

NOTES ON THE SO-CALLED END TIMES

When we speak to people about our understanding of the so-called end times, these verses inevitable become mentioned to prove the rapture:

- *"We will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptable, and we will be changed".* (1 Cor. 15:51, 52) In verse 14 he refers to those have already "fallen asleep".

- *"We who are still alive at the Lord's coming will certainly have no advantage over those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are still alive will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will always be with the Lord".* (1 Thess. 4:15-17)

Not only do these two portions of Scripture have the resurrection at heart, but they include the Old Testament concept of "falling asleep". Also, Paul is very clearly not referring to any future generation, but to the generation his letters were addressed to - note his use of the first person, "we" throughout. Bear in mind that Paul wrote to two specific congregations and not to a wider audience, as he did in the letter to the Ephesians. Bear in mind too, that Paul was addressing very specific questions and problems pertaining to those specific groups. [Note: By 70 AD there were already many churches spread throughout what we know as Europe and Asia, as well as Northern Africa. In the Bible itself 33 such ecclesia's are mentioned, but there were more. Tradition indicates, for example that the apostle Bartholomew may have been martyred in India. Matthew's missionary work and possible martyrdom is placed in Ethiopia and Persia.]

Under the Mosaic dispensation or covenant, to be "asleep" was the state of death in a **temporary holding place** (Hebrew *sheol* and Greek *hades*) that would give up its dead at the resurrection. This resurrection took place when the judgment, the days of vengeance, fell upon the Jewish nation, upon Judea and Jerusalem. *Hades* gave up the dead that were in it and it was cast into the lake of fire (*Hades*, a temporary place that would give up its dead at the resurrection):

"...because these are days of vengeance to fulfil all the things that are written".
(Luke 21:22)

“Then the sea gave up its dead, and Death and Hades gave up their dead; all were judged according to their works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire”. (Rev. 20:13, 14)

During Paul’s work among the Thessalonian believers he had emphasized that Christ’s coming would be soon. The Thessalonians feared that those who had died in the meantime would now be missing the kingdom. Paul wrote to clarify their confusion and set their hearts at ease. In similar fashion, he addressed specific aspects in his letter to the Corinthians. After the judgment upon the old Jewish dispensation, those who died would no longer go to the temporary holding place, *Hades*, but would be changed in the twinkling of an eye! The dead would henceforth come face to face with the Lord in His Glory when they die, of which clouds and the air are but concrete symbols for the abstract concepts they were.

Considering that the rapture doctrines are absolutely interwoven with a time called The Great Tribulation, such tribulation content is conspicuous in its absence in these two letters. Bear in mind that Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians was written in 50 AD (it was his second letter, Galatians being the first in 49 AD). His second letter to them was written in the same year. The first letter to the Corinthians followed five years later, and was followed by:

2 Corinthians in 56 AD

Romans in 57 AD

Ephesians, Philippians, Collosians, and Philemon in 61 AD

1 Timothy and Titus in 63 AD

2 Timothy in 64 AD

If the rapture theology were true, it entails a matter of absolute life and death. Yet, it is not a theme developed in Paul’s other works over a period of 14 years! To read such a developing theme into the other works would be to do violence to the texts.

But don’t the majority of Christians believe in the rapture?

The answer is an unequivocal “No”! The Reformed groups do not, and neither does the Catholic Church or Seventh Day Adventists. You will search in vain for Rapture doctrine in the writings of Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, or the Wesley brothers. The radical Puritans never wrote about it, and the Eastern Orthodox Church and Anglicans also deny it. It is not found in the doctrinal statements of the Presbyterians, Lutherans, or

Mainstream Methodists. The so-called “truth of the Rapture” was not revealed until approximately 1831, and it only became popularised in the 20th century.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE APOSTLES

We noted earlier that the letters and writings of the New Testament reflect a first century frame of reference. While the doctrine of the apostles (see Acts 2:41-47) would have included all they were taught by the Master in His time with them, such as the Beatitudes of Mat. 5, there can be no doubt that they would have included His end times prophecy recorded in Mat. 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. DeMar quite rightly points out that the New Testament is filled with exhortations of a near eschatological event (near in context of the apostles’ time):

- **Romans 13:12** - *“The night is nearly over, and the **daylight is near**, so let us discard the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light”.*
- **1 Corinthians 7:29** - *“And I say this, brothers, **the time is limited**, so from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none”.*
- **1 Corinthians 10:11** - *“Now these things happened to them as examples, and they were written as a warning to us, **on whom the ends of the ages have come**”.*
- **Philippians 4:5** - *“Let your graciousness be known to everyone. **The Lord is near**”.*
- **Hebrews 1:2** - *“**In these last days**, He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things and through whom He made the universe”.*
- **Hebrews 9:26** - *“Otherwise, He would have to suffer many times since the foundation of the world. But now He has appeared one time, **at the end of the ages**, for the removal of sin by the sacrifice of Himself”.*
- **Hebrews 10:25** - *“...not staying away from **our meetings**, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more **as you see the day drawing near**”.*
- **James 5:3** - *“your silver and gold are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You stored up treasure in the last days”!*
- **James 5:7-9** - *“Therefore, brothers, **be patient until the Lord’s coming**...Strengthen your hearts, because **the Lord’s coming is near**...Look, **the judge stands at the door**”.*
- **1 Peter 4:7** - *“Now **the end of all things is near**; therefore, be clearheaded and disciplined for prayer”.*

- **1 John 2:18** - *“Children, it is the **last hour**. And as you have heard, ‘Antichrist is coming,’ even now **many antichrists have come**. We know from this that it is **the last hour**”.*
- **Revelation 1:1** - *“The revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave Him to show His slaves [or bond-servants] **what must quickly take place**”.*
- **Revelation 1:3** - *“Blessed is the one who reads and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it, **because the time is near**”!*
- **Revelation 3:11** - *“I am coming quickly. Hold on to what you have, so that no one takes your crown”.*
- **Revelation 1:19** - *“Therefore write what you have seen, **what is, and what will take place after this**”.*
- **Revelation 22:6** - *“Then he [the angel] said to me [John], ‘These words are faithful and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirit of the prophets, has sent His angel to show His servants **what must quickly take place**”.*
- **Revelation 22:7** - *“Look! I am coming quickly! Blessed is the one who keeps the prophetic words of this book”.*
- **Revelation 22: 10** - *He [the angel] also said to me [John], ‘Don’t seal the prophetic words of this book, **because the time is near**”.*
- **Revelation 22:12** - *“Look! I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me to repay each person according to what he has done”.*
- **Revelation 22:20** - *“He who testifies about these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming quickly.’ Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!”!*

To turn the above time indicators into something in the far distant future is not only reading far above what is written, but it is doing violence to the text. Daniel received a prophecy that was in the distant future, and he was instructed to seal the book until the time of the end (Daniel 12:4). Here, in Revelation 22:10, John is instructed **not to seal up the book because the time was near**.

WHO IS LEFT BEHIND?

The Left Behind series of books and the films that flowed from them have taken an important part of the Christian world by storm. Those of us who have seen one or more of

the films will recollect how people would be together, and then one or some of them would suddenly disappear, with their clothes all neatly folded up where they had been standing.

The biblical left behind image Jesus used in his Matthew 24 prophecy, has a completely different meaning: In the cultures of the Biblical times, during persecutions and wars, the conquering forces would take the strong and young captive and leave the old and weak behind. The Babilonian exile is one example. Historical records show the reality of just how many young people had been taken captive by the Romans during the final destruction of Jerusalem. The Complete Works of Josephus on the history of the Jews is a must-have resource for Bible study.

A simple reality of the times was taken by modern end times prophets and turned into highly spiritualised fiction!

Dr. Grant Jeffrey, a well-known teacher of the rapture doctrine, and referring to the statement of many that the early church never taught the rapture doctrine, wrote as follows: *“During the summer of 1994, after more than a decade of searching, I discovered several fascinating manuscripts that contain clear evidence of the teaching of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture in the early church”*.

He then went on to quote a statement from the work of a so-called early Christian writer and poet, Ephraem the Syrian, (who lived from A.D. 306 to 373) and who was a major theologian of the early Byzantine Eastern Church: *“For all the saints and Elect of God are gathered, prior to the Tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins”*.

We wish to make the following observations in this regard. It is astounding that someone who had been preaching the rapture concept for a long time, acknowledges nonchalantly as if it is of no importance at all, that he had to make a very concerted effort, which took ten years, to find something resembling the modern rapture doctrine in ancient Christian writings. Even then, he fails to show that it was more than just the one writer’s own opinion; that it was taught in the church.

Worse, Jeffrey also misrepresents the source of his quotation – why, one wonders? The quotation is from a document called *Pseudo-Ephraim*. *Pseudo*, of course, means false. It is regarded to be a document from the 7th century or even as late as the 17th century (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apocalypse_of_Pseudo-Ephraem, and <http://www.tribwatch.com/davemac.htm>, for example).

The fact is simply that if the rapture had been early church doctrine (and the fourth century is certainly not early enough to prove authenticity of doctrine) it would not have been difficult to find such evidence. According to the Bible (Acts 2) the people were taught the doctrine of the apostles and not something else. There is abundant evidence that by the fourth century the pagan influence of converted Greeks such as Origen had already philosophised much of the Scriptures into what it never stated or intended.

We read in numerous places in the Old Testament prophecies concerning the house of Israel being gathered together in the latter days...This time, I understand to be at the time of the coming of Christ at the end of the world, as it is called in Scripture; or in other words, at the destruction of Jerusalem. Many admit, and earnestly contend, that the end of the world, as understood by the Jews, has long been past...it is contended that the end of the world, means the end of the Jewish age. Very well - so does the last day mean the end of the Jewish age. One is no more future than the other. **(Ephraim Currier, 1841)**

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