

History of the Place of Safety Doctrine in the Church of God

By Craig M White
Version 1.4

Introduction

For those who have been around long enough, or who have read widely, would know that probably no doctrine in the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) is unique.

Rather, it is the collection of doctrines and their assemblage into a unique mosaic which stands out. Also, the emphasis of certain truths above others helps the Church of God to stand out comparative to the majority of Christian groups and the additional dimension of understanding also assists in demonstrating the differences between the groupings.

This is true also of the place of safety doctrine (ie a refuge for the saints in the last days) – a truth long held by sections of the Church of God for decades. However, as pointed out in the article *The Place of Safety and the Church of God*, others have held to this view prior to us. The article you are reading is a slight re-jig of one portion of the aforementioned article.

A rumour doing the rounds is that the place of safety doctrine may be attributed to Herbert W Armstrong's (HWA) wife, Loma Armstrong. The rumour suggests that she read an article on Petra in a *National Geographic* magazine and that convinced her of a place of safety. She supposedly then took this idea to her husband who consequently adopted it. No evidence is forthcoming that this happened. However, while she did write about the subject in her diary published in the November 1956 *Plain Truth* (PT), this was not the origin of the doctrine.

The concept of a place of safety extends back earlier and Ethelbert Bullinger mentions the term in his *Companion Bible*¹ and we also find that early Seventh-day Adventists held to similar views.² The Petra connection to the place of safety also probably extended back earlier than HWA, but the source of this disappears into the misty past. The best candidate for the concept is Dr William Blackstone. According to famous evangelical preacher Oral Roberts

"William E. Blackstone, author of the book, *Jesus is Coming Soon*, carried on a very interesting work among the Jewish people, especially in Palestine. Mr. Blackstone died in 1935 at the age of 94, but before his death he had a revelation from God that many of the fleeing Jewish people, awakened to their awful betrayal at the hands of the Antichrist, would find refuge in the dens and caves of the mountain fastnesses around Petra.

Out of a \$5-million trust fund, Dr. Blackstone, in 1935, sent a corps of Christian workers to Petra with great cases of Hebrew Bibles, encased in copper boxes. **They were sealed in hewn-out vaults in the mountain side of the Petra region against**

¹ In a note on Nahum 1:7 he stated "stronghold = a place of safety." He also uses the term in relation to Psalms 91 and 93 where God is a place of safety for the saints.

² In fact, a proponent of British-Israelism, Colonel Edward Angelo, used this term in his book *Ephraim, or, The Present Locations of the Hebrew Tribes*: "the rapture, and retreat to a **place of safety**, of those who will take part in it, prior to the 'troublous times' that are coming upon the earth" (p. 39) [emphasis mine]. Apparently the rapture (an unscriptural concept, was/is a sort of false place of safety in evangelical theology.

the day when, according to the Bible, the Jews will flee from Jerusalem to the Petra Mountain.

In the midst of the Great Tribulation, these Bibles with marked passages will be found, tracing the lineage of Christ, and the working and deceit of Antichrist will be exposed to the persecuted Israelis. These marked passages will show the Jewish people how they have been deceived, betrayed by the Antichrist, and that Jesus Christ is truly their Messiah, their only hope. Only the future will reveal the results of this unique venture of Dr. Blackstone." (quoted in *Petra. A reserved place prepared by God*, p. 18) [emphasis mine]

Regardless, surprising as it may seem to critics, there is very little reference to Petra or a place of safety in WCG literature. To understand what was really taught (compared to the wild allegations), we should explore the WCG's own statements and articles on the subject.

First Reference to a Place of Safety

The first known reference to a place of safety may be found in an article by Herbert W Armstrong titled "A Heart to Heart Talk with the Editor," *Plain Truth*, March-April 1942:

"This prophecy [referring to Luke 21:36] shows it is those who 'keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ' (Rev. 12:17), some of whom shall be taken to a place of divine protection, and some of whom shall be killed in religious martyrdom.

"But where shall those who escape flee for refuge - WHERE? And HOW shall they go? and when? These questions, only those who are praying earnestly, sincerely, constantly, without ceasing, fully surrendered to God - and WATCHING! - shall be able to answer. Will you be in that number? ...

"Some of us believe we are beginning to receive rays of light on this vital subject. Light on the PLACE we shall go - HOW we shall get there, as revealed in these marvelous prophecies. When God removes those accounted worthy to escape, there shall come a time of FAMINE - not of bread, but of hearing the words of the Eternal!" (p. 4)

The year 1942 seems to be a pivotal year for it was that year that over 1,700 souls attended HWA's evangelistic outreach campaign in Los Angeles. It was also the year that the *World Tomorrow* radio programme went nationwide beginning with a broadcast from the 50,000 watt WHO radio station in Des Moines, Ohio. And in 1942 the very first edition of *The United States in Prophecy* went into print. What an important year for the Work that was!³

³ The term also appears in the Coworker letters, viz: "AFTER our people fall into captivity at the hands of the revived and 7th head of "the BEAST," then united with the "False Prophet," their headquarters removed to PALESTINE, which they shall have captured, the MARK OF THE BEAST shall be enforced. Pure Gospel preaching shall be PROHIBITED! Then comes the FAMINE of HEARING the Word of God. Then the SAINTS who refuse to take the Mark of the Beast or worship his image shall be PUT TO DEATH. PART of the saints--those who WATCH, and PRAY without ceasing, and are accounted worthy to escape all those things--shall be taken to a place of safety. The others shall be MARTYRED. Immediately following this TRIBULATION, God shall step in and send the terrible heavenly signs. Then follows the DAY OF THE LORD--the time of DIVINE WRATH--the PLAGUES, upon Babylon and the seat of the Beast." (Herbert W Armstrong, *Our Coworkers Bulletin*, 24 March 1944, p. 4)

"Every individual who HEEDS this warning, turns to God, is WATCHING and PRAYING ALWAYS, being filled with God's Spirit, living by every Word of God, with a life consecrated to Him, will be given special divine protection---taken beforehand to a place of SAFETY---preserved thru the final horrifying tribulation, time of plagues and human anguish soon to visit this earth! ...

Continuing with the history of this important subject: Leroy Neff⁴ wrote the following information in his paper on this subject delivering to us some fascinating historical data:

“On April 23, 1955 Mr. Armstrong had a sermon on this subject at Pasadena. He also had a sermon on the subject at the Feast of Tabernacles about that time, but I do not have the date.

In 1956 Mr. & Mrs. Armstrong, and their son Dick visited Petra. Mr. Armstrong wrote about it in his co-worker letter dated 5/8/1956

"We later took a three-day tour down to Petra, the mysterious, awe-inspiring ancient city built in a Rock, called the Rose-Red City half as old as Time. We travelled in the comfort of a modern Ford automobile, but even so it was a slow, jolting, dusty journey--half of it over primitive dirt-and-rock roads, around narrow ledges on sharp "figure-8" curves on steep canyon-sides. The last 4 miles going in and coming out were ridden on horseback, thru the narrow single-filed Siq, with solid rock walls rising straight above us for hundreds of feet. I'll have much to tell you, later, about fantastic Petra---a now deserted city that was carved out of solid rock, in a recessed hide-away surrounded by its own impenetrable wall of mountains."

Some details were also written in Mrs. Armstrong's diary, published in the November 1956 PT. She wrote that the first night in Petra, she had refused to eat some of the cooked food for fear of becoming ill. She then ate an orange that had been given to her previously. Because of the cold she went to bed early in one of the caves. "With hunger and cold I began to see that Petra was **no bed of roses**, but a place to really rough it." (p. 12) [emphasis mine]

There were several articles that were published on the subject which mentions Petra and they are listed at the rear of this article.

The Pastor's Report dated 26 June 1978 included excerpts from a sermon by HWA. Here is a part of what he said. Speaking of a "place of safety," Mr. Armstrong stated:

"Now where is the place? that's been a great contention. I used to preach the possibility that it would be at Petra. Well, I don't know that it will be at Petra, and I never said I knew it would be. But others say, 'Well, that's something we can get back at Herbert Armstrong. Let's just say that he was wrong about that.' And some very high in the church were saying that is a lot of rubbish and hodge-podge. I say to you now I don't know whether it's Petra. I don't know where it is or where it will be, but I know God knows. But I do know this much: there are many indications that it is Petra and if it isn't Petra, **then the Bible gives us absolutely no indication of where it will be.** Now I'll stand my ground with that and any of you who want to can come and face me with it. In any case, I've been to Petra and it's not a very pleasant place to be." (p. 5) [emphasis mine]

EVERYTHING material we possess now will be swept away from us, and we shall then be either in that haven of safety under God's divine protection, or else dead or in slavery worse than death" (Herbert W Armstrong, *Coworker Letter*, 8 Dec 1947. p. 2)

It is also mentioned in the following Coworker Letters, 20 Nov 1958, p. 3; 13 Aug 1959, p. 3; 23 Oct 1961, p. 3; 14 Sept 1962, p. 4; 2 March 1967, p. 7, 10-11; 25 July 1967, p. 4; 17 April 1979, p. 1; 3 Sept 1970, p. 2; 24 Dec 1976, p. 2; 14 Aug 1978, p. 14; 24 Feb 1979, p. 6; 20 Jan 1981, p. 3; 25 Feb 1982, p. 1; 16 July 1982, p. 2.

⁴ After writing my paper *The Place of Safety Doctrine and the Church of God*, Mr Leroy Neff sent me his paper on the subject which allowed me to insert this valuable information. Thanks to him for this quote found in his paper *Where is the Place of Safety? Notes from a 1989 sermon*, p. 11.

In addition, there were two *Coworker Letters* which referred to Petra in February and July 1982.

From the above we can see little was written on the subject and that it was not an obsession at all (some individuals may have been obsessed by it, but most weren't). It stood out and imprinted on members and observers because of it not being a doctrine generally taught with the exception of a minority of evangelicals.

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9 – RSV)

"Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having **their conscience seared** with a hot iron" (1Tim 4:2 - KJV)

Now, however the idea that Petra would be the final refuge entered the Church is not possible to determine, but we do know that in the *Good News* magazine, Herman L Hoeh wrote about a trip that he and Paul C Meredith took to Petra in July 1957:

"We do not yet know absolutely where the prophesied place of escape may be. But the recent trips to Petra have led to uncovering important new Bible evidence strongly indicating Petra to be the probable place of safety!" ("We saw Petra!," *Good News*, January 1958, p. 1)

It would appear that Herman Hoeh developed the belief further in discussions, sermons and articles.⁵ For instance he wrote the article on *World War III: There is a Way of Escape* in 1963. It was republished as a reprint article *There is a Way of Escape* and became the most visible Church of God pronouncement on the issue.

Given that the Church was teaching the Church Eras doctrine and believing that it was the Philadelphia Era probably prior to adopting the place of safety doctrine, it follows that it saw what the scriptures plainly revealed in Rev 3:7-12:

"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is set-apart, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts; and shuts and no one opens, says these things:

I know your works. Behold, I have given before you an open door, and no one can shut it. For you have a little strength and have kept My Word and have not denied My name. **[first phase – undertaking a Work]**

Behold, I give out of those of the synagogue of Satan, those saying themselves to be Jews and are not, but lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. **[second phase – apostasy]**

Because you have kept the Word of My patience, I also will keep you from the hour of temptation which will come upon all the habitable world, to try those who dwell upon the earth. **[third phase – keeping His Word – including a revived Work followed by the Great Tribulation]**

Behold, I come quickly. Hold fast to that which you have, so that no one may take your crown. **[fourth phase – Christ's return]**

⁵ It is interesting that in the 1940s Herman Hoeh was familiar with the famous preacher Louis Talbot (ie his books and radio broadcasts) according to Robert Macdonald who knew Dr Hoeh. Talbot who wrote the booklet *I Saw Petra* (1951) as well as on prophecy and the typology of the Feast Days. Another booklet on the subject was *The Man from Petra* by Joseph Hoffman (1961)

Him who overcomes I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will go out no more. And I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of Heaven from My God, and My new name." **[finally – the granting of rewards in His Kingdom]**

It would appear that we are in the first part of phase 3 at the present time. How long it will continue and how extensive the end-time Work will be remains to be seen. Cooperation between groups and extending the hand of friendship to demonstrate a brotherly love is needed now more than ever to enable a great global Work again.

Concluding Remarks

It was the Synagogue of Satan, referred to above, that threw out the place of safety doctrine and denounced it with fury.

Joseph Tkach snr delivered yet another boring, lifeless and meaningless sermon – something he was renowned for over many years. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania church on 25 August 1990 he vented against the place of safety doctrine. Two days later he had the following published:

"Do any of our ministers or members believe Jesus promised that all the faithful at the end time would be physically protected from harm in a place of safety? The fact is, Jesus prophesied that His faithful people would suffer persecution, even that many of the faithful would be martyred. The idea that only the weak in faith will suffer persecution and that all the strong will be spared in a place of safety is simply not accurate" ("Personal," *Worldwide News*, 27 August 1990, p. 4).

Of further interest is that in a phone conversation between a Church of God member in the early 1990s and David Hunsberger, head of the Personal Correspondence Department, he revealed the following:

Question: I no longer agree with the W.C.G. and the Bible says unless two agree they cannot walk together. Should I leave the W.C.G. then?

D.H.: That is, of course, your option...I would, however, be careful as to where I go.

Question: What do you mean?

D.H. Some of the churches believe in a Place of Safety which only a cult would teach.

Question: What? Believing in a place of safety is a cult idea? Does that mean the W.C.G. no longer accepts the idea of a place of safety for the Philadelphia era of God's church?

D.H.: The idea is currently being re-evaluated...

Question: I am tired of being called a Protestant by people I know outside the church. And the bad thing is I really believe they are right. The W.C.G. does appear to be a Protestant group at this point.

D.H.: I see nothing wrong with being called a Protestant." [emphasis mine]

Well, that says it all!

It is so easy to slip away from truths by neglect, pressure from outside sources or apostasy. Something to be ever alert about.

Let us maintain this truth and teach it, without becoming fanatical or setting dates and such like.

List of Worldwide Church of God articles on the Place of Safety

Below is a list of articles published by the WCG which contained the word *Petra*:

- “Petra!”, *Good News*, October 1963
- “This is Petra!” (part 1), *Good News*, April 1962
- “This is Petra!” (part 2), *Good News*, June 1962
- “This is Petra!” (part 3), *Good News*, July 1962
- “We fled Petra!”, *Good News*, October 1966
- “We saw Petra!”, *Good News*, January 1958
- *Coworker Letter*, 8 May 1956
- *Coworker Letter*, 25 February 1982
- *Coworker Letter*, July 1982
- Entry on his Middle East tour in Herbert Armstrong’s “Autobiography”, *Plain Truth*, February 1965
- Mrs Armstrong’s “Diary”, *Plain Truth*, 1956
- “Excerpts of Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong’s Sabbath Sermon,” *The Pastor’s Report*, 26 June 1978

The following is a complete list of entries containing the term *place of safety* or similar:

- “A Heart to Heart Talk with the Editor,” *Plain Truth*, March-April 1942
- “How important is your physical life?”, *Good News*, March 1957
- “If World War Three comes – there is a way of escape”, *Plain Truth*, June 1963
- “Is there a Place of Safety?”, *Good News*, May 1982
- “Q: How will we care for our children as spirit beings?”, *Good News*, October 1964
- “There is a Way of Escape,” *Plain Truth*, March 1984
- “We saw Petra!”, *Good News*, January 1958
- “Will you be alive when Christ Returns?”, *Good News*, April-May 1965
- “Will you be protected?”, *Good News*, May 1982

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- Armstrong, H W
Various *Coworker Letters* 1950s-1980s
- Armstrong, H W (1944) *Our Coworkers Bulletin*, 24 March, p. 4
- Armstrong, H W (1947) *Coworker Letter*, 8 Dec. p. 2
- Armstrong, HW (1978) "Excerpts of Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong's Sabbath Sermon," *The Pastor's Report*, 26 June, pp. 1-13.
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- Catherwood, C (1979) *The Place of Safety*. WCG, sermon delivered in the USA.
- Fahey, R (1980) *The Place of Safety*. WCG, sermon delivered in Australia 10 April.
- Haneveld, AK (1995) *Petra. A reserved place prepared by God*. The Netherlands.
- Hoeh, HL (1958) "We saw Petra!", *Good News*, January, pp. 1-4, 10-12.
- Hoeh, HL (1963) "If World War III Comes – There is a Way of Escape," *Plain Truth*, June, pp. 15-18, 47-48.
- Hoeh, HL (1970 etc) *There is a Way of Escape?* Reprint article, Worldwide Church of God, Pasadena, CA.
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- Waterhouse, G (1980) *Finishing up the Work*. WCG, sermon delivered in Florida 5 Jan.
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- *History of the Feast of Tabernacles in the Radio/Worldwide Church of God*
- *History of the Place of Safety Doctrine in the Church of God*
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