

# Now You See 'Em, Now You Don't: “Dispensing” with the Rapture

By Thomas J. Nash

**ISSUE:** Is there biblical and other historical evidence to substantiate belief in the Rapture?

**RESPONSE:** Some Christians believe that Jesus will one day instantaneously take people selected by Him from earth to heaven (the Rapture). Despite the popularity of books and movies about the Rapture, most Protestants do not actually believe in the Rapture. Belief in the Rapture only began in the 1800s among Christians known as “premillennialists,” who believe that Jesus Christ will visibly return after the Rapture to rule on earth for a literal, thousand-year reign (see Rev. 20:1-3).

The Bible and other historical evidence do not support belief in the Rapture. Christ established His reign on earth 2,000 years ago when He founded the Catholic Church. He gave Peter, the first Pope, the keys to the kingdom of heaven to signify the establishment of His reign (cf. Mt. 16:18-19). In addition, nowhere does the Bible speak of a new or different reign of God *between* an alleged Rapture and the Last Judgment. The Bible consistently speaks of one future coming of Christ in which the dead will be raised. On that day, Christ will judge those living and those raised to life. The just will enter heaven with Him, the damned will burn in hell forever. Scripture illustrates that this event will be on the “last day” and not during some intermediate time after which Christ will begin His “reign” on earth.

**DISCUSSION:** All Christians agree that Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. The Catholic Church expressed this teaching in the Apostle’s Creed in the first century. This belief was reaffirmed in the Nicene Creed in the fourth century, which Catholics continue to pray at Mass every Sunday: “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end” (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 195). While each man and woman will face a particular judgment at their respective deaths (*Catechism*, nos. 1021-22), there also will be a definitive and Last Judgment at the end of the world:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats he will place at his left. . . . And they [the goats] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Mt. 25:31-33, 45).

## **Thy Kingdom Come Later: Premillennialism and the Rapture**

Christ will always remain with us on earth in some sense (Mt. 28:20), but the Church has always taught that the definitive and final return described in Matthew 25 is Jesus’ Second Coming or *Parousia* (*Catechism*, no. 1001). Those who believe in the Rapture disagree with the Church. They agree that Matthew 25:31-46 depicts the Last Judgment, but they argue that the Last Judgment should not be confused with the Rapture. The Last Judgment takes place *on the earth* after Christ’s thousand-year reign, while the Rapture takes place *in the air* before that reign. They cite 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18,<sup>1</sup> in which St. Paul details how the Christian faithful will ascend to meet Christ in the clouds and remain with Him forever:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord

himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Some Christians believe that the Rapture is Christ's Second Coming, which will be followed by His return to earth for a thousand-year reign. Others do not view the Rapture as Christ's Second Coming, but rather as something else. They believe that His subsequent return to earth for a thousand-year reign is actually the Second Coming, even though 1 Thessalonians 4:15 speaks of the event they describe as the Rapture as "*the coming of the Lord*" (emphasis added). In any event, Rapture enthusiasts agree that Christ will return with all those raptured, including those who had died prior to the Rapture, with our Lord somehow making earthly accommodations for this enormous influx of Christians.

Christian premillennialists also believe that the Rapture will be associated with the "Great Tribulation," a period of future crisis on earth that they believe is foretold in Scripture (cf. Mt. 24:15-31; Lk. 17:34-35; Mk. 13:24-37; Dan. 9:24-25; Rev. 4:1). Premillennialists disagree amongst themselves whether the Rapture will occur before, during, or after the Great Tribulation.

### **Dispensationalist Premillennialism: The Protestant Tradition Behind the Rapture**

The error of premillennialism was actually first taught in the early days of the Church, although the associated belief in the Rapture only began, as noted, almost 2,000 years later. Cerinthus, an Ebionite heretic, was apparently the founder of premillennialism, and he was also an opponent of both St. Paul and St. John. He claimed that "an angel" revealed to him the doctrine of premillennialism, thereby indicating the nonbiblical roots of premillennialism (cf. Gal. 1:8). Writing in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, St. Irenaeus recounted that, when Cerinthus once entered a public bath house, St. John ran outside and called others to do the same, lest they be killed if the house fell on "the enemy of truth" [Cerinthus] in an act of divine judgment.<sup>2</sup> The Church continues to condemn premillennialism, which it refers to as a form of "millenarianism" or "chiliasm" (Catechism, no. 676).

When Martin Luther broke with the Catholic Church, he did not believe in premillennialism, let alone the Rapture, nor did any of the first Protestant leaders in the 1500s. Premillennialism, however, made a comeback in the 1800s in the form of "dispensationalism." John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), a member of the Plymouth Brethren, pioneered this "doctrinal development."

The dispensationalist system was popularized by C.I. Scofield, creator of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, which includes dispensationalist annotations. The *Scofield Reference Bible* has been a big seller throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dispensationalism is also promoted by many well-known people and institutions, including Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (authors of the *Left Behind* series), Charles Ryrie, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jack Van Impe, Hal Lindsey, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Moody Bible Institute.

While there are many variations and forms of dispensationalism, a few points seem common to all:

1. The term "dispensation" is intended as an English translation of the Greek *oikonomia*, or economy. Dispensationalists hold that God's interaction with men is *divided* into approximately three to nine dispensations (usually seven), in which men were given different responsibilities by God to keep. For this reason, dispensations are sometimes called "administrations" or "stewardships." Instead of seeing salvation history as a unified whole in which God progressively enlarges His people from a single family (Noah) and tribe (Abraham) to a worldwide people (cf. Mt. 28:18-20), as Catholics do, dispensationalists believe that God deals with people in markedly different ways during different dispensations.
2. Dispensationalists try to interpret the Bible as "literally" as possible.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Scripture is interpreted according to the dispensation of time and place. Thus, we are not bound by all of Scripture, only that pertaining to our dispensation.

3. As an extension of numbers 1 and 2, dispensationalists strictly *distinguish* and *separate* Israel and the Church, believing God has given each a *radically different* dispensation.

Point number three is one of the more intriguing aspects of dispensationalism. According to this theory, the Father sent Jesus to be the Messiah of the Jewish people and therefore establish His kingdom on earth according to prophetic expectation (“Plan A”), but the Jews rejected Jesus. For this reason, God set aside Israel’s dispensation for awhile and temporarily instituted the Church, primarily for Gentiles, in the interim (“Plan B,” i.e., another dispensation). Plan B will end with the Rapture of the Church, and Plan A will be resumed with the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple and the establishment of the millennial kingdom.

Believing that God’s plan for Israel will resume with the rebuilding of the Temple after the Rapture is also misguided. As the Book of Hebrews so eloquently expresses, Jesus definitively ended the need for the repetitive animal sacrifices of Temple worship, suffering and dying once for all (7:23-28, 8:3-7). As Christians, we have drawn near to God as partakers of His divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) and do not need a Temple high priest to enter the Temple Holy of Holies with the blood of animals (Heb. 8:23-38). To think that God would authorize the reinstatement of Temple sacrifices is to misunderstand His salvific work. It is also a blasphemous insult to Christ, who definitely rendered void the need for such inferior sacrifices.

Belief in the Rapture stemmed from an alleged vision of a 14-year-old girl, who was also a member of the Plymouth Brethren. Because of her vision, belief in the Rapture and premillennialism became part of dispensationalist doctrine. Subsequently, all dispensationalists are premillennialists. However, not all premillennialists are dispensationalists.

### **Setting the Record Straight on Salvation History**

Contrary to what dispensationalists fervently believe, God does not radically separate Israel and the Church and provide a separate dispensation for each. There is no Old Testament prophecy or anything in the New Testament that substantiates such a view. Rather, dispensationalism represents an elaborate tradition based on minimal and misinterpreted biblical evidence. Jesus Christ renewed and transformed Israel by founding His Catholic Church, which is the prophesied restoration of the House of David (compare Is. 22:25 and Amos 9:11-12 with Acts 15:15-18). Jesus reconstituted the Davidic kingdom of Israel under the Jewish leadership of the Twelve Apostles, with Peter overseeing the earthly administration of “the kingdom of heaven” (compare Is. 22:15-25 with Mt. 16:13-20). Thus, the reign of God actually began with the coming of Christ and came to full flower through His death, Resurrection and the manifestation of His Church on Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:15-22, 32-33; Catechism, no. 1076). As Jesus told His disciples and a multitude, “Truly, I say to you, *there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power*” (Mk. 9:1, emphasis added; cf. Lk. 17:20-21; Catechism, nos. 541-50). This view of salvation history is somewhat similar to what some Protestants call “amillennialism.” Based on its usage elsewhere in Scripture, the Church understands that the reign of God should not be understood as a strict, literal, thousand-year reign, for the number 1,000 is simply a number that figuratively represents perfection in duration (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8).

Dispensationalism is biblically unfounded. In giving Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 16:18-19), Jesus clearly teaches that His kingdom is a present reality, not merely a future one (cf. Lk. 17:21; Mt. 12:28; Acts 1:6). He mediates His kingdom through the rule of His universal or “catholic” Church, telling His apostles to make disciples of all nations (Mt. 28:18-20; Acts 28:28), especially their Jewish brethren, who were the first called (cf. Mt. 10:6, 15:24, 18:11). Through His death, Resurrection, and the founding of His Church, Christ instituted and mediates the blessing of all nations promised through Abraham’s descendants (cf. Gen. 12:1-3, 22:18). St. Paul affirms that Jews and Gentiles have become **one** in Christ’s kingdom (Eph. 2:11-16) and that Gentiles, like Jews, are children of Abraham and “heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29).

Unfortunately, modern premillennialists make a similar mistake that some ancient Jewish leaders made. They misunderstand the reign of God as having political dimensions, thinking that the Messiah would personally and visibly reign as a worldwide ruler. God’s plan for Israel was fulfilled, not interrupted, by Jesus.

His reign is a much more significant victory over Satan, sin, and death (cf. Col. 2:8-16) in which *all people* are called to participate. The consequence for those in ancient Israel who did not accept Christ was the divine judgment that concluded in the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. (cf. Mk. 13:24-37; Mt. 27:24-26), a sober affirmation that the Old Covenant had indeed been superseded by the New. The consequences for modern premillennialists who misunderstand the reign of God are (1) their similar rejection of the Catholic Church; and (2) their misinterpretation that passages like Mark 13:24-37 apply to a latter-day tribulation and Rapture. Consider this excerpt:

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. . . . Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (Mk. 13:24-27, 30-31).

The Church has always taught that Scripture has different senses or meaning (cf. Catechism, nos. 115-19). For example, in the literal-historical sense, Mark 13:24-30 and the related passages in Matthew and Luke refer to Christ's coming in covenantal judgment against ancient Israel, which rejected Him. Jesus speaks of a fearful tribulation that would occur before that *present* generation passed away, and which would culminate in Jesus' figuratively coming on the clouds (cf. Mk. 13:26) to destroy the Temple and Jerusalem (cf. Mk. 13:1-4ff.; Mt. 24:1-2), whereas His disciples would be delivered from the destruction (cf. Mk. 13:14-20). History records that apocalyptic signs accompanied the destruction of Jerusalem and that Christians vacated the city before the Romans destroyed it and the Temple in 70 A.D. Christ also notes that He would then have His angels gather the elect from "the four winds" (cf. Mk. 13:27), a reference to the Gospel's being preached not just in the land of Israel but the whole earth (cf. Mt. 24:14).

Considering the parallel passages of Mark 13, Matthew 24, and Luke 17 in terms of their significance in Christ (allegorical sense), they refer to His Second Coming. Considering the passages in terms of the kingdom of God's ultimate fulfillment on earth and in heaven (anagogical sense), they refer to Christ's Last Judgment.

### **Should I Stay or Should I Go: The Scriptural Rap on the Rapture**

In contrast, premillennialists view Mark 13:26-27 as affirming their interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, with Jesus coming on the clouds to rapture them away. They also believe the Rapture is referenced in the parallel passages of Matthew 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-35, in which one person is taken and another "left behind." But here they misunderstand Scripture again, because those taken aren't raptured but rather actually die because of their sins. In turn, those left behind are the faithful ones who survive and carry on with God's mission. Consider that St. Matthew sets up his discussion by referring to Noah, who was left behind with his family after the flood. St. Luke mentions not only Noah but also Lot, who escaped Sodom and Gomorrah with his relatives. In both cases, those "taken" were killed in judgment, the first in the flood (Lk. 17:27) and the second in the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Lk. 17:29). Jesus adds in the very next verse, "[S]o it will be on the day when the Son of man is revealed" (Lk. 17:30). Where were those taken actually taken?: "Where the body is, the eagles will be gathered together," Jesus summarizes in Luke 17:37, affirming again that those taken would die for their unfaithfulness. Based on these Scripture passages, Noah and Lot can testify that it actually pays to be "left behind."

Consider again 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Notice that Paul speaks of *the* coming of Christ, not multiple returns, and that both the faithful who have died *and* the believers alive on earth will be taken to heaven, though the dead will precede the living. While some premillennialists view this action by Christ as the Rapture and not His Second Coming, Scripture does not speak of any other coming. Elsewhere in 1 Thessalonians Paul consistently speaks of one, definitive, future coming of Christ (cf. 1:10, 2:19, 3:13, 5:23-24). St. John and St. Peter affirm Paul on this point regarding the end of the world (cf. 1 Jn. 2:28; 2 Pet. 3:1-

13). In 2 Thessalonians, Paul goes into greater detail about Christ's Second Coming, speaking of eternal destruction for the wicked and beatitude for believers (cf. 2 Thess. 1:1-15). And when will that Second and only Coming be? Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, St. John assures us that it will be on the "last day" (Jn. 6:39-40; cf. 6:44, 54).

### Carrying Our Crosses with Christ

Those who place the Rapture before the Great Tribulation seem to want to avoid the suffering associated with the Tribulation. Tribulations are not new for Christ's saints as the history of Christianity confirms. Jesus Himself reminds us that the road to salvation is not easy (cf. Mt. 7:13-14). We must embrace the cross in our lives on an ongoing basis (cf. Mt. 10:38, 16:24). We also have His word that this suffering will be redemptive and that we will reign with Him in heaven if we persevere in faith (cf. Mt. 7:21-23, 10:22). Tribulation accompanies the reign of God, as Jesus tells us in His parable of the weeds among the wheat (Mt. 13:24:30). During this reign, Satan is bound (cf. Rev. 20:1-3) in the sense that he is incapable of prevailing against the Church in her mission to preach the Gospel (cf. Mt. 16:18). And when Satan is loosed for his final fury (cf. Rev. 20:7-10), the faith of the faithful will be tested, but those who persevere in Christ will be saved (Catechism, nos. 675-77).

In summary, the Bible consistently speaks of one future coming of Christ in which the dead will be raised and the living taken with them to heaven. Scripture affirms that this event will be on the last day and not at some intermediate point after which Christ will begin His "reign" on earth. Belief in premillennialism was a doctrinal heresy that the early Church condemned, and dispensational premillennialism is a doctrinal novelty not even two centuries old. Christ's reign began on earth 2,000 years ago and will continue through His Catholic Church until the last day, when He comes in glory. May His kingdom come in all of our lives unto eternity.

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the word "Rapture" has its roots in the Catholic Church's Latin Vulgate translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. "*Rapiemur*," which means "to be seized, snatched, or caught up," is the Latin word from which we get our English "rapture." Most English biblical translations render the word as "caught up."

<sup>2</sup> David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Forth Worth, Tex.: Dominion Press, 1987), 494, footnote 2. For a treatment of Cerinthus and his heresies, see St. Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* (Book 1, 26:1-2 and Book 3, 3:4) and Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* (Book 3, 28:1-6; Book 4, 14:6; Book 7, 25:2-3).

<sup>3</sup> With regard to biblical interpretation, "literally" can mean different things when used by different people. For Catholics, seeking the "literal" sense means taking into account a text's genre and literary form, as well as the related idioms and other nuances of the original language, history, and context and other factors, in order *to learn what the original author's intention was*. For many "fundamentalist" Protestants, however, "literally" too often means assuming the text refers to historical facts, regardless of genre and other factors.

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