



## **“Can I Be A Christian If . . . 7. I Don’t Believe In “The Rapture”?”**

Text: Matthew 24:36-44

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We are really in the home-stretch of our summer sermon series. I must admit to being completely flabbergasted at the response these sermons have generated. I have never received so many positive comments and encouraging words from members of our congregation, our friends in the community, and from complete strangers who happen upon them via the internet or someone handing them a printed copy of one of the sermons. I am humbled by your encouragement and kindness and I can assure you that we will take up more of the kinds of questions that prompted this series in the years ahead.

Our sermon for this Sunday takes us to the subject of the Rapture – a particular understanding of how the world will come to an end. Let’s be clear: believing in the Rapture and believing in the return of Christ and the consummation of all things in God are two very different things. The Rapture has a lot more to it than just an understanding of how God will bring everything to an end. The Rapture (and its promoters) has much more of an agenda than that. We’ll get to all of that in just a minute.

But, let’s begin by saying that as Americans, we have a peculiar fascination with things apocalyptic. We are rather taken with the idea of the end of the world. We watch television programs about it. Apocalyptic movies are always among the biggest box office winners. People on the right talk about Jesus coming again. People on the left talk about how we’ll reduce the whole planet to a cinder by global warming. Ever since we detonated our first thermo-nuclear device, we know we have the capability. We’re all totally caught up in apocalyptic imagery and thinking. The good people at Chevy gave us a commercial during the Super Bowl last year of a Chevy Silverado driving through the ashes of a post-apocalyptic world, with Barry Manilow crooning in the background, “Looks like we made it...” Face it, we’re

obsessed with the end of the world.

So, let's see if we can make some sense of this whole business of the Rapture and the end of all things. Let's consider what this teaching offers. And then, let's see if all of that works in harmony with the God revealed to us by Jesus. And we'll do that all in about 14 minutes, so, fasten your seat belts.

A central historical teaching of Christianity is that human history has its beginning and ending in God. For centuries, the Church has taught that God created the world and called it good and that when all is said and done, at a time known only to God, as Jesus tells us in our morning lesson from Matthew, God will intervene and bring history to its conclusion. There is nothing new, or strange, or conservative, or liberal about this teaching. It has been the church's story for two thousand years.

But, about 170 years ago, a new teaching appeared on the scene. A fellow by the name of John Nelson Darby, an Irish evangelical and founder of the Plymouth Brethren, a very conservative evangelical denomination, began teaching that Jesus would return *twice*. The first return of Jesus would be a secret return, at which time Jesus would take the true and faithful Church out of the world and up to heaven. Then, at the height of a seven-year period of tribulation and suffering, Jesus would come back a second time<sup>1</sup>, to establish his kingdom on earth, with Jerusalem as its base and capitol. Even Darby didn't predict when this would happen, only that it would.

Darby did, however, put forward a theory that God had divided all time into seven "*dispensations*," seven periods of time in which God dealt with people according to different sets of rules. So it is that dispensationalism, still widely taught in evangelical circles today, lays out a rigid master plan for all of history.

When Darby's teachings hit the United States, a most interesting fellow by the name of Cyrus I. Scofield, included the dispensationalistic teaching of Darby into his study Bible, still known and published as *The Scofield Reference Bible*. By weaving the teachings of dispensationalism into his notes on Scripture, Scofield elevated the teaching to a level of biblical authority as no previous writing had been able to achieve.

The *Scofield Reference Bible* became the favorite of Dwight L. Moody, Lewis Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, Mordecai Ham, an itinerate evangelist under whose preaching a young Billy Graham was converted, and on to such evangelical personages as Charles Ryries, Hal Lindsey, John Hagee, and most of today's contemporary evangelical preachers and teachers of note. Because these people are committed to a literal interpretation of the Bible, and because most of the Bible's words about the end of the world are not in harmony with each other, dispensationalism seems to them the best way to harmonize that which is, at best, shall we say, a bit bumpy. Because there can be no loose ends, no allegory, and certainly no contradiction, this dubious patchwork quilt of a teaching has been exalted to the level of Biblical truth, even though it is absolutely not Biblical truth.

So, when you take the seemingly authoritative teaching of a two-step Second Coming – the Rapture and Return teaching of Darby and his followers,

and combine it with the American propensity for all things apocalyptic, you end up with Hal Lindsey's "*The Late, Great Planet Earth*," and John Hagee's, "*Earth's Final Moments*," and Tim LaHaye's series of "*Left Behind*" books and movies. You get teachings that run along parallel lines with an ancient heresy called, *manicheism*, a teaching that says that the world is evil and no good and that our job is to escape it. So, rather than address the world and its problems, all that is really left to be done is to save as many people as possible, so they can get out too. The world is going to hell in a hand-cart, but you can escape by "getting right with God." It was Dwight L. Moody who famously used the image of a shipwreck, teaching that "individual survivors might be rescued, but the vessel itself was beyond hope."

And when you let this teaching of dispensationalism – Rapture and Return – and all that goes with it, really start its run, you find yourself stockpiling weapons and food and everything you will need for the end of the world. You find yourself fixed on seeing Israel as key to the second coming, because God is going to set up God's capitol in Jerusalem, so Jerusalem should be the capital of Israel now, a policy that is being forwarded by one of the presidential candidates in this year's election. Middle East peace is never important to dispensationalists, because the more you force the issue of Israeli dominance, the more you force God's hand to move the whole process along with a new sense of urgency.

And the Rapture is big money. Millions upon millions upon millions of dollars have been spent on books and courses and tapes and compact discs devoted to the subject.

So, when you combine our American commitment to freedom and survival with politics and big business, you have a powerful cocktail that shapes American foreign policy, domestic policy, and business practice. All of that makes a Presbyterian preacher in Evansville, Indiana, or anywhere else, sound a little cynical and a little paranoid. But, the teachings and policies and practices of the Rapture and Return crowd, sound a little crazy to some of us.

In light of this suspect teaching, what can we say and what can we believe? How can Christian people who do not believe in the Rapture, live their faith and their lives?

The first thing I would suggest is that we remember Martin Luther's famous statement, when he said, "If I knew the world were going to end tomorrow, I would plant a tree." The hope that is ours in Jesus Christ is the most priceless of all the gifts God offers us. As Christian people, we can never be so hopeless or so desperate, and the future can never be so bleak that we succumb to fatalism in any of its insidious forms. We must be now and always, people of abundant hope.

The second thing I would offer you is that there is no reason to fear. The One who comes is the One who came for us 2,000 years ago in Jesus Christ. The One who comes for us loves us and seeks the best for us. The love of that One who comes is stronger than anything in the universe and assures us that nothing in all creation can separate us from that love. There is no room for fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear.

The third thing I would suggest is that we take Jesus at his word and live our lives in a constant state of readiness for God’s intervention. Jesus teaches us, “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” We don’t “get ready” for the end – whether our individual lives or the life of the world. We “live ready.”

And that means our life has meaning and purpose here and now and not in some heaven to which we might wish to escape from time to time. We are people of meaning and purpose, created that way by God, and placed in this world at this time to be instruments of peace and hope to each other and our neighbors. We have a calling – a divine calling – to live as beacons of what God is all about and by our actions and by our witness, to begin to heal the brokenness of the world. We are called to be as concerned about the hungry and the sick and the homeless and those who suffer injustice, as we are about our own future, and, frankly, maybe more.

“Can I Be A Christian If I Don’t Believe in the Rapture?” Absolutely. You don’t need to lose one more moment of your life worrying about that.

But remember this: that at a moment known only to God, the way things have been and are will come to an end. History will come to its conclusion in its Builder and Maker. God will, one day, known only to God, close the book.

And there is nothing about that which any of us need to fear. For “nothing can separate us from the love of God.” Nothing. Not now. And not forevermore. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, p. 22



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