

13. DEBUNKING THE RAPTURE



FOCUS: Failing to understand the message of hope offered in the Book of Revelation, many Christians have been misled by 19th century doomsayers and modern-day apocalyptic preachers who proclaim their vengeful god's impending extermination of the apostate masses. Just what part of "love your enemies" doesn't their god understand?

REQUIEM FOR THE RAPTURE

"The Rapture is a racket. Whether prescribing a violent script for Israel or survivalism in the United States, this theology distorts God's vision for the world. In place of healing, the Rapture proclaims escape. In place of Jesus' blessing of peacemakers, the Rapture voyeuristically glorifies violence and war. In place of Revelation's vision of the Lamb's vulnerable self-giving love, the Rapture celebrates the lion-like wrath of the Lamb. This theology is not biblical. We are not Raptured off the earth, nor is God. No, God has come to live in the world through Jesus. God created the world, God loves the world, and God will never leave the world behind!"

— Barbara Rossing,

The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation

Over the last 150 years, countless millions have been caught up in various forms of Rapture theology. Scripture, torn from its context, is manipulated as a weapon of fear and intimidation. An offended God is portrayed as being out for vengeance – and people are encouraged to embrace a self-centered satisfaction in being personally "saved" at the expense of the suffering and death of family, friends, and neighbors. Barbara Rossing writes, "The Rapture vision invites a selfish non-concern for the world. It turns salvation into a personal 401(k) plan that saves only yourself." Meanwhile, a ravaging warrior Jesus is preparing to return to violently punish those who aren't the right kind of believers. So best get right or be "left behind."

While this belief system seems too abhorrent to be the obsession of anything but a few fringe thinkers, *Time* magazine discovered that fully 59% of respondents to their poll said they believe the events of Revelation are going to come true. ("Apocalypse Now," June 23, 2002) In fact, despite a record of having never been right on anything, the sensational prognostications of Rapture promoters have, in our day, fueled what can only be called its own end times "industry."

The pastors, teachers, and authors who have visited this indignation on so many trusting people are either conniving, snake-oil salesmen (and don't forget Rexella!) who should be ashamed of themselves or poor sots who actually believe their own foolishness and are in need of our pity. Regardless of their motives, they have struck fear into the hearts of innumerable innocents with

elaborate constructs of immanent cosmic destruction. Their shameless schemes have ruined lives and raked in millions worth of profit, while the original purpose of apocalyptic literature and the true context and meaning of the book of Revelation have been buried behind un-biblical Nostradamus-esqe prophecies.

THE COMING OF DARBY'S *SECOND* SECOND COMING

"It's the end of the world as we know it."

-REM

Little did 19th century evangelist John Nelson Darby know, that when he conceived of what was to become "premillinarian dispensationalism," his musings would one day capture the imagination of millions and become the foundational cosmology for millions more. According to the scriptures Darby cobbled together, the Bible sketches out a cosmic calendar of events leading to the end of time. Before the end comes, Jesus returns to spirit away all true believers into heaven in an event dubbed, the "Rapture." Never mind that the word never occurs in scripture – according to adherents, the event is clearly described in the text. After seven years when those who have remained behind suffer great "tribulations," Jesus returns a *second* time (the *second* second coming) to exterminate the evil forces gathered at Armageddon. After the battle, there will be a thousand years of peace and prosperity.

To anyone outside the Rapture cult, the sheer fabrication of the idea is painfully obvious – and because its sources are disparate and unrelated texts, everyone in the clique claims and argues over a different story. Be it Dispensationalism, Postmillennialism, Historic Premillennialism, Dispensational Premillennialism, or some variation on one of the above, the texts cited by Dispensationalists are taken completely out of context and have absolutely nothing to do with one another, let alone the make-believe Rapture. Unconsciously drawing on the dualism of Zoroastrianism and the Manichaeism declared a heresy by the early church, Rapture proponents believe that the world is evil and that the righteous must escape before a vengeful God destroys it. The message of Revelation has been warped to sensationalize the death and destruction of masses of people, to prop up fundamentalist Christians' own prejudices, and sanctify the status quo.

Many of the primary doctrines of modern fundamentalist Christians, including the Rapture, have their primary source in the relatively recent Scofield Reference Bible of 1909. This "Reference Bible" includes section headings and margin notes that support Darby's theology and the investigations of earnest prophecy sleuths. The Moody Bible Institute is just one of the schools and other institutions that have raised up generations of Rapture-anticipating Christians who promote their message through local churches, conferences, publications, radio and TV.

One of the best sellers of the genre has been Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* published in the 1970s. Continually updated to recast the current political landscape as the definite proof of the Rapture's immanence, it has paled in

significance with the popular success of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* novels. First published in the late 1990s, they are now cross-promoted through a variety of media, including movies, DVDs, and video games.

It would be one thing if this were just bad theology embraced by harmless kooks. But in fact, it has become so influential that it is affecting public policy and international relations. Rossing contends that a side benefit of the *Left Behind* novels is its having established a "power platform" for the Religious Right. In the course of the story, readers are not-so-subliminally influenced "on a whole range of conservative political issues including anti-abortion, anti-homosexuality, anti-environmentalism, militarism, and Middle East policy, as well as opposition to the United Nations." The faithful are relieved of any need to be concerned for the environment or any other aspect of the world; for in the course of their personal salvation, the earth and all the evils therein will be destroyed.

But sociologist and Baptist preacher, Tony Campolo, has argued to the contrary, saying Christians would

"...never leave suffering people behind or we couldn't call ourselves Christian. What the Bible makes clear is that we are to stay here in this world struggling against the powers of darkness. No wonder America spits on the UN — and they put down what government can do. I think that we need to challenge the government to do the work of the Kingdom of God, to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord. That whole sense of the rapture, which may occur at any moment, is used as a device to oppose engagement with the principalities, the powers, the political and economic structures of our age."

— comments by Tony Campolo to the *Baptist Press*,
www.umcnet.com, June 2003

DOOMSDAY IS COMING...NOT!

"So we keep waiting; waiting on the world to change."

— John Mayer

When Revelation was written, it was not unique. The genre of apocalyptic literature was popular with both Jews and Christians. Apocalypse simply means "unveiling." The form was originally intended to reveal a hopeful vision for people, for the idea of gradual change wasn't a common concept in the ancient world. Progress was seen as a series of ages, one after the other, that changed with suddenness. In Hebrew thought, there are three "ages": 1. Original paradise, 2. The cursed world, and 3. The Messianic kingdom. An "apocalypse" was therefore the Hebrew way of expressing hope for the victory of God and the triumph of righteousness.

As Christians entered the story, they took over that phrasing of expectancy and aimed it squarely at the oppressive rule of Rome. While the New Testament is aglow with "Christ is coming!" the notion of the second coming was for the early

Christian a very specific way of expressing hope in overcoming their suffering under the heel of Empire. It was essentially “resistance literature” hiding the promise of triumph in fantastical images and language. The “end,” as announced in *Revelation*, is not the end of the world, but the end of the Roman Empire (take heed, present-day imperial powers!).

Unfortunately, the historical and political are lost on present day Rapture proponents. “Christ is coming!” seems to be the central message of the Gospel for many Christians. They either sit still and do nothing and expect the world to grow increasingly chaotic until Christ comes – or worse, they intentionally do what they can to achieve what they think will promote or hasten the end.

A group of über-Christian Texas ranchers have been doing their part to “bring it on” by helping fundamentalist Israeli Jews to breed a pure red heifer, a genetically rare beast that must be sacrificed to fulfill an apocalyptic prophecy found in the Book of Numbers.

At www.raptureready.com, you can track how many weeks you have left to get your affairs in order. The “Rapture Index” tracks all the latest news in relation to biblical prophecy. Among its leading indicators of Apocalypse are oil supply and price, famine, drought, plagues, wild weather, floods, and climate.

After Sept. 11th, there’s been yet another wave of Apocalypticism in American culture: Christ is coming literally, externally, on the clouds of heaven, to make things right and set up his literal Kingdom here.

“Mark it down, take it to heart, and comfort one another with these words. Doomsday is coming for the earth, for the nations, and for individuals, but those who have trusted in Jesus will not be present on earth to witness the dire time of tribulation.”

— John Hagee, pastor of the 17,000-member Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, quoted in Barbara Rossing’s *The Rapture Exposed*

“NO SIGN WILL BE GIVEN”

It’s a scenario that always seems to pop up when frightening circumstances arise and people’s only hope seems to lie in divine intervention. But even in Greek tragedies, such plot twists were mocked as cheap. Called *Deus ex Machina* (God on a Machine), it is used only when the plot and circumstances of the play become impossibly complicated and irresolvable. Then, at the last minute, an actor playing a god is lowered by a crane into the midst of the action to rescue the righteous and save the day. Questionable plot and slapdash exegesis notwithstanding, the Rapture starts at the end with a Christian *Deus ex Machina* and leaves befuddled Bible readers to work out the circumstances that trigger the crane’s descent.

Despite the Gospel of Matthew’s warning that only “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of

Jonah,” (*Matthew 16:4*) whole denominations of people are totally absorbed with the minutiae of Biblical prophecy and second-guessing the unfolding of history. The sign of Jonah, as Bill Nelson says, “...is not about a dumb fish!” Ironically, the “sign of Jonah” is a reminder of God’s unpredictable grace. Jonah experienced firsthand how God short-circuits any legalistic understanding of rules or events that force the Divine to behave in a prescribed manner or show favoritism to one particular tribe or another.

“To let the gospel work on us is to overcome the prejudices and fears that close the mind. It is to allow common sense and prudent judgment to prevail. To live by this sign is to learn to laugh as the author of Jonah did at the silly, chauvinistic behavior of himself and his people, so certain that God preferred them over the Ninevites.”

— Robert Jewett, *Jesus Against the Rapture*, pg 83

And yet, a vast amount of intellectual energy is spent combing the scriptures for passages that support the shallow and chauvinistic tenets of fundamentalist Biblical prophecy. Devotees have convinced themselves that the Hebrew prophets, the writers of Christian scripture, and Jesus himself were in on secret knowledge that is waiting just for the uncovering – if only they can tease out the clues.

“One of the appealing aspects of Dispensationalism is its apparently systematic and comprehensive explanation of Scripture. Everything in Scripture fits together to form a consistent picture. Moreover, the dispensationalist system assumes that every word in the Bible comes directly from God. Like fundamentalists, dispensationalists do not allow that there are any errors in the Bible, but insist that God inspired the human authors to record exactly what we have.”

— Perry V. Kea

“The Theology Behind *Left Behind*” in *The Fourth R* Nov.-Dec. 2006

But no matter how it’s “spun” through a very narrow reading of scripture, the apocalyptic vision set forth by televangelists is of a god restoring justice through divine retribution — what one scholar calls “divine ethnic cleansing.” This ideology, espoused so dramatically by the *Left Behind* series, has essentially hijacked Jesus’ message, taken advantage of a culture of fear, and rationalized voyeuristic primal urges that enjoy wrath and war. Indeed, it has been said that

“Today’s Christian fixation on Armageddon and war is a sickness...”

— Barbara Rossing,

The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation

“JESUS IS COMING. LOOK BUSY.”

Some believe Jesus was an apocalyptic preacher. Indeed, there are passages in the gospels that paint such a portrait. But if Jesus was an apocalyptic preacher, he was wrong, since the end of the world didn’t come in his lifetime (nor has it since). But the question isn’t whether or not Jesus was wrong. Nor is it whether he preached divine retribution — on occasion the gospel writers certainly put

such words on his lips. The real question is, wasn't Jesus' message the Kingdom of God, an inclusive realm marked by justice and divine love?

There are many strands in the fabric of scripture, and apocalypticism is certainly one of them. But it's not the only one. Simply put, the apocalyptic image of Jesus returning in power on a majestic white horse with sword in hand to slaughter the evil masses absolutely contradicts the Jesus who taught us to love our enemies, the humble Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and would later tell his disciples that "those who live by the sword will die by the sword." How could one who practiced non-violence and compassion denounce his core values and embrace brute force, violence and vengeance? It is simply inconceivable that the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ would resort to retribution. It is more than inconceivable; it is unbelievable.

In her book, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, Barbara Rossing asserts that *Revelation's* true message is a "vision of hope for God's healing of the world." A divine plan to dramatically and violently enter into history and remake the world is a lie. The literal "second coming" will never happen – and yet we are called to participate in the coming of the Kingdom here and now. Slow it may be, but the will and principles of a just and gracious God are being worked out in human life and institutions – in us! We are the second coming, called to manifest a message of hope to a world in fear.

"Revelation calls us to 'come out' of the beast's realm of violence and injustice so that we can participate in the beloved city of God. That call ... is the key to Revelation's ethical imperative. The book wants us to follow the Lamb in a life-changing exodus."

— Barbara Rossing,
The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation

Insofar as one perceives the mystery of the Divine as the benevolent ground of all being and that Mystery to have been revealed in Jesus, then there is certainly nothing to fear from the ravings of apocalyptic preachers and authors. Our call continues to be one of offering an alternative to the fear and violence embraced by so much of the Church. The message of *Revelation* is but one facet of the disciples' overall responsibility of bearing hope and reconciliation to a troubled world — doing our part to bring healing to the nations, one person at a time.

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

Describe the origins and meaning of the idea of “eschatology.”

What is apocalyptic eschatology?

Crossan points out the heart of Christian teaching is that the Kingdom “has already begun.” How did the Biblical authors get it wrong?

Why did Paul’s eschatology change over time?

According to Rossing, what would a good “warning label” be for the *Left Behind* books?

DVD Chapter 3:

Highlight some of the history and creators of the notion of the so-called “rapture.”

What part of Darby’s theology is anything more than fantasy?

Describe the origin and influence of the *Scofield Reference Bible*.

According to Rossing, why do we have to counter this fictional Biblical timeline?

Theologically and psychologically, what does the rapture mentality foster?

DVD Chapter 4:

What does the God revealed in Jesus suggest about his character?

How does the vision of a violent apocalypse sync with that character?

What does Crossan suggest is our “great Christian treason?”

DVD Chapter 5:

What is the appeal of the *Left Behind* stories?

What are some of the possible elements of the “different story” Rossing sees a need for?

What is the significance of the Greek word, *epignosko*?

If Jesus doesn't come to us through violence, death, war, and disaster, where will we find him?

SPIRITPRACTICE:

Discerning "Thin Places" with Marcus Borg

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

Be sure to follow up on this session's theme with Session 13's *Living it Out*: "The Healing of the Nations" distributed by your facilitator.