolitan city.

Where is he? Verse 9, I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos. Where in the world is Patmos? What is John doing there? Patmos is an island in the Aegean Sea. The Aegean is an inlet of the Mediterranean Sea between Greece and Turkey. John doesn't come to this little island to retire and live the rest of his life in leisure on the coast. He is not on a Mediterranean cruise, that ports at Patmos to enjoy the sights and seabreeze. Patmos is a remote island. 40 miles off the west coast of modern Turkey. Small strip of earth. 10 miles long and 5 miles wide. Rocky island, very rugged terrain, windswept, barren, desolate. The Roman authorities use it as a penal colony, a prison. Patmos is the ancient Alcatraz of the Aegean. No escape. The inmates are used as forced labor in the stone quarries. Such seems to be John's sentence. Detect at the end of verse 9, I, John...was on the island of Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. John is on Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. That doesn't mean that he goes there voluntarily to preach the word of God. To the contrary, he is sent there as a punishment for preaching. Exiled to Patmos as the penalty for his teaching ministry and faith in Christ. John was living in Ephesus, but is now banished. The Roman governor interprets his teaching as seditious, dangerous. A threat to the law and order of the Empire. John declares that there is a Lord other than Caesar. He will not confess that "Caesar is Lord" but insists that "Jesus is Lord." Some revolutionary Nazarene who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and whom John claims rose from the dead. Christ crucified is foolishness in the eyes of the governor as well as the Greeks (1 Cor. 1:23). Therefore the governor banishes John from Ephesus in an attempt to stop the spread of this dangerous sect of Christians. For John, as the last living apostle, is now leader of the early church. So the authorities think if they get rid of John, they rid the world of Christianity. At least, it would seem. Strike the shepherd, the sheep scatter. So in order to decapitate Christianity, John is cut off from the churches and exiled to Patmos. His sentence: You shall serve in the rock quarries. That is his punishment. "Go, dig in the dirt until you die." So here we find the aged apostle, on Patmos the prison island. Uncertain of his future. No idea what will happen to him.

Exile During the Tribulation

In this context, it is important to notice how John refers to his exile. This is what we want to focus on for the rest of the time. It is absolutely critical for the survival of Christianity to understand how John views his banishment. Extremely urgent for our own personal perseverance in the faith. How does John refer to his prison time on Patmos? Verse 9, I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation... The Greek word is θλίψις which is correctly translated as "tribulation." So the ESV is excellent here. As confirmed by other English versions of Bible. *I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation* (Rev 1:9 NAS). *I, John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation* (Rev 1:9 RSV). This concept tribulation is clarified all the more with the definite article, *the*. As in *the tribulation*. Why does he refer to his exile as occurring in *the tribulation*? Why not use the word "tribulation" by itself? "I, John, your brother and partner in tribulation." Why employ the definite article *the*? *The tribulation*. Because

John's exile is an experience of tribulation about which every Christian should know, a particular time of tribulation, a period of great distress and trouble (Dan. 12:1). Which from John's perspective, begins during his lifetime, the first century age of the apostles. According to the Apostle John, he is living in the tribulation.

This is just all too weird for American evangelicals. Not what we saw in the movie, *Left Behind*. Some have never even heard this view. That is because the predominant teaching within the American evangelical church today states that the tribulation is future. The 7 years immediately preceding the Second Coming of Christ. Furthermore, it is taught that believers won't even see the tribulation. In the *Left Behind* movie, believers are secretly raptured by a secret return of Christ. Christians worldwide suddenly vanish from the earth. So they won't be here during the tribulation. Only unbelievers, *left behind* during the tribulation. This interpretation of Christ's coming is known as a pre-tribulation view because it teaches that Jesus will return *before* the tribulation, or *pre-tribulation*. This view is what I was weaned on. In my youth, I lived in Germany and didn't have access to an American church so I listened to pre-tribulation teaching on cassette tapes. Totally convinced that the rapture was so close that I didn't need to do homework since I would be secretly raptured before I reached college age. So you can imagine how shocked I was to learn that the *Left Behind* view is not the historic teaching of the church with respect to the tribulation. Was not the view of any of the church fathers, nor was it taught by the Protestant Reformers. It was developed in the 1800s by a dude named John Nelson Darby. Only been around for a little over 100 years. It is a new teaching in Christianity, yet though new it is the predominant interpretation by far. Initially it was popularized by Scofield Reference Bible (1909). It was kept alive in the 1960s and 70s by Hal Lindsay's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Then by the popular *Ryrie Study Bible*. Now revived with the movie and bestselling books, *Left Behind*. This is view of my family and friends whom I love and respect. So we don't want to be divisive.

Context and Purpose of Letter

But I cannot hold to it. Because of what John says right here. Verse 9, *I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation*. John is living in the tribulation. The tribulation is the present experience of the seven churches in Asia to which John writes. We simply cannot understand the *Apocalypse* outside of the context of the seven churches. Believers are severely and bitterly persecuted. Some languish in dark dungeons (2:10). Some thrown to the wild beasts (6:8). Many are executed. *And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus* (20:4). John writes to comfort these suffering Christians, encourage, provide hope. Yet what hope would it be for these 1st century believers to discover that in a few thousand years from now, Christians need not suffer the tribulation? Christ will come for them, rapture them out of the world. When the persecution becomes intense, they'll just vanish from the face of the earth. The future Christians will escape the tribulation, but not the Christians in first century who suffer. What comfort would that knowledge provide for these believers in AD 95 who sacrifice everything for Christ? What comfort would it be to John who is arrested, stands trial, rejected, exiled—and according to tradition, even boiled in oil. Would it provide any hope for these persecuted Christians to whom the letter is actually written? Probably not. Which should cause some pause before embracing that view as our own. Any interpretation of the *Apocalypse* that views its events in the 21st century and beyond fails to take into account John's original audience and therefore misses the whole point of the letter. John writes to real people,

with real names, in real places. If we come along and try to interpret the Apocalypse in only futuristic categories, then we will never understand it. We can't begin to grasp the *Apocalypse* outside of the circumstances of the seven churches. Christians who are suffering bitterly and cannot understand their present experience of persecution. Indeed, it presents a *faith-crisis*. They thought that God was in control of every world event so that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from His will. They thought that Christ was the reigning Lord. Yet, they are suffering brutally. They cannot reconcile the contradiction. The appearance of their reality seemingly contradicts the reality of God. Is God not real? Is He not in control? Is Jesus not on His throne? Does He not see their misery? If so, then why are they bitterly suffering?

Therefore John writes to encourage these suffering Christians, to provide hope. How? Identifies with them. Verse 9, I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation. John identifies with them in the tribulation. I am your partner in this. Your experience is my experience. The tribulation is upon us all. Christ has not abandoned you. Christ has not forsaken you. He has not forsaken me. I am not *left behind*, I am *left banished* on the isle of Patmos. News flash for the American church. Christ doesn't return until *after* the tribulation, *post-tribulation*.

This is exactly what Jesus teaches. Matt. 24: In His Olivet Discourse, the Lord Jesus clearly teaches that believers will live through the tribulation. During the Passion week, Christ and the apostles are leaving the temple area, they remark about the beauty of the temple. Jesus replies that not one stone will be left upon another. They say, "*Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?*" (Matt. 24:3). Jesus teaches about wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, false christs, widespread apostasy, then He mentions *tribulation*, same Greek word, θλίψις. "*Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake* (Mat 24:9 NAS). To whom is Jesus speaking? The apostles. Jesus clearly teaches the apostles that they will see tribulation. That the tribulation will occur in their lifetime. Which Jesus begins to call the tribulation, after which, post-tribulation, He will return to gather the elect. ²⁹ "*But immediately **after the tribulation** of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken,* ³⁰ *and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.* ³¹ "*And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other* (Matt. 24). The Lord Jesus teaches that after the tribulation, post-tribulation, He'll return to gather His people in the air. No believer will be *Left Behind*. Eschatology is actually easy. As confessed in the *Apostles' Creed*, "From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." Done. After the tribulation, the Son of Man will appear in the sky, the dead in Christ shall rise, living believers will be raptured and meet Him in the air. Then they shall triumphantly descend with Him to earth for the final climatic battle, the destruction of His enemies including the antichrist, then final judgment, then ushered to the New Earth. The end of the world is a one-stop-shop. Not two returns of Christ separated by seven years. It all occurs at once, after the tribulation. Until then, believers live through it. That is why the Lord Jesus prepares the apostles for it. "Get ready. Don't be surprised."

Current Persecution and History of Persecution

This post-tribulational view of Christ return is not only the party line for Presbyterians.

For example, the greatest pastor-theologian today, John Piper, a Baptist. About the timing of the tribulation, he says, “Go to North Korea and ask the Christians, when will the tribulation begin? They will say, ‘My weak American brother. Her husband was killed, his wife was arrested. We are in the tribulation’” (personal notes). Dr. Piper raises a very crucial point about the American experience. As American Christians, we interpret the Bible through the American experience. Bad hermeneutics. Experience doesn’t interpret the Bible. The Bible interprets experience. Our text interprets the experience of American believers who cannot even conceive of the tribulation as present reality. What is that? The text shows that the American experience is completely abnormal, unusual. In the world today, Christians are bitterly and relentlessly persecuted. August 25, in Cameroon, a Bible translator, Angus Abraham Fung was killed in an attack. His wife survived but lost her arm. In Egypt, since the recent revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood has burned scores of churches and destroyed homes and businesses of Christians. Over 600 people killed. Christian women and girls abducted. In my youth, I was profoundly influenced by a man whom I met, Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian pastor. He had been imprisoned by the communist for 14 years. The crime: preaching the gospel. Which he describes in his book, *Tortured For Christ*. Plus 20 million other Christians under the Soviet regime. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, only one German pastor executed by the Nazis for his fidelity to Christ. American Christians—totally obsessed with sensationalist movies and popcorn theology—cannot conceive of such persecution in the world today.

That is because we live on a safe island in the vast ocean of persecution. But the American experience is the exception. Which itself a function of American history. Why did the Pilgrims sail from England on the Mayflower? Religious liberty. The colonies were founded by those fleeing from religious persecution. The Puritans in England were severely persecuted. Bloody Mary—not a drink—a queen under whom Protestant ministers were severely persecuted. Countless imprisoned, executed, exiled. In one year alone, 1555, 75 leaders of the church were burned at the stake including two bishops, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury, burned the following year. The Covenanters in Scotland were hunted down like wild animals. Richard Cameron, James Guthrie, David Hackston. The persecution against the covenanters so severe, that some historians argue that it rivaled that of the Roman persecution, if not worse. What about the Reformers? There was a bounty on Calvin’s head. When the authorities came to arrest him, he leapt from a two-story window, escaped Paris, traveled in disguise, using the alias, Charles de Esperville and fled to Geneva. Luther, lived under the constant threat of death. We could go on for the rest of the day with the Bohemian Christians, the Lombards, Inquisition. All the way back to the Roman persecutions, lasting two and a half centuries, at which beginning we find John on isle of Patmos. The last living apostle because all the others have been executed. What about the apostles’ helpers? They lived peaceful and quiet lives, right? Not Luke, Luke hanged on an olive tree by the pagan priests of Greece. Timothy, beaten with clubs by a mob in Ephesus. Ask Christians throughout the history of the church, “When will the tribulation start?” They will look at you as if you’re from Mars! All we have to do is ask John. When? Verse 9, I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation. The tribulation begins in John’s day and continues through the present. To quote Hoekema, “the...tribulation is not restricted to the end-time, but characterizes the entire age between Christ’s two comings” (*The Bible and the Future*, 150). Granted, as Jesus clearly teaches, the tribulation will intensify immediately before His return. Not that it will be a categorically different type of tribulation. But intensified in its scope, extent. The persecution won’t be contained to different regions at different times, but it will be everywhere at once.

Global persecution. *If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened* (Mat 24:22 NIV).

So what does this mean to us? Verse 9, *I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation...* John is a *partner* of the seven churches in the tribulation. He partners with them in the persecution. Therein lies the question the text forces upon us. If persecution comes, or more probable, when persecution comes, will you partner with the seven churches, will you partner with John? Will you join the partnership of the early Christians? Will you partner in suffering for Christ? It is easy to sit in our comfortable chairs and assume that we would. Yet why should we think that we would suffer persecution for Christ, when He is not important enough to us to read His word? Why should we think that we would suffer persecution for Christ, when we won't even sacrifice ten percent of our income to His work? Why should we think that we would suffer persecution for Christ, when we don't come to church consistently? Why should we think that we would suffer persecution for Christ, when we don't practice any self-denial in our lives; eating, spending money. Why should we think that we would suffer persecution for Christ, when we won't deny ourselves the pleasure of that one sin? Self-deception is easy. The only assurance that we would share in the tribulation is a deeper desire for God now. If Christ is our portion and treasure now, our chief joy now above all earthly pleasures, then we can be confident that our love will not grow cold and we shall be faithful to the end. If not, then the question remains, when persecution comes, will you partner or plea-bargain? Will you compromise, or will you commit yourself to Christ until the very end, no matter how bitter that end may be? Amen.