

## RAPTUROUS LIVING WITHOUT THE RAPTURE

Scriptures: Luke 17:20-37; Revelation 7:9-17

One of the best selling novels of 1995 was a book about the Rapture. Tim LaHaye's and Jerry Jenkins' book *Left Behind* began a series of 12 novels that sold over 60 million books. It starts on an airplane where the pilot Rayford Steele is given startling news by Hattie Durham, one of the flight attendants.

"People are missing," she managed in a whisper, burying her head in his chest. ... She was sobbing now, her body out of control. "A whole bunch of people, just gone!"

"Hattie, this is a big plane. They've wandered to the lavs or ..."

She pulled his head down so she could speak directly into his ear. Despite her weeping, she was plainly fighting to make herself understood. "I've been everywhere. I'm telling you, dozens of people are missing."

"Hattie, it's still dark. We'll find ...."

"I'm not crazy! See for yourself! All over the plane, people have disappeared."

"It's a joke. They're hiding, trying to ..."

"Ray! Their shoes, their socks, their clothes, everything was left behind. These people are gone!" (p. 16)

That is a description of what many Christian groups call the "Rapture." The Rapture is where all the Christians in the world are suddenly beamed up, so to speak, to be with Jesus in heaven, while everyone else is left behind. As you might guess, this creates a fair amount of chaos. As Rayford Steele guides his plane into O'Hare airport he sees a pall of smoke over the city. Cars are off the road and smashed into each other. Planes are in pieces on the ground. Emergency vehicles are picking their way through the debris.

The idea of the Rapture comes from combining several different scripture passages and giving each of them a particular spin. The most important is from I Thessalonians 4:16-17:

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.

To come up with the Rapture, this scripture is combined with the one I just read from Luke 17. In verses 34-35 Jesus says, "I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be

taken and the other left.” The idea is that the true followers of Jesus are the ones suddenly beamed up to heaven while the rest are left behind to fend for themselves.

Sometimes people combine these two scripture readings with Revelation 7. Revelation 7 pictures a multitude of people singing praises before the throne of God. These, it is argued, are the people who were caught up in the Rapture. They enjoy peace with God in heaven, while everyone else suffers the tribulation that afflicts the people left in the world over the next 14 chapters of Revelation. That is called the “Pre-tribulation Rapture.” Christians are scooped up to heaven and don’t have to suffer all the bad things that happen to everyone else.

Our Question of Faith for this week asks, “When is the Rapture?” To answer that question I need to revisit the whole idea of the Rapture. For in my humble opinion the Rapture as described in the book *Left Behind* is a serious misreading of the Bible.

There are three big mistakes with the Rapture, and one thing it gets right. That is the outline for the rest of this sermon about the Rapture: Three mistakes and one thing right.

**Mistake #1: When people focus on the Rapture, they forget that Jesus has already come, and that in one sense the kingdom of God has already dawned.**

Jesus makes this point at the beginning of our second scripture lesson. He is asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God is coming. Which is like asking, “When is the Rapture?” But Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”

In Jesus the kingdom of God is here now. Granted, at present it is hidden kingdom. It is not something you can observe through unmistakable signs. As Jesus says elsewhere, it is like yeast in bread dough. You can’t tell it is there, but it is, and it is already fermenting and bubbling and will one day transform the whole lump of dough. So if you ask, “When is the Rapture?” in one sense it has already started. The kingdom of God has already begun in Jesus, and even now it is fermenting in us.

**Mistake #2: When people focus on the Rapture, they forget that Jesus came to redeem the world not to abandon it.**

In Luke 17:24 Jesus says, “For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.” In the *Left Behind* series many people don’t realize that the Rapture has happened. They don’t realize that Jesus has come and taken people to be with him. Initially there is a fair amount of chaos from all the driverless cars and planes, but the Rapture happens and the world goes on like it always does.

That is NOT how the Bible pictures it. According to both I Thessalonians 4 and Luke 17, when Jesus comes again and we are caught up to be with him, the whole world is transformed. The world is not left behind, it is changed. There is no more ordinary eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. It is like the flood in the time of Noah. When Jesus comes again and takes us to be with him, no one can go back to business as usual.

For a moment turn back to our first scripture lesson from Revelation 7. Revelation 7 pictures a multitude of people from every nation singing praises to God. In verse 13 one of the elders asks, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” Then in verse 14 he answers his own question: “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (The Lamb is Revelation’s picture for Jesus.) It does not say they avoided the great ordeal. It does not say that they got to lounge with Jesus sipping lattes while the rest of the world was engulfed in conflict. It says that God brought them through these ordeals and gave them forgiveness and new life through Jesus’ death on the cross.

Ultimately God wants to do that for the whole creation. At the end of Revelation in chapters 21 and 22, John describes a new heaven and a new earth. It says that the springs of the waters of life flow through the new Jerusalem bringing healing to the nations. It says that death and suffering will be no more, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Now look at Revelation 7. After describing the white robed multitude who have been brought through the ordeals of the world, verse 17 says, “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” Revelation 7 is a sneak preview of how the whole story will end in Revelation 22. The blessings that God gives to the saints in Revelation 7 are the blessings that God wants for the whole world.

**Mistake #3: When people focus on the Rapture, they forget that our job is not to escape the tribulations of the world but to serve Jesus in the midst of them, living as signs of the new world Jesus came to bring.**

In Acts 1 after Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples ask him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” You might say they are asking, “When is the Rapture?” But Jesus replies, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

One of the ironies of the book *Left Behind* is that the most interesting and appealing characters in the book are the ones who got left behind. It is not the people who got sucked up out of the airplane that we come to care about. It is Rayford Steele, the pilot, and Hattie Durham, the flight attendant, and other people who come to believe in Jesus and who struggle to share Jesus’ love with people as the world spirals into chaos. That is what we are all called to do: not to escape the struggles of the world but to share Jesus’ love and call people to follow him in the midst of the struggles of this world.

**One thing the Rapture got right: Jesus coming brings a division into the world, both at his first coming and at his second coming.**

Near the end of Luke 17 Jesus says, “I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left.” This is not a picture of the Rapture, where some of the passengers on the plane are beamed up while the rest are left behind. This is a picture of the judgment

God's kingdom will bring. When Jesus came the first time, some followed him and some didn't. When Jesus comes again, some will be glad to join him, and some won't. Those glad to join him will be received by Jesus. That is one of the meanings of the Greek word translated "taken" in this verse. Some will be received by Jesus because they will be glad for the kingdom he came to bring. But others will want nothing to do with it, and they will be left out.

The question is which are you. If all that matters to you is what you can eat and drink, what you can buy and sell, what you can plant and build, then you will not be eager for the kingdom Jesus brings, where all these things are lost in something greater. That is what happened in the time of Noah when people did not realize that all the things they acquired for themselves and built for themselves will one day be washed away. If all you care about is what you can get for yourself, what you can build for yourself, the possessions or reputation you can acquire for yourself, you are not going to like the kingdom of heaven where all these things are lost in something greater.

But if in your heart you know there is more to life than eating and drinking or buying and selling, if in your heart you mourn because there are still people in this world who have nothing to eat and drink, buy and sell, or build and live in, if you sense that this world is not the place God wants it to be and you yearn for the world where death and suffering will be no more and God will wipe every tear from our eyes, then you will be eager to join the new world that Jesus comes to bring and to show people glimpses of it here and now even while we wait for it.

- Ken Onstot  
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