

Escapist — the label

Some of the hottest debates I have ever heard had to do with things written in the Bible. Actually, I have heard very few real debates on such matters because most of them quickly digressed into arguments, some quite heated. This seems to be especially so when it comes to a discussion of Bible prophecy.

At other times, however, instead of arguing people will simply throw very pointed barbs at those with whom they disagree, almost in an over-the-shoulder, nonchalant manner. Such is the case when a person says very matter-of-factly to someone who believes in the imminence of the rapture, "Well, you believe in escapism. You're just an escapist." The statement is most often meant to be curt along with an air of flippant dismissal. But, the fact of the matter is the label in itself is not a pointed barb, is not condescending and is not unbiblical. The proper response could be, "Yes!! I am an escapist! I do believe in escapism! I look forward to it with great and grand anticipation! And, by the way, what are YOU looking forward to?!"

Allow me to refresh our memories for just a moment. "Escapists", as we might be called, believe Jesus will rapture the church out of the world before the start of the Seven Year Tribulation, often called the 70th week of Daniel chapter nine. This will be a time of persecution and tribulation that will come upon the entire world. Billions will die from war, murder, disease, starvation, etc. At the end of this period Jesus will come back with the church to this very earth and will reign for 1000 years from the Throne of David in Jerusalem (Zechariah 14 ; Revelation 19).

Make no mistake about it, the entire seven-year period will be a time of unprecedented pain and suffering for all those living on the earth as seen in the breaking of the first four seals in Revelation 6 . Yet, I believe the time Jesus referred to as the "great tribulation" in Matthew 24:21 will be the final three and one-half years of that seven year period. Basically I believe this because it is at that point anti-Christ will break his covenant with Israel and will begin to persecute and murder Jews with wild abandon (also see Daniel 9:23). Though all people will be forced to bow before anti-Christ, yet the suffering of the Jews will be different because they will not be the objects of servitude, but of annihilation.

To be an "escapist" is to believe the church, the body of Christ, will be removed before the starting point of that seven years. This belief system is grounded in such

scriptures as 1 Thessalonians 1:10 ; 5:9, etc. Further, it is based upon a scriptural sense of love and concern Jesus has for His bride, and that such love and concern will manifest itself in His taking His bride out of the world before it becomes the object of His wrath.

Several things must be mentioned at this point for clarity's sake. The church has always been the object of tribulation; that is, she has always been persecuted, ridiculed and harassed since her founding on Pentecost. This, of course, refers to the genuine church in her purity. The false church knows nothing of satanically inspired persecution simply because she is false and is in no way a threat to Satan's desires. Further, a great portion of the church, if not the majority of it, is currently in the presence of Jesus in heaven. Though many of her members were martyred for their faith, it is difficult to understand why Jesus would purposefully subject the balance of her members still on earth to an existence even the early church did not experience.

Additionally, though the Lord has often used difficult times to purge and purify His bride, it must be understood the purpose of the entire seven years has nothing to do with church purification — the blood of Jesus does that. Rather, it has to do with the Jews and the earthly events that will finally bring them to their knees before their Messiah, and the wrath of an angry God that is poured onto a God-hating world. An angry God? Somehow that just doesn't "fit" with the world's view of God. Even most Christians seldom think about that aspect of His character. Remember Korah in Numbers 16 ?

The persecution the church has known throughout her history is not the cause of her salvation because we are saved by grace through faith only. Rather, it is for the purpose of her being His witness and light in an evil and dark world. In essence, though the church has been the victim of 2000 years of persecution that has often been too ruthless and merciless to imagine, yet God's hand has been upon her. The seven year tribulation will be a time when God, in a manner of speaking, removes His hand from the affairs of humanity and allows humanity to have it their way — a world without God. And, "escapists" believe before He removes His hand He will remove His church.

Escapism has a precedent in God's plan. Several precedents, in fact. By God's plan Noah escaped His judgment upon the world when the world-wide deluge happened. Eight escaped as multitudes drowned. Moses led about two million Jews from the fires of Egyptian slavery. The Red Sea was parted during their escape, but the Egyptian army drowned as God released the waters. Jesus Himself was the object of escapism when Joseph, after being warned by God, took Him and Mary into Egypt to escape death at the hands of Herod. All the other little boys His age died that day in Bethlehem.

If one takes the whole council of what God has said about this matter of the timing of the rapture relative to the seven year tribulation period, it seems clear the church will be removed prior to its start. When the purpose of the tribulation is studied we find no scriptural place in it for the church. Further, to believe the church will escape the events of the tribulation is to believe in the imminence of the rapture, and that is what associates the idea of a pure church to the rapture (1 John 3:1-3). Not the prospect of going through some of the tribulation.

Escapism is part of everyday life. People are warned about inclement weather, hurricanes, volcanoes, tidal waves, Islamic attacks, disease pandemics and other kinds of danger. Multitudes have escaped tragedy by simply escaping. There is nothing inherently wrong or evil in those who warn or in those who take the warning seriously and flee.

Regarding the rapture of the church we must understand that to be accused of being an "escapist" is not an indictment, and it is difficult to understand why some use it as such. The bottom line is not only is the idea of God's people escaping the tribulation (all of it and not just the last 3½ years—the great tribulation) a very pleasing and peaceful prospect, but it is in full agreement with the dictates of scripture and the character of Jesus as the Savior as described in those scriptures.

Well, what should be our response to these matters? It can be summed up in two words: be ready. To ignore what God has said is to be foolish. Harry Truman refused to heed the warnings about Mt. St. Helens in May of 1980 and died along with his 16 cats. His body was never found because it is about 150 feet below the current surface of the mountain's slope. Many of those who could, but refused to leave New Orleans

in August of 2005 died for their choice, too. I have copies of pictures of some of their bodies floating in ditches and canals — clear evidence of their foolish decision.

God has issued His warnings about future events, and He is quite serious about them. People must not only believe in God, but must believe God. Though most people condescendingly and contemptuously smile at these things, yet the fact remains that the horrible events occurring on earth today cannot even be compared to what is coming. The rapture of the church is indeed the “great escape”, but there is not a person on earth that will be there accidentally. It is all about the choices people make.

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