

RAPTURE

In case you haven't noticed, rapture is big business. The *Left Behind* series of books alone has sold over fifty million copies. It is a publishing phenomenon. This is both a theological viewpoint and a huge business embraced with heartfelt emotion by millions and millions around the globe. And its primary focus is whether you will be one who is seized in the "twinkling of an eye" or whether you will be one who is *Left Behind*.

In addition to that series there are hundreds of other books. One that was very influential in the seventies was Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey's book, and many like it, resonated with the fear of the coming Armageddon resulting from the expected hot nuclear end of the cold Cold War. Be it *Left Behind* or *The Late Great...*, enter rapture into your search engine and you will get hundreds of hits. These folks and thousands like them write about, talk about, and make products about the rapture for a living. In addition to the all the books, web sites, tapes and DVD's, there are tee shirts and bumper stickers. I am sure you have seen the one that says: In case of the rapture this car will be unmanned. (I have not yet seen the one that says unwomanned.) To these books, bumper stickers, web sites and tee shirts add all of those wonderful *New Yorker* cartoons. You know the ones I mean. The little bearded guy stands on the street corner carrying a sign that says: "The end is near." Add your punch line. All things considered the end of time may be more about profits than prophets.

For those of you who have been raised in faith traditions where the rapture is not part of the future cosmic landscape let me fill you in. The dictionary defines rapture as: "The state of being transported by a lofty emotion; ecstasy." So, of course, it can be used in any kind of a sexy or

secular context. You can even order Rapture online from Victoria's Secret. The blurb describing this fragrance said: "Attracts men. Guaranteed!" That is not the meaning of rapture that we will examine today although it does have a certain appeal. The dictionary also defines rapture as the "transporting of a person from one place to another, especially to heaven." Ok. Now we're talking! The evangelical Christian view is that it is the literal raising up of the faithful before the last days.

A belief in the Rapture is a belief in certain things that will happen at the end of time as we know it. Specifically, it is a belief that the chosen, the saved, will be beamed up in an instant, that wherever they are—working in the field, eating a pizza, answering email—they will simply disappear. When I thought about this growing up I hoped that I wasn't doing something really gross like dying my hair at that exact moment. I thought about patients left without surgeons, kids flying off of unmanned seesaws, and kissing someone who just went away. Those who are gathered up in a millisecond are taken to heaven to avoid the period here on earth known as the Tribulation. They will be spared all of that agony and grief, but those left behind will not be so lucky. There is a lot more to say about it, so many nuances, details, descriptions. Check out the web sites.

My reflections are not about whether or not any aspect of this belief system is true. I do not know when the world is going to end or how it is going to end. I do not know whether it will be, as T. S. Eliot wrote, with a bang or a whimper, or, as Robert Frost wrote, by fire or ice. I do know that it is totally and absolutely and irrefutably in the hands of Almighty God. But for others it is a cherished and central belief; they selectively use scripture to passionately defend it. Beliefs about the rapture are an amalgam of various texts including the ones we read today. My reflections, then, are about how a

preoccupation with, or even an obsession with, this theology of end times plays out in your life, in your faith, and in your view and treatment of others.

Today's text in Luke is one of the primary "end times" texts in the Gospels. It is important to remember that Luke's Gospel was written around 85 AD; the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD. So Luke's listeners know that Jesus' words about the Temple have already come to pass. Jesus speaks these words during the Feast of the Passover; it is near the end of his ministry. The folks who have come to the Temple are not unlike those who make a pilgrimage to St Patrick's or St. Peter's. They are oohing and aahing over the beautiful stones and offerings. Jesus jumps on that. He says: "These things you are looking at (think Tiffany stained glass and the Michelangelo sculptures)—days will come when there will not be a stone left. It will be a pile of rubble." Whooooaaa. There's a *turista* buzz kill. Look at their reaction. The first thing they say is: when will this happen? Not who will do it, or why, or you can't be serious, but when. Then: what will be the sign that this will happen?

How human to want to know exactly when. How human to look for a sign. Listen carefully to what Jesus says to them in response to their questions. What he says is a guidebook for how we are supposed to deal with our concerns about such things. First he says: do not be deceived. Don't be faked out, duped, conned. A lot of people will come and say: I am here representing Jesus. It's time. In response to this Jesus issues a command, not a request, a command. He says: "Do not follow them." Then he immediately follows this command with a second one. "When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not panic." Again a command: "Do not panic. Do not panic."

Let me pause here and ask you this. Why would anyone do this? Why would they try to make folks believe that the world was going to end?

Could it be because, as Hitler's Chief of Staff, Herman Goering wrote: "Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked..." Could it be, perhaps, that fear and terror are so powerful and that panic almost always leads to the destruction of ourselves and others?

But back to the text. First, do not follow them. Second, do not panic. (Don't be conned. Don't freak out.) And then he tells them that some very bad things will happen to them. No word here of being spared. You will be persecuted. You will be sent to prison. You will be hauled into court. You will be betrayed by your family. Some of you will be killed. No escape here. No miraculous disappearance. Instead, an opportunity. Look at verse 13. "It will turn out to be a chance for you to bear witness. Therefore put it in your hearts not to prepare ahead of time...for I will give you speech and wisdom..." Second, look at verse 19. "You will gain possession of your lives by your endurance." He says: Things can get really rough. When they do, speak from your heart of all that Jesus has done and will do. And endurance matters.

Now I pause a moment to compare these words to the words in the book we are studying. It is called *Living the Questions*. And here are the words we will explore tomorrow night from the chapter titled *Debunking the Rapture*. The chapter begins with a quote from Barbara Rossing:

"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's 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!”

After this the author continues: “While Tex Sample was riding in the car with another man, the talk turned to the Bible: He was telling me about that passage in Thessalonians where it says that when Christ comes again we will rise up in the air to meet him. He interpreted that passage very literally and began to tell me what would happen if the second coming should occur while we were riding together. He told me that he would be leaving the car very fast. He seemed convinced that I would not be leaving the car at all. So he told me that I would need to be prepared to grab the wheel as he left so that I would not crash. I remember thinking as he as describing these things that if he left that car that fast he was far more likely to be *ruptured* than raptured.”

Following Rossing’s quote and Sample’s story he comments: “While this belief system seems too ab horrent to be the obsession of anything but a few fringe thinkers, *Time* magazine discovered that fully 59 percent of respondents to their poll said they believe the events of Revelation are going to come true. 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. After spending more than \$100 million on billboards warning of the end of the world in 2011, radio personality Harold Camping garnered worldwide ridicule for his ‘Great News!’ prediction. Sadly his retirement from the business of predicting Judgement Day only leaves a niche for the next charlatan to rise up and hornswoggle the vulnerable.

The pastors, teachers and authors who have visited this indignation on so many trusting people are either conniving snake-oil salesmen who should be ashamed of themselves or poor souls who actually believe this foolishness and are to be pitied. 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 unbiblical Nostradamusesque prophecies.”

Ok. You can exhale now. Understand that things end. Everything ends. But don't make this the primary focus of your faith. Don't base your faith on terror. A little fear of the Lord is just fine. After all, God is God Almighty and we aren't. A little awe is good. I think, however, that if your primary motivation for accepting Jesus is to save your proverbial body part then you might be missing the point. Buy a bullet-proof vest, build a bomb shelter and wear your Jesus tee shirt. Each of those actions can, in certain circumstances, be wise. However, if you base your faith on commando Jesus it is probably a selfish religion, a self-centered religion, a religion that is about self-preservation, about being one of the survivors. This leads to the second problem with this apocalyptic view. A fixation on rapture inevitably leads to “them and us.” If you say and do certain things the way we think you should you are one of us and you will be selected. If you believe this you spend a lot of time trying to figure out who will go and who will stay. If this is how you see things you spend a lot of time judging. Judging. Judging.

Take a look at the passage in Luke again. Here's the point: panic should not be our primary motivation, and self-preservation should not be our greatest worry. That is not the Jesus way. The point is “...that we should not be panicked by such events. (There are always things that terrify us.) The same danger exists today except the reports come by way of the media and sometimes packaged by the media for good viewing.”¹ Just think of how many times you have thought to yourself: this is it. This is the end. When

¹ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost24.htm>

you saw pictures of emaciated Holocaust victims peering out from behind the barbed wire. When you saw newsreels of the bombing of Nagasaki. When you curled up like a snail under your little desk to practice protecting yourself in case those nasty Communists dropped a bomb on your little fifth grade head. When you or your friend saw villages burning in Vietnam. When you saw the apocalyptic images coming from New York City on September 11, 2001. When hurricane winds chased you up Route 95? When you were afraid that if you opened your mail you would die of anthrax. Was it anytime you saw the furious faces of enraged Iraqis or Palestinians or Israelis storming through streets while you watched on your entertainment center and ate popcorn? Or was it simply when things in your life got so dark and miserable you just thought this is it. This is it. This is it. This is it. Well even if it wasn't "it", "...the panic whipped up is highly volatile and has the potential to ignite and explode into irrationalities, religious and otherwise. The casualty is usually truth as racist and other generalized claims are made or people drive themselves into doomsday fantasies..."², when people surround themselves with sects and cults, when they curl up in a bunker in New Mexico and live only to die.

I repeat. I do not know when and how the world is going to end. I do not know how God Almighty will judge, although the more I study Scripture and the closer I grow to Jesus Christ the more inclusive and merciful I believe God to be. I do not know any of these things nor do I choose to spend any time thinking about them. There is too much else to do.

And that leads me to the new way to see the rapture. I don't think that this view will win me a guest spot on the 700 Club, but this is how I think about it based on my understanding of the Gospels at this moment in my life.

² Ibid.

As always, my view might evolve as I learn and study more. Jesus says he's got it covered. He gives us instructions, and he assures us, in a popular expression his day, that not one hair of our troubled heads will be singed by the fire or frozen by the ice. Accept that. And then turn your time and energy to what you can do now so that others are not left behind so that the hungry, the poor, the blind, the homeless, the children are not left behind. Here. Now. Look around you and see what the women and men in this congregation are doing here, now. They are, you are, living a life that shows that you do understand how you are suppose to live in this time before the end.

In each of these cases these women and men of the Gathering, and all friends of the Gathering, you who are so close to my heart, have chosen to hear the word of God, to speak the word of God, to act on the word of God. You have chosen to affirm life, to live life, to let love, not fear, drive you. You have chosen to trust. "Trust in God has profoundly personal implications. It also has important political, social and religious ramifications. Listen carefully to Luke. Luke has not withdrawn into individualism...He is prepared to be inventive, to tackle the madness of fear and hate and the fanatical theologies it also generates. He keeps our feet on the ground about abuse and oppression. He stands on a tradition which tackles enmity in a way that is not off-centered by hate or fear, but informed by the stillness and wisdom of the Spirit. The shift is then from quantity of time to quality of being in all times and places."³

The fact is that we do live in times when apocalyptic images and signs of end times are there if that is what we choose to see. We do have enough nuclear weapons to blow up the planet. If someone wants to wreak havoc

³ Ibid.

and let fly the dogs of war they have the technology and the micro-organisms to do it. We can go crazy thinking about this stuff. For so much of our thinking “...arises from our terror rather than our faith.”⁴

Sometimes we are afraid. Sometimes imagining disappearing into the clouds is a lovely thing to do. But if we choose to listen to what Jesus said—Don’t follow the fakes. Don’t panic. Speak up for me. Know you will be fine—our focus will not be on fear of being left out, left over or left behind. We will know that we are already grabbed, embraced, protected. And that knowledge frees us to live fully and fearlessly here and now. It frees us to work as hard as we can to make absolutely certain—by reaching out and giving in every way we can—that no child of God is ever left behind.

Amen.

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⁴ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1018>