

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

<i>Preface to the Paperback Edition</i>	vii
<i>Preface to the Hardcover Edition</i>	xv
1 The Destructive Racket of Rapture	1
2 The Invention of the Rapture	19
3 The Rapture Script for the Middle East	47
4 Prophecy and Apocalypse	81
5 The Journey Begins <i>Rome's Worship of Victory</i>	103
6 Lamb Power	109
7 Nonviolence <i>Conquering in Revelation</i>	115
8 The Exodus Story in Revelation	123
9 Hijacking the Lamb <i>Addiction to Wrath and War</i>	135
10 Rapture in Reverse <i>God's Vision for Renewing the World</i>	141
11 The Journey Outward <i>Homecoming to the World</i>	159
<i>Epilogue: Debunking the Rapture by Verse</i>	173
<i>Reader Discussion Guide</i>	187
<i>Notes</i>	197
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	208
<i>Index</i>	211

EPILOGUE: DEBUNKING THE RAPTURE BY VERSE¹

"We are not playing a game of biblical hopscotch," claims Hal Lindsey.¹ Yet it is hard to call it anything else when he and other dispensationalists jump from one Bible verse to another to piece together their chronology of the Rapture. They use the image of buried treasure, claiming that God has hidden individual Rapture verses here and there in the Bible, similar to burying a treasure. But if the doctrine of the Rapture is so central to Christians' future, why did God bury the treasure for 1,800 years? Why do we have to piece it together only to find it now?

As I have argued, the answer is that the Rapture and the dispensationalist chronology is a fabrication. The dispensationalist story creates a comprehensive, overarching narrative that appeals to people who are seeking clear-cut answers. But the dispensationalist system's supposed clear-cut answers rely on a highly selective biblical literalism, as well as insertion of nonexistent two-thousand-year gaps and dubious re-definitions of key terms. The system is not true to a literal reading of the Bible, as they claim. Nor is their system true to the Bible's wonderful richness and complexity. The dispensationalist system narrows the Bible's message.

The following discussions address in greater depth the three principal biblical passages people ask me about most often, which are key to the dispensationalists' Rapture script (see discussion in chapters 2 and 3): First Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 24:40-41, and John 14:1-2. Rather than trying to harmonize these and other passages into an overarching system, it is important to examine each passage in its own historical and theological context. Each of these three early Christian documents was written to address specific concerns in different first-century communities. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, for example, addresses different questions and emphasizes different aspects of our relationship with Jesus from the Gospels of Matthew or John. That very diversity is the Bible's true treasure. It gives us a richness and depth of relationship with God that far exceeds all of our attempts to systematize it.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so 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 died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left

¹ Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Basic Books, 2004), pp. 173-186.

until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (New Revised Standard Version)

The apostle Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is the favorite Rapture proof-text for dispensationalists. A closer look at this passage in the overall context of the letter shows that it is not about Rapture, however, but about resurrection from the dead at Christ's second coming. The Thessalonians apparently feared that some family members who had already died before Christ's return would be left behind in their graves when he returned—and they were grieving that separation. Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonika to reassure them that those who have died will also be raised to meet Christ, "and so we shall always be with the Lord." He wrote the letter in order to give comfort and encouragement, using the assurance of Jesus' resurrection from the dead to give assurance of resurrection also for us.

What this letter is emphasizing is not that some will be left behind, but rather that we will all be *together* with our loved ones in our resurrection life. No believer, whether dead or alive, will be separated from Christ or from the community of their loved ones when the Lord comes again. Paul is saying the very opposite of what Rapture proponents claim when they use him to support their terrifying left-behind notion that some people will be taken while others are left. Paul's pastoral concern here is to comfort people by showing that we will all be together in Christ when he comes again. We will not be separated from Christ or from one another.

Rapture proponents use the details of these verses to argue that Christ snatches born-again Christians off the earth to meet him in the air, and then that Christ turns around and takes people back to heaven for seven years. But take a closer look and you see that there is no indication that the Lord switches directions—much less any mention of seven years in heaven. The passage proclaims that Christ will "descend *from* heaven" (1 Thess 4:16)—that is, he is coming down from heaven to earth. There is no reason to think that Jesus will change directions and turn around to go back to heaven after Christians meet him in the air. What the passage is describing is Jesus' second coming to earth, and the resurrection from the dead that will happen when he returns.

Paul's description of "meeting" the Lord in the air employs a very specific Greek word for greeting a visiting dignitary in ancient times: *apantesis*, a practice by which people went outside the city to greet the dignitary and then accompanied him into their city. The same word is used in Matthew 25:6 to describe the bridesmaids who go out to "meet" the bridegroom and then accompany him

into the feast, and also in Acts 28:15 to describe the Romans who go out to "meet" Paul as he arrives in their city. We can look at these other usages to see more specifically what Paul means by the term "meet" the Lord.

The key factor with the normal usage of the Greek verb "meet" is this: In no case does the arriving dignitary change directions and go back where he came from after people come to meet him; rather, he continues with them into their house or city. In Matthew, for example, the bridegroom's arrival is greeted with a shout: "Look! Here is the bridegroom. Come out to meet him." But the bridegroom does not then kidnap the bridesmaids and take them away with him after they go out to meet him! Rather, the bridegroom goes with the bridesmaids into the house from where they came, where everyone is waiting for him. Matthew makes this clear: "The bridegroom came, and those who were with him went into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut" (Matt 25:10).

Similarly in Acts 28, the Christians from Rome go out to meet Paul while he is still outside their city gates, because they are so eager to welcome him. "The believers from there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Apius and Three Taverns to meet us," Acts records. Paul does not then switch directions and take the Christians away from their city after they go out to "meet" him. Rather, Paul accompanies them back where they came from—into their city.

Paul's use of the same word "meet" in First Thessalonians would suggest that Paul is proclaiming a similar "meeting," where both those who are alive and those who are dead go up to "meet" Christ in the air on his way back to earth, and then they accompany him the rest of the way back to earth as he "descends." The central message of this passage is resurrection of the dead. The image of meeting the Lord in the air underscores that every Christian—whether dead or alive—will be resurrected together to greet Jesus when he returns to earth.

Paul does not ever return to this image of meeting Christ in the air in any of his other letters, so we cannot know with any greater detail what he meant. In all his other writings what Paul emphasizes is simply the good news of resurrection from the dead.

MATTHEW 24:39-42 (SEE ALSO LUKE 17:34-35)

The flood came and swept them all away; so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

Only by combining this passage together with First Thessalonians 4 can

dispensationalists begin to piece together their notion of "left behind" their scenario in which some Christians will be taken up suddenly to meet Christ and go back to heaven with him for seven years, while others will be left behind on earth. But here's the problem with their use of this passage from Matthew: Dispensationalists make the leap of assuming that the person "taken" in this passage is a born-again Christian who is taken up to heaven, while the person "left" is an unbeliever who is left behind for judgment. This is a huge leap, since Jesus himself never specifies whether Christians should desire to be taken or to be left! In the overall context of Matthew's Gospel, both the verbs "taken" and "left" (Greek *paralambano* and *aphiemi*) can be either positive or negative.

In the verses immediately preceding this passage, Jesus says that his coming will be like the flood at the time of Noah, when people were "swept away" in judgment. If being "taken" is analogous to being "swept away" in the flood, then it is not a positive fate. That is the argument of New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop N. T Wright:

It should be noted that being "taken" in this context means being taken in *judgment*. There is no hint here of a "rapture," a sudden "supernatural" event that would remove individuals from *terra firma* . . . It is a matter, rather, of secret police coming in the night, or of enemies sweeping through a village or city and seizing all they can. (N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* [London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 366)

If Wright is correct, this means that being "left behind" is actually the desired fate for Christians, whereas being "taken" would mean being carried off by forces of judgment like a death squad. For people living under severe Roman occupation, being taken away in such a way by secret police would probably be a constant fear. B. Brent McGuire, a Lutheran critic from the conservative Missouri Synod, suggests that the *Left Behind* books have it "entirely backward." McGuire, like Wright, points out that when analyzed in the overall context of the gospel, the word "taken" means being taken away for *judgment*, as in the story of Jesus' being "taken" prisoner by soldiers in Matthew 27:27.² "Taken" is not an image for salvation.

The fact is, Matthew's Gospel is not clear on whether "taken" or "left" is the desired fate—whether being "taken" is analogous to Noah rescuing people by taking them into the ark to save them, as dispensationalists argue, or whether being "taken" rather means taken away for judgment, as Wright argues. Similar ambiguity surrounds the word "left." Is being "left" the negative fate the dispensationalists assume, or does it rather have a positive sense, as when Satan "left" Jesus in Matthew 4:11? Matthew seems to be deliberately ambiguous—perhaps because our focus is not supposed to be on worrying about being taken or on being left, but rather on the urgent necessity of readiness for Jesus' return at any moment!

Whatever the desired fate, Jesus' description of people being "taken" or "left" in this passage certainly does not describe a "Rapture" or an event separate from the last judgment, but is rather part of that judgment. Christ's return is a single event in Matthew, with no evidence that it is separated into two events. There is no "Rapture" to heaven followed by seven years of tribulation, followed by another return of Jesus for judgment.

Indeed, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus cautions most strongly that we are not supposed to try to figure out the details of the chronology of the end times. Just two verses before our text, right before the reference to Noah and the flood, Jesus tells his followers, "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matt 24:36). Jesus does not intend for us to piece together Bible verses to construct a detailed timetable that even he himself does not know.

We are, however, to be urgent in our waiting. That urgency is the focus of the entire Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24-25. This urgency is highlighted by the four parables that Jesus tells to illustrate his message.

THE SO-CALLED OLIVET DISCOURSE, MATTHEW 24-25

The Matthew passage about people who are taken and left is part of what dispensationalists call the Olivet Discourse, one of Jesus' five long speeches in the Gospel of Matthew. LaHaye calls the Olivet Discourse the "prophetic clothesline on which every other Bible prophecy ought to be hung."³ With their view that Jesus' prophetic reference to the blooming of the fig tree was fulfilled with the founding of Israel, they think that chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew predict a sequence of other events that were set in motion in 1948 and are accelerating toward a cataclysmic completion in our lifetime.

But as I have argued, prophecy does not mean prediction. Jesus did not intend his prophetic Olivet Discourse to give a play-by-play of predictions that would eventually culminate in a sequence of events thousands of years off into the future, after the United Nations granted statehood to Israel. Rather, Jesus' purpose is to give *exhortation* to his followers to "keep awake" and remain faithful. Urgency and readiness are the message of this important speech. Disciples of Jesus in every generation are to obey his commandments in readiness for his return, whenever it happens. Jesus is not telling us to figure out the detailed sequence of when or how that return will happen.

Most scholars date Matthew's Gospel to around the year 90 A.D., less than one generation after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. Thus, the immediate context of the destructions described in the Olivet Discourse for the first readers of the gospel was the trauma of the devastating war and destruction that they had just experienced. We should not look two thousand years later for future fulfillment of specific details of Matthew's Olivet

Discourse. Rather, Matthew's first readers would have recognized many allusions to events that had just happened, in the war that they had survived. The Jewish Temple had been desecrated and burned; wars and rumors of wars had swirled all around; many people had been "taken" away as captives, to be enslaved or killed. It certainly felt like earth's last days for those who survived the trauma.

The focus of Jesus' Olivet Discourse for Matthew's first readers, and for us, is not prediction but rather *ethics*—as seen by the four vivid parables Jesus tells to underscore this discourse. The four parables or stories all illustrate the importance of readiness and staying awake, of faithfully stewarding what is entrusted to us until Jesus comes again. We do not know when Jesus is returning again. That is why we must live our lives at every moment as Jesus taught us. The message to Matthew's original readers was the same as the message today: Whatever traumas befall us, we are to be urgent in loving our neighbor, urgent in caring for the world that God created, urgent in feeding the hungry and visiting prisoners, urgent in living faithfully as Christ commanded us to live.

In the first parable (Matt 24:45-51) immediately following the saying about the one who is taken while the other is left, Jesus casts his followers in the role of servants whose master has temporarily gone away. The servant's job is to care for the household in the master's absence, to give food to each inhabitant at the proper time. We are that servant, Jesus tells us! The message is that we must love and care for one another and for the household of God's whole world—so that we will be "the servant whom his master will find at work when he arrives" (Matt 24:46). If we fall asleep while Jesus is away, or if we are like the wicked slave who says to himself, "My master is delayed," and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth," the parable warns.

Similarly, the threat of the severe consequences that will result for those who fail to care for people while Jesus is away is also the message of the fourth parable, the story of the judgment of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31-46). Lindsey applies this parable only to those left behind after the Rapture, and then only to the few who survive the seven-year tribulation. For Lindsey, the predictive message of the parable is that "tribulation survivors" will be judged on the basis of how they welcomed a specific group—the 144,000 Jewish evangelists.⁴ But such a bizarre interpretation totally misses the ethical urgency of the parable for all of us. There is no evidence that "one of the least of these my brothers and sisters" in Matthew 25:40 refers to Revelation's 144,000. Rather, the parable calls all of us to give an account to God on the basis of how we treat our neighbors who are in need. The "goats" are people who fail to welcome the stranger, who fail to give food to the hungry or clothe

the naked or visit the prisoners. Jesus says that if we fail to do such deeds for "one of the least of these" that is, for our neighbor in need—then we have failed to do these things for Jesus himself, since Jesus is present in every stranger who asks for a cup of water from us.

The message of the third parable (Matt 25:14-30) is similar to the first, that the master of the household will return, and he will ask us to give an account for how we have cared for God's resources in the household of the world. Hoarding our resources or failing to multiply our talents will result in judgment.

Living together as faithful servants ready for Jesus' return—not speculating about the end-times—is the central ethical urgency of all these parables and of Matthew's entire Olivet Discourse. Abusing people or abusing the household of God's creation will carry severe consequences, Jesus says. This is a very different message from the dispensationalists' escapist and nonethical reading of this discourse.

Dispensationalists view the Olivet Discourse as predictive—literal predictions of a linear sequence of world events that must happen in our day in order for Jesus to return. But the most glaring problem with such a literalist approach is Matthew 24:34, where Jesus says: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." Two thousand years have now passed since Jesus spoke these words, and the people he addressed as "this generation" have long since passed away—yet the specific events of which he spoke did not literally happen as exactly as dispensationalists say they must. The dispensationalist solution is to arbitrarily redefine Jesus' term "this generation" so that "this generation" means not Jesus' original audience, but a generation of people two thousand years later, the generation that began with Israel's founding as a state in 1948, or with Israel's taking of the West Bank and East Jerusalem in 1967. Lindsey calls those of us living today "the generation of the fig tree," referring to his interpretation of the founding of Israel as the fig tree putting forth its buds in Matthew 24:32. Such a move has no literal basis in the Bible itself, however, nor is it true to their "plain sense" rule of interpretation. It is an example of their highly selective literalism—with no biblical evidence to support this redefinition of "this generation."

JOHN 14:1-2

In my Father's house are many dwellings. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

Rapture proponents like to point to Jesus' farewell words in John 14:1-2 as the "first teaching about Rapture in the Bible."⁵ They argue that Jesus' statement that he is going away to "prepare a place for you" means that he is going away to heaven to get a place ready for those who will be Raptured. "In my father's house are many dwellings," Jesus says, using a Greek word that means "rest-

ing place" or "way station": *mone*, from the verb "abide" or "remain." But the problem is that Jesus does not specify where the Father's house is located. Is it in heaven, as Rapture proponents argue? Not necessarily, or at least not exclusively in the Gospel of John, because later in the same chapter Jesus says that he and the Father will come and make their "dwelling"—using the very same word—in the believing person: "We will come and make our dwelling [*mone*] with that one" (John 14:23). Here the image surely means God's mystical indwelling in the believer. The Gospel of John is the most mystical of all our gospels, and it is very hard to pin down locations or chronologies in this Gospel.

Robert Gundry, a conservative evangelical scholar, cautions against assuming that Jesus' "many dwellings" or "many mansions" are rooms up in heaven. For Gundry, the crucial clue is that Jesus never promises that, upon his return, Jesus will take the disciples *away* to the "dwellings" or "mansions" in the Father's house, as one would expect in the dispensationalists' literalist scenario. Rather, what Jesus promised to the disciples is that "Where I am, you will be also." Gundry views the key to chapter 14 as the two parallel occurrences of *mone*—verses 2 and 23. These verses provide a "reciprocal relationship: [A]s believers have abiding-places in Christ, so Jesus and the Father have an abiding-place in each believer."⁶

In Gundry's view the "father's house" in John's gospel is not so much heaven as God's household or family on earth. Indeed, the word "house" is probably better translated as "household" both here and in John 4:53 and 8:35. In a strong and mystical sense, John wants to underscore that we are *already* in some sense living in the mystical "dwelling places" in the Father's household that Jesus says he has prepared for us. The passage is about "not mansions in the sky, but spiritual positions in Christ."⁷ Jesus is the vine and we are the branches who "dwell" or "abide" in him already, to use the similar mystical imagery that is found in John 15. It is not a matter of being taken away from planet earth, up to the Father's house in heaven. The dwelling Jesus is preparing for us is something quite different.

In the Gospel of John, imagery of ascending and descending has a rich, double meaning that makes a strictly "heavenist" interpretation impossible. Far more important than going up to heaven in John's gospel is the in-ness and oneness Jesus wants us to experience already with God. The gospel's focus is on the rich relationship of mutual indwelling and eternal life that is already ours. To know God is to have eternal life—"this is eternal life," Jesus says in his great farewell prayer (John 17:3).

Never would John's Gospel say that Jesus and God are now up in heaven, waiting until the end-times in order to come back to earth and take us away to heaven in the Rapture and then in the Glorious Appearing. God dwells with us now, on earth, in mystical communion through the Spirit or Paraclete, in

John's Gospel. To impose the linear timeline of Rapture followed by tribulation and then an earthly return imports a chronology that is totally foreign to the Gospel of John.

WRESTLING WITH THE BIBLE:
A PROPHETIC CLOTHESLINE OR A BLESSING?

The Bible is difficult to understand, and apocalyptic passages such as the book of Revelation and Matthew 24-25 are some of the hardest. The temptation is to make up a system to give answers—to create a "prophetic clothesline" and then hang biblical passages on it. But the Bible gives us neither a clothesline nor a timeline nor a system—it gives us a relationship with God! To read the Bible's hardest passages is like wrestling with God, much like Jacob who wrestled through the night at the river Jabbok.⁸ You grapple to make sense of the words, you hold on, you struggle for clarity, you seek to wrest answers for all your questions. What God gives you instead of a system of answers is a blessing, a new name—a living relationship. You are forever changed by the encounter. You have seen the face of God.

We could examine each of the many other biblical passages that dispensationalists love to cite. The fact is that not one single biblical passage lays out the dispensationalists' overarching chronology of Rapture followed by seven years of tribulation followed by Jesus' return to earth. They have to piece this grand narrative together like stringing clothes on a clothesline. There is no two-stage return of Christ in the Bible, no escapist Rapture from earth for born-again Christians.

Jesus will return—once. Until then, we are always with Jesus and he is with us—Emmanuel. Our life is held in God's time. And we are called to live in wakefulness, to pray as the final verses of Revelation do, 'Amen, come Lord Jesus.'

¹ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 119.

² "Will You Be Left Behind?" *The Lutheran Witness*, March 2001, <http://www.lcms.org/cic/lbwitness.htm>.

³ LaHaye, *The Merciful God of Prophecy*, 120.

⁴ Lindsey, *The Rapture: Truth or Consequences*, 172-175.

⁵ LaHaye, *The Merciful God of Prophecy*, 155.

⁶ Robert Gundry, 'In my Father's House are Many *Monai*' (John 14:2)," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 58 (1969), 68-72.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸ Genesis 32:22-32.