



OMAR RIKABI

LEAVING BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND

***THE FALSE FEAR OF THE RAPTURE
AND THE TRUE HOPE OF THE RETURN OF CHRIST***

SEEDBED SHORTS

Kingdom Treasure for Your Reading Pleasure

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Introduction

Rapture.

Apocalypse.

The second coming.

The end of the world.

In my church youth group days, a lot of teaching focused on two things: sex and the end-times. The sex talks were summed up in one idea: Don't have it till you get married. Likewise, the end-times talks were summed up in one idea: It's gonna happen really soon. For most of us in junior high, our thoughts were also summed up in one idea: I hope I get to have sex before the end times.

But a lot of folks took it very seriously, including my mom's Sunday school teacher. Almost every lesson involved reading the headlines and getting ready for the end, which could come at any moment. She taught the class from cassette tapes and books by popular end-times preachers. Using current events and Scripture, they attempted to predict a target date for the return of Christ. They said there would be global cataclysms to signal

the end of the world, and the big question she wanted answered was, “Are you ready?”

Then one day, the teacher and her family disappeared.

They sold their house, quit their jobs, and moved to rural Texas. They bought some remote property, stocked up on food, water, and other supplies... and waited.

And waited.

Five years later, we saw them at the grocery store, after they moved back.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his followers not to worry about what happens tomorrow (Matt. 6:25-34). However, the fear of tomorrow has helped create an end-times industrial complex. A lot of ink has been spilled trying to interpret the last days, the end of the world, and the role of Christians in all of it. Many preachers, teachers, conferences, books, movies—all aimed at predicting when Christ will return and what will happen to the world—have steadily flooded the Christian consumer market.

At the heart of this machine is an idea called the rapture, when Christians are supposed to disappear, and an already dark world will be plunged into utter despair before Jesus returns to settle the score.

This industry is massive, with the *Left Behind* series of books and movies being the most popular and influential. The tales of getting Christians off the Earth before the world gets really bad have left behind a major, and unholy, mark on Christianity in America. Most end-time predictions operate from a place of fear, and as Yoda said, “Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, and hate leads to suffering.”

Into this industry, I am attempting to tell an alternate story. In one way or another, rapture theology has created fear, anger, hatred and even suffering... all in the name of Jesus. For the sake of the gospel, it is time to leave theology of *Left Behind* well behind us.

This work is a simple primer into the the world of the rapture theology, not an exhaustive historical or exegetical study of end-times theology or the book of Revelation. This is a Google Earth view from 40,000 feet, looking down at the major markers on the map. It is a different starting point for the conversation, looking instead at where rapture theology came from, why we

need to leave it behind, what we can expect when Christ does return, and why we can embrace his return with hope instead of fear.

So let's begin at the end. Are you ready?

PART 1

Q1: What is rapture theology?

The *rapture* is understood as an event, during which Jesus will “fly out” his believers on Earth to be with him in heaven. The story goes something like this:

The rapture could happen at any moment. No one knows when.

All over the world, Christians will disappear in the blink of an eye. Millions of people will suddenly vanish. There will be mass chaos as cars without their drivers and planes without their pilots come to a fiery crash ending. The sudden disappearance of so many people will ignite mass hysteria.

Then things will get bad.

If you are not a confessed Christian before the rapture, it will be too late for you. You will suffer through a seven-year event called the Great Tribulation. Wars will be started. Disease and famine will be a global pandemic. An anti-Christ will rise to power, and though everyone

thinks he will bring peace at first, he will plunge the world into more darkness. If you don't follow him and take his computer chip in your hand or forehead (the *Mark of the Beast*) you will not be able to buy or sell basic goods, and could even be subject to death. But if you do take the chip, you are subject to judgment and eternal hell for siding with God's enemy.

Most of those who happen to convert to Christianity during the Tribulation will be tortured and killed. And just when all hope is lost, Christ will come back again and fight the world war to end all wars in the Middle East (Armageddon), lock up Satan in the pit of hell, and set up God's kingdom on Earth. For good measure, after a 1000 year reign of peace and prosperity, God will release Satan for one last chance to tempt humanity. Jesus will then cast a final judgement on the living and the dead, and God will destroy the Earth in a ball of pyrotechnic glory. All those who were raptured, along with those who endured the Tribulation and were judged well, will live with him forever in the glorious paradise of a new heaven and a new earth.¹

There are warning signs that it could happen soon: more war in the Middle East, cataclysmic natural disasters

1. Tim LaHaye & Thomas Ice, *The Complete Bible Prophecy Chart* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2001).

that take more lives and destroy more property than ever before, and moral decline coupled with growing animosity toward Christianity.

There are variations on what will happen and when. Some believe the rapture won't happen until half-way through the Tribulation, while others believe it will happen at the end of the seven years. The perseverance of Christians in the face of persecution and war will be the true test of faith, and many will hunker down in remote mountains or woods, hopefully stocked up on enough food and supplies to keep them until the end.

But the most popular version today believes the rapture will happen first, and so it will be the beginning of the end of the world.

Q2: Is the rapture in the Bible?

Jesus promised he will return one day, and no one—not even he—knows when. Even so, for the past 2000 years many have looked around at their current landscape and speculated, prognosticated, formulated, and tried to predict when the end will happen, and what it will look like.

But of all the theories and predictions about the end of the world, the idea of the rapture and all the events to follow is a relative newcomer to the scene. So where do we find the rapture event in the Bible?

We can't.

Those who have pointed to key Scripture passages as foretelling of the rapture have done so by *proof-texting*, the process in which a text is extracted from its original context. Proof-texting can be theologically dangerous, because when a passage of Scripture is isolated from the rest of the story and slapped up against another extracted verse, you can make the Bible say almost anything you want.

So let's take a brief look at two Scriptures used to justify the rapture, and then put them in their context:

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

13 And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died. 15 We tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet him ahead of those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. 17 Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. 18 So encourage each other with these words.

In the first century Roman Empire, a city like Thessalonica was surrounded by a wall. When an emperor would come to town, a trumpet would announce his presence. The people in the city would go out to meet the emperor, and then process with him back into the city.

N.T. Wright helps us understand why Paul used this metaphor: “When Paul speaks of ‘meeting the Lord in the air’ the point is precisely not—as in the popular rapture theology—that the saved believers would then stay up in the air somewhere, away from earth. The point is that, having gone out to meet their returning Lord, they will

escort him royally into his domain, that is, back to the place where they have come from.”²

In his letter to the church of Thessalonica, Paul is addressing a church in the Roman Empire with an encouragement that Jesus, not Caesar, is their true, victorious king. He uses a cultural metaphor that his readers would understand to describe a victorious Jesus who will return to Earth to remain among his people.³

Matthew 24:40-42

40 “Two men will be working together in the field; one will be taken, the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding flour at the mill; one will be taken, the other left.

42 “So you, too, must keep watch! For you don’t know what day your Lord is coming.

At first it seems clear. Two people will be next to each other, and suddenly one will be gone. Taken away in the blink of an eye, while the other person is left behind to suffer tribulation and judgment.

But look at the verses that precede being left behind:

37 “When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah’s day. 38 In those days before the flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. 39 People didn’t

2. N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (New York: Harper One, 2008), p.133.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

realize what was going to happen until the flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes.

Jesus compares the left behind event to the Noah story in Genesis, where God flooded the land to wipe away all the sin and evil consuming humanity. No one saw it coming. There were parties and weddings and the feasting of daily life. Suddenly the rains came, and the wicked were judged by the flood, while God's people were left behind in the boat.

Whereas rapture theology sees being left behind as something to be feared, Jesus speaks of being left behind as a positive thing. It is the wicked who will be taken away for judgement, and the righteous who will be left behind. Indeed, some scholars believe this to be a reference to what happened in 70 AD, when the Romans, led by Titus, laid waste to Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.

Rapture theology ignores the context of these verses and turns their ideas around, leaving the reader anxious and afraid. But these passages, and the many others used in rapture theology, were never interpreted like this. Measured alongside nearly 2000 years of Christian theology, the rapture appears to be a dubious, recent idea.

Q3: Where did rapture theology come from?

In 1830, during a healing prayer meeting at a church in Glasgow, Scotland, a teenage girl name Margret McDonald stood up and said she had a vision of the return of Christ. But her vision was unique: Christ would return not once, but twice.

An Anglican minister named John Nelson Darby heard about her vision. Darby was concerned some prophecies in the Bible had not yet come to pass, and so he expanded on McDonald's vision by creating a prophetic "road map" of human history, from creation in Genesis to the end of the world in Revelation, called *dispensationalism*. The basic tenet is that God operates differently throughout various periods of history, each with its own prophecies and rules, and each period should be understood differently from the others.

Darby concluded there were seven specific dispensations, or ages. For example, the first dispensation is the age of innocence with Adam and Eve in the Garden. Another was the age of Israel during the Old Testament era of prophets and patriarchs. According to Darby, we now live in the age of the Church. The final dispensation

is the millennium reign of Christ, inaugurated after the rapture and the events as Darby interpreted in Revelation.

Getting out of the world before things get really bad is a distinct aspect of Darby's theology, and plays best during times of great crisis. Darby made several trips to the United States between 1859 and 1877, a time of national crisis in America. He preached during the build up, battles, and reconstruction of the Civil War. To many of his listeners, the division and bloodshed must have seemed like the end of the world. Darby's theology of "things are bad, but don't worry because we'll get out of here soon," caught on in the U.S. in ways it hadn't in the U.K.

This theology could have ended up as a war-time fad. Other individual "prophets" in the 19th century also preached "other worldly" new theologies in America, specifically Joseph Smith with Mormonism and Charles Taze Russell with the Jehovah's Witnesses.

But these two sets of beliefs have remained outside the accepted theological boundaries of orthodox Christianity, whereas Darby's teachings and dispensationalism didn't stay on those fringes. The right literature, by the right people, and at the right time, have helped it take root and grow in Western Christianity.

Who were some of those people? D. L. Moody was the Billy Graham of his day. He embraced Darby's theology, and began to promote it heavily in the United States. In 1886, he founded the Chicago Evangelization Society, which today is known as the Moody Bible Institute. Later, the Moody Press and radio network helped spread the word.

Others also wrote and preached along Darby's theological lines, but it was Cyrus I. Scofield who cemented the union between Darby's theology and Scripture. Scofield took Darby's themes, found ways to connect them to various Bible passages, and then presented them with headings, topical outlines, maps, charts, and notes, all intending to show that this theology was in fact in the Bible. The Scofield Reference Bible was first published in 1909, and remains one of the best-selling Bibles today.

However, Scofield was not a Biblical scholar nor a trained theologian, and he did not use the original Hebrew or Greek texts in his interpretations. Later, a Presbyterian minister named Lewis Chafer became concerned that this theology would end up as just a popular movement and wanted to shore up some "exegetical liabilities." So in 1924, Chafer founded the Dallas Dispensation Institute, which today is Dallas Theological Seminary.

At this point, rapture theology was still somewhat in a world of its own making. But some major players, and some major events, would help propel it to the main stage of Western Christianity.⁴

4. This summary of the history of rapture theology comes from my interview with Ben Witherington at Asbury Theological Seminary in January, 2006 and from his book *The Problem With Evangelical Theology*, (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press), pp. 94-96.

PART 2

Q4: Why is rapture theology so popular today?

Rapture theology is popular because, amid uncertainty, we tend to chase after fast facts we can control, catalogue, then check off and move on. This happens often, with drastic consequences, when talking about the end of the world.

In Matthew 24:7-8, Jesus says there will be wars, famines, and natural disasters before he returns. But he calls these the “first of the birth pains.” And just like labor pains, these things will go on for a long time. There have been wars, famines, and natural disasters for the past 2,000 years, but that has not stopped those who preach rapture theology from using current events to interpret biblical prophecy.

As rapture theology has evolved, wars in the Middle East (specifically the Arab/Israeli conflict) have escalated in the second half of the 20th and first part of the 21st century. Many writers have published works mapping out the last days of humanity, and some famous works highlight the problem of using current events to interpret

Scripture: every time the end of the world doesn't happen, the names, nations, and events predicted to usher in the end keep changing to keep up with the times.

One example is John Walvoord, who was a professor of Systematic Theology and the President at Dallas Theological Seminary from 1956 to 1986. Walvoord published *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis* in 1974, and revised it at the start of the first Gulf War in 1990. It was revised and released again after 9/11, but this time with the title changed to *Armageddon, Oil and Terrorism*.

Arguably the most notorious publication was *The Late Great Planet Earth*, written in 1970 by a student of Walvoord's named Hal Lindsey. Lindsey was even bold enough to predict that the world would end in 1988. Though the world is still here, Lindsey still publishes, teaches, and predicts the end of the world is coming soon.

But neither Walvoord nor Lindsey, nor the many other authors who have written about the rapture, would have the success or impact of Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins. In 1996, they published the novel *Left Behind*, a fictional account of the last days based on the tenets of rapture theology.

The story begins with the immediate rapture of Christ's followers and the ensuing chaos that follows. The rest of the 12-novel series follows a group of those left behind who struggle through the seven-year tribulation, the war over Israel, the rise of the anti-Christ, the battle of Armageddon, and the final, glorious return of Christ.

Using the perfect combination of moral decline and war in the Middle East, they created a fictional story of fear and devastation to evangelize the tenets of rapture theology. It was a huge success. In eight years, LaHaye and Jenkins sold over 60 million copies of the 12-volume story, mostly in the Bible Belt. Beginning in 1996, they published at least one volume a year, and released the eighth installment in August of 2001.

Then, on September 11, 2001, terrorism from the Middle East literally crashed into the the United States. To an already trembling body of believers, who had been overly sensitized to a cataclysmic set of convictions, this helped fuel the popularity that we were in the last days.

Amid rapidly increasing fear and war in the Middle East, *Left Behind* was there to help believers map out events and control their fear, promising they wouldn't have to stick around for the worst of it.

So what could be wrong?

This is bad theology.

Let's consider two definitions:

Orthodox: holding to what is generally or traditionally accepted as right or true; established and approved.

Theology: the study of the nature of God and religious beliefs.

Have you ever heard someone say, “I don't want theology, I just want the Bible”? The problem with this statement is that you can't have one without the other. Everyone has a theology. Whatever you believe about God and his work in the world is your theology, and our theologies didn't form in a vacuum. Different preachers, Sunday school teachers, books, music, and even experiences have helped form our theology.

Orthodox theology is simply those beliefs about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures, etc., that the church has held as true over the centuries. The Apostle Paul could be counted as Christianity's first theologian. But he didn't just “come up” with his beliefs about Christ. They grew from the roots of the Hebrew scriptures,

worship practices, rabbis, and teachers of the Law that came before him.

In Acts 15, we see a disagreement about what God expects of new believers who weren't Jewish. So a council was called, and through prayer, discussion, and trusting in the role of the Holy Spirit, an orthodox theological decision was discerned.

This has happened throughout our history in different ways. For example, John Calvin and John Wesley did not create new theologies; they systematically pulled together the work of those who had gone before them.

The church has long considered those who come up with "something new" to be heretical (or not accepted as true, orthodox Christian theologies). Think Mormonism or Jehovah's Witness.

This pattern is important, because rapture theology is new and cannot be found in any orthodox Christian theology prior to the 19th century. It originated as the work of one person, and the idea of a rapture would have been foreign to the New Testament writers, the early Church fathers and mothers, and the Reformers.

Over the last 40-plus years of geopolitical events, the “prophetic” books and teachings on the end times have kept the same plot lines, but the cast of characters keeps changing, and the wars keep going on in a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies. At some point, this theology must be called out as false. Rapture theology is not orthodox Christian theology. It is bad theology, and bad theology is trouble.

Q5: Why is Rapture theology dangerous?

Whatever you believe about how the world will end forms your posture to the world today. If you believe the world will someday be destroyed, billions of people will suffer, your enemies will be killed, and you won't have to be around for it, then what is at stake today?

There are at least four dangers that result from such a theology:

1. It ignores care for the world God created.

A theology of the future destruction of earth can lead one to ignore creation care. In Genesis 1, God created the heavens and the earth, the sky and the sea, the land and plants, and all the living creatures, and he called them “good.” Then he created humanity, and instructed us to care and protect creation... to have stewardship over it.⁵ But because of humanity's rebellion in the Garden of Eden, all of creation suffers from the fall, and all of creation groans for full redemption (Romans 8:19-21).

But then, in Revelation 21:1, John sees a new heaven and a new earth. So, if all of this world is going to burn

5. Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008), p.103.

up, why should we care about the environment, how we consume our resources, the effects on other nations, etc.?

Because the Greek word used in this passage, *kinos*, implies renewed, not brand new, it's a "change in quality or a change of essence rather than something never in existence before."⁶ The current world we inhabit today will be the same one when Christ returns. He will not wipe this world out in a fiery and violent final act, but instead restore this world to his original intent at creation—the one lost in the Garden of Eden.⁷

To live "on earth as it is in heaven" has consequences for how we will live on Earth now. And as we will see later in this book, what we do now will matter in the end. As N. T. Wright says, "... if God really does intend to redeem rather than reject his created world... we are faced with the question: what might it look like to celebrate that redemption, that healing and transformation, in the present, and thereby appropriately to anticipate God's final intention?"⁸

6. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World* (Michigan: Francis Asbury Press of Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 315.

7. Richter, *The Epic of Eden*, p. 129.

8. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, p. 212.

2. It trivializes the suffering and tribulation of persons in other countries.

The seven-year tribulation of rapture theology describes intense war, suffering, and persecution in the world, especially of those who choose to follow Christ. However, in the two millennia since Jesus ascended, there has been intense war, suffering, and persecution, even for those who have followed Christ. In other words, there has always been a tribulation.

The fear of a coming tribulation only plays well in a country like the United States, where we have enjoyed the protective barrier of two oceans and a prosperity never before seen in history.

For the most part, rapture theology has only taken hold in the United States, where in our lifetime, we have never experienced the famine, war, and real persecution that much of the rest of the world has. After all, we are a country who decries a store clerk saying “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas” as persecution. Such a posture, and a false fear of some future suffering, makes a mockery of those in the world who suffer now, and waters down our call to stand with the martyrs of the faith.

3. It supports violence (and may even be racist).

Within rapture theology is the use of war to bring about the return of Christ: God is seen to have human enemies who must be defeated by military means to fully establish his Kingdom. These wars are understood to be in the Middle East, specifically over the land of Israel.

In Genesis, Abraham's first-born son was named Ishmael (Genesis 16). But God said his covenant would be with Abraham's second son, Isaac, and the biblical nation of Israel would be Isaac's descendants. The story goes on to tell how God had Abraham send Ishmael away, but not before promising that Ishmael's descendants would be a great nation (Genesis 21:8-21). Many believe that the Arab and Muslim people are those descendants, and that they have been engaged in a sibling rivalry ever since.

This division in Genesis has led to the suspect belief that anyone opposed to the political nation of Israel today is an enemy of God, and anyone who supports her is in God's favor. The result is a theology that supports war in the Middle East—even celebrates it—as a selfish way to play God's hand to bring Christ closer to returning so we can get out of here.

The tragedy of a theological support for violence and bloodshed is an obstruction of efforts for peace. Christ is reduced to a general who will war over a particular piece of land at the expense of an entire people group; a savior who will use violence to establish a kingdom of peace.

Such a theology ignores the work of Christ on the cross for all of humanity (John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9), ignores our call to be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9), to help turn swords into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4), and to fight against our real enemy: the spiritual forces in dark places (Eph. 6:12).

A theology that singles out a particular people group as the enemies of God is borderline racist. A theology that says a particular people group must be destroyed if they don't convert makes Christianity no different than the other radical religions today declaring unbelievers must convert or be killed.

Salvation, and the establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven, is no longer based on bloodline or nationality, and it will not be won by military or political conquest. The whole Earth is the Lord's, no longer just one piece of land in the Middle East.⁹

9. Richter, *The Epic of Eden*, pp. 229-233.

4. It rejects the Incarnation (and prevenient grace).

Eugene Peterson translates John 1:14 as, “The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood.”¹⁰ The very nature of the Incarnation is that God became fully human in Jesus Christ in order to share in our sufferings.

Through Christ’s birth, life, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Holy Spirit, God’s intention is to be with his people in the midst of suffering. And the Incarnate Christ calls his followers to be incarnate in the broken world in which we live as the Body of Christ, broken for the world, until he returns in final victory. The idea of a Christ who will fly out his believers so that they don’t have to suffer completely contradicts the Christ who moved into the neighborhood to suffer with all of humanity.

Furthermore, the support of bloodshed to bring about the return of Christ forgets that the enemies of a particular country are not necessarily the enemies of God. To reduce people this way denies the salvation work of prevenient grace.

The theology of prevenient grace maintains that God created all of humanity in his image, and though we have

10. Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Illinois: NavPress, 2011)

sinned and turned away, we still bear his image. Through the Holy Spirit, God is working in every person on Earth so that they may come to know him through Christ, even if they are not aware of it (John 1:9; Acts 17:26-27).

But the gospel was never intended to be spread through violence. God cannot be both pursuing people by grace for salvation, while having at the same time already pre-determined that they are an enemy who must be killed.

For the sake of the gospel, we need some theological course-correction regarding Christ's return. But before we can look to a more hopeful image of his return, we need to address the mother of all rapture proof-texts: the Book of Revelation.

PART 3

Q6: What is Revelation really about?

Revelation is the text most used in rapture theology. Its unsettling images, coded language and use of numbers have made it the most confusing and feared book in the Bible. Many pastors seem to either avoid it altogether, or almost exclusively teach it as a “road map” of the end times. But both extremes are toxic to our understanding of the Scriptures.

So then how should we look at this difficult book? It is no easy task, and must be done prayerfully, but also with an understanding of its context.

John wrote the book of Revelation while a prisoner of the Roman Empire on the island of Patmos (off the coast of modern-day Turkey). His audience was Jewish believers in Jesus who lived under threat of persecution and death for their faith in Christ.

Revelation is written in the style of apocalyptic literature, a genre used by Jews and Christians to reveal secrets and truths about God and his supernatural work in the world in a way that could not be described by human

understanding. John's audience understood prophecy to be the articulation of God's actions in human history to restore the Kingdom, not so much telling about the future.¹¹

John opens the book of Revelation with, "This is an apocalypse of Jesus Christ." Today, the word apocalypse is used to describe some kind of end-times, cataclysmic disaster. But in John's day, the word apocalypse did not mean "cataclysm" or "destruction," but rather "to reveal or unveil."

Apocalyptic writing is characterized by a supernatural vision or event. John writes in Revelation 1:10-16 that he was taken into the full presence of Christ:

10 It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshiping in the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast. 11 It said, "Write in a book everything you see, and send it to the seven churches in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea." 12 When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lamp-stands. 13 And standing in the middle of the lamp-stands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. 14 His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. 15 His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. 16 He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp

11. Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 33-34.

two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance.

Now watch this: John also says in Chapter 1 of his Gospel that in the beginning, all of creation was created by God through Jesus Christ, who brings a brilliant light into the world:

- 1 In the beginning the Word already existed.
The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
- 2 He existed in the beginning with God.
- 3 God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except through him.
- 4 The Word gave life to everything that was created,
and his life brought light to everyone.
- 5 The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.

And in Colossians 1:15-20, Paul says that everything was made through Christ, is held together by Christ, and is reconciled through Christ:

- 15 Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.
He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,
- 16 for through him God created everything
in the heavenly realms and on earth.
He made the things we can see
and the things we can't see—
such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.
Everything was created through him and for him.

17 He existed before anything else,
and he holds all creation together.
18 Christ is also the head of the church,
which is his body.
He is the beginning,
supreme over all who rise from the dead.
So he is first in everything.
19 For God in all his fullness
was pleased to live in Christ,
20 and through him God reconciled
everything to himself.
He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth
by means of Christ's blood on the cross.

So if all of creation and all of human history is, was, and will be in Christ, then what John is describing is not a cataclysmic set of future events, but a revelation of Jesus Christ and his work in all of human history. John is describing what he sees all at once: the fullness of Christ and all of cosmic history, from first creation, to the fall and its effects, to the work of the Cross and the resurrection, to new creation. Like Moses on Mt. Sinai, John is seeing what no human before had seen, and trying to describe it was like trying to describe a sunset to someone who is blind. So he used the descriptive word *like* (“His voice thundered *like* mighty ocean waves” “His face was *like* the sun in all its brilliance”).¹²

12. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. “NT 666: Revelation” (class lectures, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY, January 2006).

Q7: So how should we read Revelation?

Context is everything. Words or phrases can evolve or change in meaning over time, so we must consider the context when interpreting something a writer or speaker says.

Here's a little story about the hazards and pitfalls of evolving words: I have two daughters, ages 5 and 3. Somewhere along the way, they learned the word *booty*, as in bottom; rear-end, posterior. I don't know where this came from. They talk about their booties when they have to go the bathroom. They like to dance around and yell, "I wiggle my booty." They call each other booty. They think it's hilarious.

Over and over again their mother and I tell them booty is not a nice word, especially the way they like to use it. We encourage them to you use "bottom" instead, and to use it appropriately. So far, we're failing.

Rewind a few years to when I was in seminary, sitting in my class "Introduction to the Old Testament." The professor was lecturing on the conquest of Canaan, when the forty years of desert wandering was over, and the

Israelites were about to take possession of the Promised Land.

She described the different battle locations, detailing the what, how, and why as different cities and fortresses were destroyed. And then she said it:

“Now, unlike other conquests of this time period, they did not take any booty.”

A few of us giggled.

We know what she meant. Booty is an older term for “plunder” or “treasure.” She was trying to tell us how God instructed his people not to take any of the Canaanites’ possessions as spoils of war.

But in the back of the room, our inner junior-higher kicked in, and we heard something else.

And she kept going.

“You see, often times the conquering army would take over a city, strip them down, and take their booty.”

We lost it, and a respectful room of seminary graduate students had to be disciplined like an 8th-grade biology class.

Do you see it? The professor was using the word in its earlier context: the spoils of war. For us, the context of the word had changed to mean someone's posterior.

But for us to understand the point of her message, we had to understand the word as she meant to use it, or else we would (and did) come up with our own interpretation, one that had nothing to do with what she was attempting to convey.

Rapture theology writers tend to interpret and proof-text John's descriptive images in light of a current event, bending Scripture into the theology and history they are looking for. However, whatever a word or phrase meant when the biblical author used it, we must read it with that same meaning today.

We see this in the earlier example used to justify the rapture in the Gospel of Matthew and Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. But Revelation is a different beast.

Q8: What is with all the crazy images, numbers, etc.?

One aspect of apocalyptic literature is its use of other-worldly images specific to the intended audience in order to convey a deeper story. John's audience was Jewish believers in Christ living in the heart of the Roman Empire; an empire where Caesar was considered to be a divinity, and professing Jesus as Lord instead of Caesar could lead to suffering and death. If John was writing about the cosmic, victorious work of Christ in all of human history, then in the world of Ceasar, this would serve as an encouragement for believers to live as Kingdom citizens in the midst of a fallen empire. In order to write to them "under the radar" in a sense, he wrote in apocalyptic code, using images and words that would make sense to them, but not others (specifically, agents of the Empire).

To help illustrate, here's an example of the use of images from our present day: I came across a bumper sticker with an image of a Confederate battle flag waving over the White House with the phrase, "I have a dream." As an American citizen, I know the history of our Civil War and the message implied by this particular flag. I know the White House is the home of the leader of our

country, who happens to be an African American. And I know the phrase “I have a dream” comes from a particular moment in the civil rights struggle of our history. I know who said it and why—none of it needs to be explained to me. So when I see all three images and phrases together, I immediately know the deeper (yet horrible) underlying message the creator of the bumper sticker intended. But if the sticker is buried for a thousand years, and then dug up by someone from China, how would the images and words be interpreted if they didn’t know the context?

In much the same way, John drew from the history and imagination of his Jewish readers: the Old Testament. By using images and phrases from creation, the flood, the Exodus, the Temple, the exile (and others), coupled with the Jewish practice of using numbers to explain deeper ideas, John would convey to his readers the deeper spiritual and theological meanings behind those images. The Temple was the seat of God’s presence among his people. The Old Testament was the story of God’s actions in, among and for his people.

For example, because modern-day Iraq is the location of ancient Babylon, and Babylon is named in the book of Revelation, it is seen in rapture theology as the place where war has to happen as part of the end times. But in John’s day, “Babylon” would have had a different

connotation. Babylon was the pagan superpower in the Old Testament, and the land where God's people were taken into exile. John's use of Babylon was a coded way of talking about the Roman Empire, or any empire that was a manifestation of an unholy world.

Over the centuries, Revelation has been interpreted many different ways: As something that happened in the past, something that will happen in the future, something that is only to be read as spiritual metaphor, or as literal history. But the key to understanding its true message, as stated in the last chapter, hinges on understanding what it would have meant to John's original audience.

PART 4

Q9: So what about the return of Christ?

The mystery of our faith declares *Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.*¹³

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he promised he would return once and for all and bring a final judgment, a final dealing with evil and sin in the world, and a final establishment of God's kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven.

But what will that look like? Here's a little story:

For twenty-six years my father commuted to work between Dallas, Texas, and Cairo, Egypt. He's a petroleum engineer, and that's where the work was. He was usually gone between three to six months, but often it was longer. A couple of times, he was gone for more than a year.

Dad runs a tight ship. But the second the wheels on his plane went up, my mom, little brother, and I would

13. "Service of Word and Table I." *United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), p.38.

immediately put things to our liking. No eating in the living room? Not anymore. No phone allowed in my room? We would take the one next to his bed and put it next to mine. The dog isn't allowed in the house? Guess who's cuddled up on the sofa taking a nap? Finish your homework first? My favorite show is on, so I'll watch it while eating pancakes for dinner in the living room, while feeding bacon to the dog.

We slacked off on everything.

Until the phone call. The one saying that my father was in the air and would be home in a few hours.

We never knew when he would return. There would be rumors, and plans would be made. But there was always another contract negotiation, or crisis in the field, or something to hold him up. So it was common practice for his office to wait until he was on a plane somewhere over the Atlantic before they would let us know.

And then we would panic.

We always thought that we had plenty of time to leisurely get things in order. Now it was all hands on deck! Vacuum. Shake the dog dander off the sofa cushions. Throw something that wasn't pancakes, pizza, or

takeout in the oven for dinner. Get that phone back on our father's nightstand. Is the dog still in the house?

We made big "Welcome Home Dad!" banners and hung them from the fireplace mantle, then went to pick him up at the airport. There would be hugs and celebration, gifts of chocolate from his layovers in Frankfurt, unpacking of bags, and a night's sleep to overcome the jet-lag.

Then my father would wake up the next morning and get right to work. Sitting in his office, he would pore over every statement, bill and report card piled up in his absence.

And then came the reckoning—a judgement in the form of a question: "What have you been doing while I was gone?"

He would lay out the evidence of money that shouldn't have been spent, late payments on bills, and slipping grades. He would present his findings of our lifestyle while he was away: dog hairs on the carpet, needless long-distances charges, no real food in the pantry, a demerit report from a teacher.

You see, he had a certain set of expectations while he was gone: Be the same person while I'm away that you are when I'm home."

When Jesus returns, how the Church answers the question, "What were you doing while I was gone?" will be the starting point of judgement.

But that is only the beginning of judgement.

Q10: What will the judgment be?

We tend to think of a judge as someone who hands out punishment to those who have done wrong and rewards those who did right. But in the Scriptures, judgment is also about fixing what is broken and restoring what was lost. Steve Seamands tells us that in Scripture, judgment was “not primarily about rewards and punishments or balancing scales, but about fixing what’s been broken and making wrong things right.”¹⁴

He also points to N.T. Wright, who explains the judgment as a celebration of Psalm 96:11-13: “In a world of systematic injustice, bullying violence, arrogance and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be.”¹⁵

We should have a healthy fear when Christ returns, because we will be judged for what we have done and left undone. So how do we fall on the right side of judgment?

14. Stephen Seamands, *Give Them Christ* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2012), p. 172.

15. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, p.137

Let's start with what Jesus says in Matthew 25:41-46:

41 "Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, 'Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons.

42 For I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink. 43 I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'

44 "Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?'

45 "And he will answer, 'I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.'

46 "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life."

This is the reversal of the "left behind" theology of judgment: it is not the wicked or unbeliever who faces the harshest judgement, but the religious. Here, Jesus' toughest judgment is for those who call themselves righteous, and the judgment is that they did not work to help fix what is broken and make wrong things right.

So how should we prepare for the return of Christ? Certainly not by trying to map out and divine the day when we're out of here and don't have to suffer like the rest of the world. We are called to share in the sufferings of Christ until he returns in final judgment. So what are we to do until then?

Q11: How do we live in light of judgment?

If there is one thing I appreciate about rapture theology, it is the desire for Christ to return, but for different reasons. Where rapture theology seems to champion a “we win, you lose” posture, I believe there is a more humble hope in the final chapter of the story.

With Jesus’s death and resurrection, the reign of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven was established. However, we still live under the effects of the fall: sin, sickness, death. The kingdom may be established, but it will not be fully realized until Christ returns in final victory.

We call this tension the “already, not yet” aspect of the kingdom, and it is into this tension we are called to live until Christ returns.

To illustrate what this looks like, consider the story of Alexander Ross and the Underground Railroad:

While the tendency is to look to Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, the full story of freedom from slavery is told in the secret network of individuals,

groups, churches, and others who helped slaves escape from the South to the North and Canada.

One such story of subversion is the tale of Dr. Alexander Ross. After having a conversation with an abolitionist, a convicted Dr. Ross became creative in helping slaves escape: he pretended to be a scientist studying birds. This ruse would allow him onto plantations, where he would quietly give slaves information on routes of escape. Sometimes he would offer them food, money, compasses, weapons, and the names of people who would shelter them.

He once pretended a female slave was his personal servant and led her all the way to Ontario, Canada, to be reunited with her husband.

According to his records, Ross helped free at least 31 slaves.¹⁶

Howard Snyder points out that though Abraham Lincoln had not yet delivered the Emancipation Proclamation, the people of the Underground Railroad lived as though it had already happened, and so worked to

16. "Alexander Ross: Rescuing 'Flocks' of Runaways." Cincinnati, Ohio: National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, 2010. Information Plaque.

free as many slaves as they could.¹⁷ This is what “already, not yet” looks like. This is “on earth as it is in heaven.”

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah tells the story of God’s people done in by their sin, but also the future hope of their rescue. He said the rescue of humanity and the restoration of God’s kingdom would begin when the eyes of the blind were opened, the ears of the deaf were unstopped, and the lame leaped like deer (Isaiah 35:5-6).

In the New Testament, when John the Baptist was in prison, he sent a message to Jesus and asked if he was the Rescuer. Was he bringing the Kingdom, or would it be someone else? In Matthew 11:2-4, Jesus answered in subversive code:

4 Jesus answered them, “Go tell John what you hear and see: 5 The blind can see, the crippled can walk, and people with skin diseases are healed. The deaf can hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor.

In other words, the kingdom is here now. We are not waiting until one glad morning when this life is over, we

17 Howard Snyder. “Waiting in Eager Expectation” (lecture, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY, October 18, 2005).

fly away and all get to heaven. Heaven is wherever God is, and because of Christ's birth, life, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Holy Spirit, heaven can be here now. Who would want to leave that behind?

Conclusion: The story we should tell

Rapture theology motivates salvation by fear, and attempts to promise control by claiming knowledge of the future. It takes passages from all over the Bible out of context and re-weaves them into a narrative the Bible never intended to tell. But what if, instead of distinct ages broken up and separated, the story followed one continuous line? What if instead of blowing the whole place up and building something new, the Scriptures are telling a different story? If so, then rapture theology must be left behind.

In the opening of his letter to the seven churches, John does not say he is writing a revelation of the end times or of judgment, but a revelation of Jesus Christ. Revelation shows us that God's story is not broken into dispensations, but has been a connected and ongoing prophetic story. From before the foundations of the earth were laid, to the garden, across the desert, and into the promised land, God has been working out the salvation of his people. At the heart of the revelation of Jesus is the love of God that was manifested on the cross. And so we can look to the future, to that day when there will be no more sorrow or death, and people of every tribe, tongue, and nation are gathered around the throne and

the Lamb, and all of creation is restored to God's original intent, as it was in Eden.

Until that day comes, John wrote his letter to those who would suffer and die for living a holy life in an unholy world. It was intended to be a comfort and encouragement by showing that no matter what happens, God is still in control. The final victory belongs to Christ through his death, resurrection, and ascension, and this victory will be made complete when he returns. So, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can live out our discipleship as kingdom citizens in the midst of a fallen world now, not when we get out of here.

This is our hope. This is our story. May we tell it well.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

Resources for Further Study

Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

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Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (New York: HarperOne, 1991).

You can also download Robert Mulholland's entire Book of Revelation NT-666 class lectures from iTunes.

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