



RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

'Eschatology' is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological 'system' scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular "Left Behind" system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

NO EVIDENCE FOR A RAPTURE

PART TWO

FROM "LAST DAYS MADNESS"

BY GARY DEMAR

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

In a debate on eschatology with Dave Hunt, I challenged him to point to one verse that taught a pre-tribulational rapture. He immediately appealed to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. Read it for yourself. The idea of a pre-tribulational rapture must be assumed by the reader and imposed on the text. Sound biblical interpretation, however, requires textual proof before a doctrine can be formulated.

Most postmillennialists and amillennialists see 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 as relating to the general resurrection of the saints. The text simply describes the raising of those who are "in Christ." No mention is made of the church being raptured either before or after a tribulation period. Nothing in the text even points to a tribulation period. Anthony Hoekema, an amillennialist, rejects the idea that the Apostle Paul was teaching a pre-tribulational rapture:

What this passage clearly teaches is that at the time of the Lord's return all the believing dead (the "dead in Christ") will be raised, and all believers who are still alive will be transformed and glorified (see 1 Corinthians 15:51-52); then these two groups will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. What these words do not teach is that after this meeting in the air the Lord will reverse his direction and go back to heaven, taking the raised and transformed members of the church with him. The passage does not breathe a word of this. To be sure, verse 17 ends with the words, "and so we shall always be with the Lord." But Paul does not say where we shall always be with the Lord. The idea that after meeting the Lord in the air we



shall be with him for seven years in heaven and later for a thousand years in the air above the earth is pure inference and nothing more. Everlasting oneness with Christ in glory is the clear teaching of this passage, not a pretribulational Rapture.¹⁵

Non-premillennialists do not deny the rapture as such (even though the word is not found in Scripture); they only deny the dispensationalists' version of it. Not only is the Bible on the side of those who view the rapture as the general resurrection, so are eighteen hundred years of church history: "As an established view, it can be traced back to J.N. Darby and the Plymouth Brethren in the year 1830. Some scholars, seeking to prove error by association, have attempted (perhaps unfairly) to trace its origin back two years earlier to a charismatic, visionary woman named Margaret MacDonald."¹⁶ Even pre-tribulational dispensationalists admit the novelty of the position:

It is scarcely to be found in a single book or sermon through the period of 1600 years! If any doubt this statement, let them search ... the remarks of the so-called Fathers, both pre and

What an admission! A pillar doctrine of dispensationalism does not have a single text to prove it.

post Nicene, the theological treatises of the scholastic divines, Roman Catholic writers of all shades of thought, the literature of the Reformation, the sermons and expositions of the Puritans, and the general theological works of the day. He will find the “mystery” conspicuous by its absence.¹⁷

Here is a dispensationalist admitting that there is “scarcely” any historical evidence to support the position. He’s too generous. There is no evidence. So where does a dispensationalist get this doctrine? Tommy Ice, a fervent proponent of dispensationalism, writes that the theory is based on “deduction”:

A certain theological climate needed to be created before premillennialism would restore the Biblical doctrine of the pretrib Rapture. Sufficient development did not take place until after the French Revolution. The factor of the Rapture has been clearly known by the church all along; therefore, the issue is the timing of the event. Since neither pre nor posttribs have a proof text for the time of the Rapture (unless the promise made to the church in Rev. 3:10 is an exception which promises deliverance—the Rapture—from the future tribulation before the seven-year period begins),¹⁸ then it is clear that this issue is the product of a deduction from one’s overall system of theology, both for pre and posttribbers.¹⁹

What an admission! A pillar doctrine of dispensationalism does not have a single text to prove it.²⁰

Dispensationalism’s process of “deducing” the rapture theory is this: First, create the system; second, create the doctrines to make the system work; third, claim to have restored “the Biblical doctrine of the pretrib Rapture,” which is based on a “deduction from one’s overall system of theology” because there are no verses that teach it; fourth, imply that the early church, the apostles of the apostles, knew nothing of this foundational doctrine. Bizarre. Millions of Christians today hold to a system of interpretation (dispensationalism) that does not have one verse to prove one of its foundational doctrines, the pre-tribulational rapture of the church, the concept that makes dispensationalism dispensational. This system of interpretation is a theological house of cards.

Hoping to seek historical validation for

the pre-tribulation rapture, dispensationalists have turned to an obscure and questionable source, Pseudo-Ephraem (probably a seventh-century composition). While the sermon *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World* claims to be authored by Ephraem of Nisibis (306-73), no one really knows who wrote it or when it was written. Even so, pre-tribulationists believe that it contains “two proto-rapture statements.”²¹ An appeal to Pseudo-Ephraem is an act of desperation by those in need of historical support since they have no biblical support for their position.

Titus 2:13

Dave Hunt, in *How Close Are We?*, maintains that “Paul called the Rapture ‘that blessed hope’” (Titus 2:13).²² There is no mention of a rapture, either pre-, mid-, or post-tribulational in this passage. Hunt, as a pre-tribulationist, asserts that “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior” is a description of Jesus’ coming at the end of the seven-year tribulation period while the “blessed hope” is the rapture of the church prior to the tribulation period. The belief that Titus 2:13 describes two comings must be read into the passage. Paul was “awaiting our blessed hope” which was “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” Even John Walvoord believes that Titus 2:13 describes only one event.²³

What is this “blessed hope”? It was the “appearing of the glory” of Jesus. We have come across this language before in Matthew 16:27: “For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels...” (Matt. 16:27; cf. Mark 8:38). When did this happen? “Truly I say to you, there are some of those standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Matt. 16:28). Jesus had His generation in mind, not a distant generation.

Notice that Titus 2:13 describes the “appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” Paul does not say that Jesus will appear, only that “the glory” will appear. There is a significant difference in meaning. Peter writes in a similar fashion:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the suf-

ferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation (1 Peter 4:12-13).

First, Peter writes that his readers were personally involved in a “fiery ordeal.” This was not some future event. Second, not only were they experiencing a “fiery ordeal,” but they would “rejoice with exultation” at the “revelation of His glory.” There is no indication that a long period of time exists between their “fiery ordeal” and the “revelation of His glory.” In this same chapter Peter writes that “the end of all things is at hand” (1 Peter 4:7), at hand for those reading his letter in the first century. What was this “end” that was “at hand”? Jay Adams’ comments summarize the argument:

[First] Peter was written before A.D. 70 (when the destruction of Jerusalem took place)... The persecution (and martyrdom) that these (largely) Jewish Christians had been experiencing up until now stemmed principally from unconverted Jews (indeed, his readers had found refuge among Gentiles as resident aliens)... [H]e refers to the severe trials that came upon Christians who had fled Palestine under attack from their unconverted fellow Jews. The end of all things (that had brought this exile about) was near.

In six or seven years from the time of writing, the overthrow of Jerusalem, with all its tragic stories, as foretold in the *Book of Revelation* and in the *Olivet Discourse* upon which that part is based, would take place. Titus and Vespasian would wipe out the old order once and for all. All those forces that led to the persecution and exile of these Christians in Asia Minor—the temple ceremonies (outdated by Christ’s death), Pharisaism (with its distortion of O.T. law into a system of works-righteousness) and the political stance of Palestinian Jewry toward Rome—would be erased. The Roman armies would wipe Jewish opposition from the face of the land. Those who survived the holocaust of A.D. 70 would themselves be dispersed around the Mediterranean world. “So,” says Peter, “hold on; the end is near.” The full end of the O.T. order (already made defunct by the cross and the empty tomb) was about to occur.²⁴

Third, if the “revelation of His glory” were a depiction of a pre-tribulational rapture that is yet to occur, how would

this distant event comfort those who were involved in a “fiery ordeal” nearly two thousand years ago? In death they saw Jesus “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12; 2 Cor. 5:8). Did they not behold the fullness of His glory at that time? In another context, the Apostle Paul writes, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). *The New American Standard* translation does not catch the full meaning of this passage. Following Robert Young’s *Literal Translation of the Bible*, we read, “For I reckon that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory about to be revealed in us” Whatever the glory is, it was “about to be revealed” (see Rev 2:10; 3:2, 10; 10:4; 12:4; 17:8). Peter tells his readers that the “Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Peter 4:14). This was a present condition, not something that the people in Peter’s day would have to wait for in a future rapture.

If the “appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13) is neither a distant event nor the bodily return of Christ, then what is it? The “appearing of the glory” is the coming of the fullness of the New Covenant promises as outlined in the gospel. The Old Covenant came with glory “which fades away” (1 Cor. 3:7, 10-11, 13). The New Covenant has come with even more glory (3:8). “For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory on account of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory” (3:9-11).

With the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 the Old Covenant that had faded in glory was obliterated. The gospel is the new glory which those who are still attached to the fading glory of the Old Covenant do not see. “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world [lit., *age*] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

The blessed hope, therefore, is the coming of the fullness of the gospel in the “glory of Christ.” This fullness was

accomplished with the obliteration of the symbols of the Old Covenant: the temple, priesthood, and sacrificial system.

1 Corinthians 15

This section of Scripture falls into the same category as 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. Again, no one denies that Christians are going to be raised; the dispute is over when the event happens. The passage makes no mention of a “secret rapture,” or Jesus coming “for His saints” before a future great tribulation and then later returning “with His saints” after the great tribulation. Nowhere in 1 Corinthians 15 will you find a discussion of the great tribulation or an earthly millennial reign of Christ. The pre-tribulational rapture must be read into 1 Corinthians 15. The chapter deals with resurrection not rapture: first, the resurrection of Jesus; second, the resurrection of Christians. Without the resurrection of Jesus there will be no resurrection of Christians. The resurrection of believers comes just before the end: “But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming, then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power” (15:23-24). This “resurrection of the dead” occurs after the period of the kingdom (there must be something to deliver up) and just before “the end.”

How do premillennialists fit an earthly millennium into these two verses? You guessed it. There are gaps inserted to divide the passage into three events: the pre-tribulational rapture, the coming of Christ seven years later, and the resurrection of unbelievers a thousand years after the end of the Millennium. Again, these “gaps” or “intervals” must be read into the text. John 5:28-29 states very clearly that believers and unbelievers will be raised at the same time, not separated by a thousand years.

Christians must refuse to be guided by the latest interpretive trends or to be swayed by current events. The Bible is the Christian’s guide, not the conjectures of self-appointed prophecy “experts,” the latest newspaper headlines, or the movements of national boundaries. The Bible is our starting point regardless of what we think is going on in the world.

The only question is whether the Bible actually teaches these things. If it does, then “let God be true but every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). The newspaper has no prerogative to challenge God’s word of truth. Nor do those who read the newspapers. As faithful disciples of Christ, we are to trust God as the sovereign controller over human history, “who works all things after the counsel of His own will” (Eph. 1:1), declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose” (Isa. 46:10), so that “none can stay his hand” (Dan. 4:35). With the Psalmist we should declare, “Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth” (115:3).²⁵

Returning to a true understanding of the Bible and its application to present day conditions will bring about great revival and reformation to a world languishing in the pit of despair and darkness. Jesus is the answer. It is **in the world** that God calls sinners to Himself.

NOTES

- Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 168.
- Marvin Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: A New Understanding of the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the Second Coming* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 54. For a study on the preDarbyite source of the pre-tribulational rapture, see Dave MacPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up* (Medford, OR: Omega, [1975] 1980 and *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Publishers, 1995). John L. Bray disputes the Darbyite and MacDonald sources. He has traced its origin to Morgan Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the Following Titles: Millennium, and Last-Novelties* (Philadelphia, PA: Dobson and Lang, 1788). See Bray’s *Morgan Edwards and the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (1788), Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministries, 1995) for documentation on this theory.
- H.A. Ironside, *The Mysteries of God* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1908), 50.
- Notice what Revelation 3:10 says: “Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.” This passage was written nearly two thousand years ago. The “hour of testing” was “about to come upon the whole world [Greek, *oikoumene*: the inhabited earth].” This means not long after the time it was spoken. That hour of testing was the conflagration leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the tribulation period from which Christians were warned to “flee,” which they did (Matt. 24:16).
- Thomas D. Ice, “The Origin of the Pretrib Rapture: Part II,” *Biblical Perspectives* (March/April 1989), 5. Emphasis added.
- Ice and Demy attempt to get around this admission in *The Truth About the Rapture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996).
- Timothy J. Demy, “Pseudo-Ephraem,” *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, gen. ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1996), 329. Also see Demy and Thomas D. Ice, “The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July/September 1995), 306-17 and Grant R. Jeffrey, “A Pretrib Rapture Statement in the Early Medieval Church,” gen. eds. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 105-125. For a refutation of Demy, Ice, and Jeffrey, see Gundry, “‘Pseudo-Ephraem’ on Pretrib Preparation for a Posttrib Meeting with the Lord” in *First The Antichrist*, 161-88.
- Hunt, *How Close Are We?*, 199.
- John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook: All the Prophecies of Scripture Explained in One Volume* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 496-97.
- Jay E. Adams, *Trust and Obey: A Practical Commentary on First Peter* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 129-30.
- Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism,” *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Symposium on the Millennium, ed. Gary North, 3:2 (Winter 1976-77), 54.

False Prophecies for Fun and Profit

BY GARY NORTH

from the publisher's preface to Kenneth Gentry's
The Beast of Revelation

Those Christians who believe that we are drawing close to the last days are continually trying to identify both the beast and the antichrist. This game of "find the beast and identify the antichrist" has become the adult Christians' version of the child's game of pin the tail on the donkey. Every few years, the participants place blindfolds over their eyes, turn around six times, and march toward the wall.

Sometimes they march out the door and over a cliff, as was the case with Edgar C. Whisenant, whose best-selling two-part book announced in the summer of 1988 that Jesus would surely appear to rapture His church during Rosh Hashanah week in mid-September. Half the book was called *On Borrowed Time*. The other was more aptly titled, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988*. I can think of one key argument why his book's thesis was incorrect: no rapture so far, and it is now February, 1989. So much for all 88 arguments. The anti-Christian world got another great laugh at the expense of millions of fundamentalists who had bought and read his two-part book. The story of Mr. Whisenant's book was front-page news briefly around the U.S. But Mr. Whisenant is now ancient history, one more forgotten laughingstock who brought reproach to the church of Jesus Christ while he piled up his press clippings.

This is the whole problem. The victims self-consciously forget the last self-proclaimed expert in Bible prophecy whose predictions did not come to pass. They never learn to recognize the next false prophet because they refuse to admit to themselves that they had been suckered by the last one. Thus, this sucker's game has been going on throughout the twentieth century, generation after generation, a pathetic story chronicled superbly by Dwight Wilson in his well-documented book, *Armageddon Now!*, a book that was not regularly assigned to students at Dallas Seminary, I can assure you. Again and again, some prominent world political figure has been identified as either the beast or the antichrist: Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and even Henry Kissinger. (It was President

Reagan's good fortune that he was a conservative so beloved by fundamentalists, given the remarkable structure of his name: Ronald [6] Wilson [6] Reagan [6].)

The back cover promotional copy of former best-selling author Salem Kirban's self-published book, *The Rise of Anti-Christ*, is representative of this paperback prophetic literature. Published in 1978, it boldly announced:

We are already living in the AGE OF ANTICHRIST!

The world is on the threshold of catastrophe. Scientific advances are really scientific tragedies that will spell chaos, confusion and terror.

Within the next 5 years . . .

DESIGN YOUR OWN CHILD by going to the "genetic supermarket."

YOUR MIND WILL BE PROGRAMMED without your knowing it!

Within the next 10 years . . .

YOUR BRAIN WILL BE CONTROLLED by outside sources!

YOUR MEMORY WILL BE TRANSFERRED into a live embryo.

And so on. None of this has happened, of course. My favorite is this one: "HEAD TRANSPLANTS will become a reality." I wonder who will be the first two volunteers? Who will get what? This book is to Bible exposition what the National Enquirer is to journalism. (The trouble is, the National Enquirer sells 7 million copies each week; it is by far America's largest-circulation newspaper.)

If we take Mr. Kirban's words literally—as literally as he expects us to take the Bible—we are forced to conclude: "This man simply did not know what he was talking about when he wrote those predictions." But he sold a lot of books in the 1970's—30 different titles on prophecy by 1978 alone, the back cover informs us, plus a huge study Bible, plus a comic book. By 1980, the total number of Mr. Kirban's book titles had soared to 35, according to back cover copy on *Countdown to Rapture* (published originally in 1977).

He concluded on page 188 of this book:

"Based on these observations, it is my considered opinion, that the time clock is now at 11:59. When is that Midnight hour . . . the hour of the Rapture? I do not know!"

He wisely avoided the mistake of putting a date on the rapture—a mistake that Mr. Whisenant made (assuming that the publicity and mailing list from well over four million books sold constitutes a mistake)—but his book was sufficiently explicit. Given the fact that the supposed "clock of prophecy" reached 11:56 in 1976, when the world's population passed 4 billion people (p. 45), and then reached

11:59

in only one year with the peace accord between Israel and Egypt in 1977 (p. 175), you get the general picture. Only "one minute" to go in 1977! The rapture will be soon!

Once again, however, pre-tribulational dispensationalism's notoriously unreliable "clock of prophecy" stopped without warning. The years passed by.

No beast. No antichrist. Few book sales. Scrap the topic! Try something else. Why not books on nutrition? Presto: *Salem Kirban's How Juices Restore Health Naturally* (1980). Oh, well. Better a glass of fresh carrot juice than another book on the imminent appearance of Jesus or the antichrist. Nevertheless, a stopped "clock of prophecy" is always good news for the next wave of pop-dispensational authors: more chances to write new books about the beast, 666, and the antichrist. There are always more opportunities for a revival—a revival of book royalties.

After all, a sucker is born every minute, even when the "clock of prophecy" has again ceased ticking. The next generation of false prophets can always draw another few inches along the baseline of their reprinted 1936 edition prophecy charts. They can buy some new springs for a rusted prophetic clock. These stopped clocks are a glut on the market about every ten years. Any fledgling prophecy expert can pick one up cheap. Clean it, install new springs, wind it, make a few modifications in a discarded prophecy chart, and you're in business!

Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillennial Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1977).

Salem Kirban, *Kissinger: Man of Peace?* (Huntington Valley, Pennsylvania: Salem Kirban Inc., 1974). As you might expect, this book is no longer in print. It sometimes appears in local library book sales for a dollar or less. If you spot it, buy it. It is a classic.