

# Exegetical Inconsistencies in the Anti-Rapture Arguments of NT Wright and Ben Witherington III

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There is, perhaps, no doctrine more distinctive of dispensationalism<sup>1</sup> than the pretribulation rapture. Admittedly, the pretribulation rapture was not considered part of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism by Ryrie, and I would agree with that. Nevertheless, belief or non-belief in the pretribulation rapture may legitimately be considered as something of a litmus test of whether one is a dispensationalist or not. If one believes in a pretribulation rapture, he is almost certainly also a dispensationalist; likewise, if one does not believe in a pretribulation rapture, he is almost certainly not a dispensationalist. James M. Morris, in his book, *Ancient Dispensational Truth*, lists “the Lord’s return to take his own to himself ... a significant time before He would return to judge the world for its wickedness” as one characteristic of dispensationalism.<sup>2</sup>

Critics of dispensationalism, often make the pretribulation rapture their primary target in their attempts to discredit dispensationalism. For instance, in Ben Witherington III’s recent book, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism*,<sup>3</sup> he devotes three chapters to “Dispensing with Dispensationalism,” of which he titles chapter 5, “Enraptured but not Uplifted: The Origins of Dispensationalism and Prophecy,” and chapter 6, “What Goes Up Must Come Down: The Problem with Rapture Theology.”<sup>4</sup> Non-dispensational scholars, such as Witherington, have increasingly targeted the pretribulation rapture, both in print and in social media. Much of this recent attention on dispensationalism appears to be a reaction against the popularity of LaHaye and Jenkins’ *Left Behind* books and movies. In fact, the phrase “left behind” seems to have become in many blog posts a kind of pejorative synonym for both dispensationalism in general, and the pretribulation rapture in particular.

In a 2012 ABC News Podcast, David D. Flowers interviewed NT Wright. After playing a video clip from the “Left Behind” movie, Flowers commented,

The hugely successful “Left Behind” series of movies and books that have sold more than 65 million copies is an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world, a view shared by many evangelicals. According to those who believe it, the end of the world will start with the so-called Rapture when all Christians will be taken up to heaven in one momentous

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<sup>1</sup> As is standard with the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics, I am using the term “dispensationalism” to refer to traditional dispensationalism as delineated by Dr. Ryrie in his seminal work, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), not to the so-called “progressive dispensationalism.”

<sup>2</sup> James C. Morris, *Ancient Dispensational Truth* (Taos, NM: Dispensational Publishing, 2018), 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Witherington III. *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> The third chapter, chapter 7, deals with the issue of the distinction between Israel and the Church.

swoop. The earth then enters a period of cataclysmic wars until it eventually disintegrates in a final chapter of fire. But Bishop Wright says that this is more mythical than biblical.

To which Write responded, “The whole left behind kind of myth is just that, it’s a myth. It is an attempt to make sense of some bits of the New Testament.” Flowers then asked, “So you don’t believe in the Rapture either?” Write’s reply, “No.”<sup>5</sup>

And in September of 2023 Write frankly said, “There is a major problem here, which you better name right off the top ... which looms more large [sic] ... in America than anywhere else, because the American dispensationalist, with the idea of the Rapture, has actually turned the idea of Jesus’ second coming into its opposite.”<sup>6</sup>

Recently, both N.T. Wright and Ben Witherington III have posted internet blogs purporting to demonstrate why the teaching of the rapture is wrong. Witherington devoted several chapters in his published work *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*,<sup>7</sup> opposing dispensationalism in general and the pretribulation rapture in particular. Witherington seems to have been on something of a crusade against the teaching of the rapture for at least the past ten years. Some of his videos posted on YouTube include:

- "Where Did Rapture Theology Come From?"  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d\\_cVXdr8mVs&t=13s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_cVXdr8mVs&t=13s), Oct 8, 2014
- "Is the Rapture Doctrine Biblical?"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cg8IRGqtMHc>, Oct 15, 2014
- "The Rapture Doctrine Refuted in Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrgNm6Uq4n4>, Nov 8, 2019
- "Is the Rapture false theology?"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQHyymWuZY0>, Jan 6, 2022
- "Examining Pre-Trib Rapture Theology"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3TdEiUWO1k>, Mar 18, 2023
- "Israel & the Rapture" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OBGd9IFgtk>, Jan 17, 2024

NT Wright, probably best known for his views on soteriology (e.g., New Perspective on Paul) has at least a ten-year anti-rapture history. This interest in eschatology seems to have emerged around the time of his publication of *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (HarperCollins, 2008; HarperOne reprint, 2018). Recent video interviews with Wright on YouTube, include:

- "NT Wright on Heaven & Rapture Theology, ABC Interview,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9ln9Jq5Y-E>, Oct 26, 2012
- "Left Behind Rapture Debunked" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OIVJaIcTwQ>, Oct 29, 2016
- N.T. Wright, “How will we know when Jesus is coming back?” The Veritas Forum, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BlcjeFL-dyY&t=54s>. Jan. 30, 2023

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<sup>5</sup> “N.T. Wright on Heaven & Rapture Theology,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch/I9ln9Jq5Y-E>, Oct 26, 2012, ABC News Podcast, Interview by David D. Flowers.

<sup>6</sup> “NT Wright EXPOSES Rapture Doctrine,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch/Anm7S8vGdaQ>, Sep 7, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Witherington III., *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 93-131.

- "NT Wright Exposes Rapture Doctrine"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Anm7S8vGdaQ>, Sep 7, 2023
- "NT Wright vs John MacArthur on Rapture Doctrine"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PupqA2YzXU>, Dec 29, 2023
- "What do we mean by heaven, the Resurrection of Jesus and the rapture?"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8li-yWVDbBc&t=1s>, Mar 30, 2024
- "Dear Tom: do you believe in 'The Rapture'" on Ask NT Wright Anything,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePSbRP7K0pg>, Apr 20, 2024

The rapture is the blessed hope of the church. Several passages in the New Testament describe believers as eagerly awaiting, or anticipating the coming of the Lord to take us to heaven (Tit. 2:13; Gal. 5:5; Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Cor. 1:7–8; Rom. 8:23–25; 2 Pet. 3:11–12; John 14:1–3; 1 Thess. 4:13–18). During my lifetime I have witnessed Christian evangelical interest in the rapture both wax and wane several times. Today's Christian climate appears to be one of those waning seasons. I fear that many evangelicals today are promoting a Christianity that has divested itself of the "blessed hope."

Social media today is rife with anti-rapture blogs and videos. But for this paper, I did not want to respond to just any "YouTuber" who claims to be a prophecy expert. Rather, I wanted to focus my attention on two well-known, highly qualified, evangelical academics. NT Wright and Ben Witherington are both highly respected and academically credentialed scholars. Their publications and internet presentations are highly influential and present an anti-pretribulation-rapture message that has caught the attention of many evangelicals. However, I have found their arguments less than convincing. The six most common arguments they put forth may be summarized as follows:

1. It's not in the Bible.
2. It was invented by Darby and promoted by Scofield.
3. The Bible only teaches two comings of Christ, not three.
4. Belief in the rapture is escapism (Gnosticism, dualism)
5. *παρουσία* and *ἀπάντησις* in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17, is "Caesar language" that can only be understood as pertaining to the second coming of Christ to the earth.
6. Coming in the clouds in 1 Thessalonians is a reference to Daniel 7 and the vindication of God's people that can only be understood as pertaining to the second coming of Christ to the earth.

The primary purpose of this paper is to deal with exegetical issues, so I will focus on arguments 5 and 6. However, I would like to address more briefly the first four arguments as well, as they represent serious logical fallacies.

### *It's not in the Bible.*

Both Wright and Witherington acknowledge that 1 Thessalonians 4:17 refers to a "catching up," and thus they would agree that there is a "rapture" in the Bible. But when they say it's not in the Bible, they are referring in particular to the pretribulation timing of this event. This is why they claim that the "rapture doctrine" is not taught in the Bible. What seems to be going on here is not truly an exegetical argument, but a straw man argument. The support for a pretribulation rapture is said to rest on either Matthew 24:40, or broadly to a reading of the book

of Revelation. Then, it is shown that these passages are referring either to Christ coming to the saints on the earth, rather than meeting them in the air, or apocalyptically to God's dealings with His people in the present age, and so, the conclusion is reached that the rapture is not in the Bible.

a. Matthew 24:40

Witherington claims, "Another of the favorite texts to prove that the rapture is biblical is, of course, Matthew 24:36–41," and he goes on to claim that such a notion is "far-fetched."<sup>8</sup> His exegesis of the passage is actually quite solid, as he argues for this being fulfilled at Christ's second coming to the earth.<sup>9</sup>

It is surprising that Witherington would make this argument. Almost no pretribulation rapture teacher that I'm aware of argues from Matthew 24:36-41. A notable exception would be John Hart,<sup>10</sup> but even he acknowledges, "Most pretribulation interpreters have opposed seeing a rapture of any form in Matthew 24. They have insisted that verses 29-31 and verses 36-44 concern the same coming of Christ, and that *neither* passage in Matthew 24 refers to a rapture."<sup>11</sup> Instead, most pretribulation rapture proponents rely primarily on John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54, and secondarily perhaps on Revelation 3:10 and 2 Thessalonians 2:3. As an experienced scholar, Witherington should know better. He knows how to research, and should be honest with the research. He has not documented his claim that this passage is a "favorite text" to prove that the rapture is biblical. This is simply a straw man argument, misrepresenting his opponent's position, and then attacking that misrepresentation, rather than analyzing the actual position of his opponent.

The one weak attempt that Witherington makes at supporting this argument comes from his insistence that the *Scofield Reference Bible* had a heading in Matthew 24, labeling it as "Jesus Predicts the Rapture." In an interview, he claimed:

The key thing about [the Scofield Reference] Bible was, it had notes. But it not only had notes, it had headings that he had put into the text. For example, the heading above Matthew 24, which was right in the text which gave the illusion that it was part of the Bible itself, was, "Jesus predicts the rapture." Oh, well, it's right in the gospel of Matthew. How could we possibly not believe that, if it's right in the gospel of Matthew? And, unfortunately, the notes were based, not on a Greek or Hebrew text, but on the King James Bible, so there were all kinds, in the early editions of all this, there were all kinds of misinterpretations of what was going on, based on a misreading of a particular English translation, not the original language text at all.<sup>12</sup>

Once again, Witherington disappoints with an apparent failure to do responsible research. Neither the original 1909 Scofield Reference Bible nor the subsequent 1917 revision had any such heading, nor was there a footnote referencing the rapture.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 112.

<sup>9</sup> See also "Is the Rapture false theology?" Interview of Dr. Ben Witherington III by Dale Norman. <https://www.youtube.com/watch/MQHyyWuZY0>, Jan. 16, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> John Hart, "Jesus and the Rapture: Matthew 24" in John Hart ed., *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism* (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 45-71.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> "Is the Rapture false theology?" See also *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 95.

<sup>13</sup> See appendix for scans of these pages. I also consulted the 1945 reprint and found the same results.

## b. The Book of Revelation

I have not seen or heard a specific reference to Revelation 3:10 in either Wright's or Witherington's material. However, both of these men spend a considerable amount of space and time insisting that Revelation is apocalyptic literature and therefore must not be taken literally, and can only be referring to the experiences of God's suffering people on the earth, not anything actually descriptive of heaven. Witherington, for example, said,

In the book of Revelation, when you hear John, it says, "I was in the spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard a voice say, 'Come up here, and I'll show you what must soon take place.'" This is apocalyptic language about a vision into heaven. It's not about a physical transportation on Air Ruach from earth to heaven, you know. And, that's not what it's about. In apocalyptic literature, you've got people seeing all kinds of things while their feet are planted firmly on *terra firma*. But it's in a vision that they see these things, and so this whole language of "going up into heaven" is metaphorical; it's dealing with the nature of the vision that's seeing into heaven, while John of Patmos is still squarely on the island of Patmos. So, none of those texts are even remotely relevant to a discussion of an actual bodily rapture.<sup>14</sup>

Witherington is presumably referring here to Revelation 4:1 where John is summoned to "come up here," after which he sees a throne "in heaven" (ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ). Admittedly, some pretribulation scholars have seen this verse as somehow depicting, or suggestive of, the rapture. However, many do not. Nevertheless, either way, the question is whether the things John saw in Revelation 4-5 depict the actualities in heaven. Witherington insists that since this is an apocalyptic vision, it cannot. The whole question of whether Revelation is apocalyptic literature is debatable. Some believe that the genre may be more accurately described as "prophetic." Thomas discussed the genre of the book of Revelation to some extent.<sup>15</sup> He notes that "the Apocalypse has been compared as *prophecy, apocalyptic, and epistle*. To these may be added *edict*, to which Aune has recently likened the messages of Revelation 2-3, and *drama*, for which Blevins has argued. No consensus exists as to a precise definition of genre, so discussions attempting to classify ... Revelation, are at best vague."<sup>16</sup> While admitting that "Revelation certainly has features in common with the *Shepherd of Hermas* and other works of this type," he also points out that Revelation "differs distinctly from everything else in this class."<sup>17</sup> Thomas then goes on to identify six ways in which Revelation differs from standard apocalyptic literature:

1. Other apocalypses are generally pseudonymous, but Revelation is not.
2. The epistolary framework of Revelation sets it apart from the works that are similar in other respects.
3. The repeated admonitions for moral compliance in Revelation 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19 are features lacking from other apocalyptic works.
4. Revelation is not as pessimistic about the present as other works in this category.
5. In others the coming of Messiah is exclusively future, but in Revelation He has already come and laid the groundwork for His future victory through His redemptive death.

<sup>14</sup> "Is the Rapture false theology?"

<sup>15</sup> Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 23-40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 24-25.

6. The book of Revelation calls itself a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19).

Thomas concludes his discussion of the genre of Revelation as follows:

In light of Revelation's self-claims (e.g., Rev. 1:3; 22:18-19) and how well it fulfills the qualifications of NT prophecy, the best overall characterization of the literary style of the Apocalypse is to call it prophetic. A blending of genres such as prophetic-apocalyptic or prophetic-apocalyptic-epistolary is not the best answer because it does not allow for the preeminence of the book's prophetic character.<sup>18</sup>

In light of the scholarly uncertainty that exists over the genre of Revelation, it seems unwise to me for Wright and Witherington to summarily dismiss understanding "heaven" in the book of Revelation as describing an actual place where God resides simply because the book is "apocalyptic."

One of the reasons Witherington and Wright raise questions about the literalness of a location referred to as "heaven," is to remove one of the options for the location of the Lord and His saints after the catching up of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. If there is no "heaven" to go to, then there is only one place left, and that is the earth, and this requires a "rapture" event that coincides with the Lord's coming to the earth. For NT Wright, this gets into a discussion of metaphysics. He explains his conception of "heaven" as a non-literal, non-spatial location:

We have a problem because of our implicit cosmology. We have an implicit cosmology in which Heaven is a long, long way away, probably up in the sky somewhere. ... We think of Heaven as a long way up in the sky, and then we think of earth as all the way down here. So, we think of Jesus as coming like a spaceman, having to make a long trip from somewhere else. And I've had letters from them, there are a lot of people who take that as completely literal language, as though heaven is a space within our cosmos. That is not how the Bible uses the word "heaven." The word "heaven" has a multiplicity of meanings, but in this sense, "heaven" is God's space, and God's space is supposed to be eventually integrated with our space; call it "earth" if you like. And the point is, that at the moment it is as though there is a great curtain hanging down through the middle of ordinary reality, so that at any point in any place God is not far away Jesus is not far away. It's just that they're currently invisible. But one day the curtain will be pulled back, and it won't be like *coming* it'll be like *appearing*. You imagine the gasp, as if somebody were to yank a great curtain back there [motioning behind him with a sweep of his arm], and we suddenly realized all sorts of things going on behind that curtain that were actually integrated with our reality and we didn't realize it. That's as good a picture as the idea of him coming.<sup>19</sup>

It's an interesting theory. Maybe he's right; maybe not. But it seems precarious to make this definition of heaven a foundation for understanding passages that refer either to "going up" to heaven (Deut. 30:12; 2 Kings 2:1, 11; Dan. 8:10; Amos 9:2; Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:2, 9; John 14:2, 3; 2 Cor. 12:2; Rev. 4:1; 11:12), or to "coming down from" heaven (Isa. 14:12; Dan. 4:23; Neh. 9:13; Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; John 6:33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58; Rom. 10:6; Rev. 3:12; 10:1; 12:10-12; 18:1; 20:1; 21:2, 10), or even of heaven as God's dwelling place somewhere separate from earth (Deut. 26:15; Psa. 14:2; 53:2; 80:14; 102:19; Eccl. 5:2; Isa. 63:15; Lam. 3:50; Acts 7:55-56; Eph. 2:6). We may struggle to understand how heaven can be a

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>19</sup> "NT Wright EXPOSES Rapture Doctrine."

place that is “up” with reference to an earth that is shaped like a globe, but there are simply too many verses that describe heaven as up above the earth to ignore them in favor of a metaphysical theory like Wright has proposed. Our ignorance of the things of God is not an adequate excuse to take a non-literal interpretation.

*It was invented by Darby and promoted by Scofield.*

To his credit, I could not find anywhere that NT Wright resorted to this *ad hominem* argument. Ben Witherington, on the other hand, makes abundant use of this very argument, and claims that the teaching of a pretribulation rapture did not exist prior to Darby, claiming, “What you need to understand about this is that for 1,800 years of church history nobody believed this theology or thought it was an accurate way of interpreting the Bible.”<sup>20</sup> He explains the origin of Dispensationalism as follows:

The Dispensational approach to the Bible did not arise after profound study of the Hebrew or Greek Scriptures or detailed scholarly exegesis of the text. It was a system that apparently arose in response to a vision and as a result of a pastoral concern about unfulfilled biblical prophecy, and was promulgated by various ministers and evangelists and entrepreneurs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>21</sup>

He elaborates as follows:

In 1830 in Glasgow, Scotland, a young girl named Margaret MacDonald attended a healing service. She was said to have received a vision on the occasion of a two-stage return of Christ, though it is not clear whether she envisioned a pre-tribulation or a post-tribulation rapture to coordinate with the first of these comings. The matter might have fallen into obscurity except that a British Evangelical preacher named John Nelson Darby heard the story and spread it far and wide. Darby, who was to become the founder of the Plymouth Brethren denomination, explained more fully and clearly that Christ would definitely come twice, the first in secret to rapture the church out of the world and up to heaven. He would then return after seven years of worldwide tribulation to establish a dominion on earth based in Jerusalem. Darby coordinated this latter event with the discussion of the “glorious appearing” referred to in Titus 2:13 and distinguished it from the discussion of the “parousia” in 1 Thessalonians 4.<sup>22</sup>

There are three persons making up the substance of this argument: Margaret MacDonald, John Nelson Darby, and Cyrus Scofield. All three of them are presented in a decidedly negative light, and the pretribulation rapture is associated with these three.

a. Margaret MacDonald

Margaret and her sister claimed to have the prophetic gift. In the quote above (from 2005), Witherington included the caveat, “it is not clear whether she envisioned a pre-tribulation or a post-tribulation rapture.” However, in the YouTube videos, all coming from later dates, he just makes the unqualified claim that MacDonald was teaching a pretribulation rapture and that Darby got his views on the rapture from her. For example,

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<sup>20</sup> Seedbed, *Seven Minute Seminary*, “Where Did Rapture Theology Come From?” Ben Witherington III, [https://www.youtube.com/watch/d\\_cVXdr8mVs](https://www.youtube.com/watch/d_cVXdr8mVs), Oct 8, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 93.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

It really began in a little Revival in Glasgow in Scotland. There was a teenage girl named MacDonald, a good Scottish name, who claimed to have a vision of a pre-tribulation Rapture of the church, out of this world, into heaven. Now, this event might have come and gone and not left much of a mark on the church itself, except that there was a certain reverend named Darby there who heard this, became convinced that that this theology was correct, began preaching this.<sup>23</sup>

Contrary to Witherington's claims, MacDonald actually taught a posttribulation rapture, and Darby was convinced that she was actually a false prophet. Dr. Paul Wilkinson wrote his thesis at Manchester University on the life and works of Darby. He has published the substance of this masterful work in *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby*.<sup>24</sup> Wilkinson thoroughly researched the MacDonald incident that occurred in Scotland. I will quote somewhat extensively from his work:

In 1830, Francis Newman received a letter from the Gare Loch region of Scotland, which was 'alive with religious fervour'. The letter was passed to Newton, and Darby was duly commissioned by the Brethren to investigate the matter on their behalf... the sisters had received an ecstatic experience... Edward Irving was "convinced that the 'extraordinary manifestations' were 'of God'. Darby did not share Irving's convictions... Newton, a Brethren leader, wrote, "What decided Darby ... was that when those who were inspired were expounding prophetic Scriptures, such as those in Isaiah, respecting Israel [and] Jerusalem, they explained them as being prophetic of Christian Churches of this dispensation." ... Newman, another Brethren leader, reported that Darby sent him "a full account of what he [Darby] heard with his own ears; which was to the effect – that none of the sounds, vowels or consonants, were foreign; - that the strange words were moulded after the Latin grammar ... so as to denote poverty of invention rather than spiritual agency; - and *that there was no interpretation*. The last point decided me, that any belief which I had in it must be for the present unpractical..."<sup>25</sup>

Wilkinson concludes, "Darby's personal record of his visit to the region ... completely exonerates him from *any* charge that he derived his doctrine of the pretribulation Rapture from the utterance of Margaret MacDonald."<sup>26</sup> He adds Darby's own testimony about the MacDonald affair (Darby referring to himself in the third person),

The sense he had of the want of the power of the Holy Ghost in the Church made him willing to hear and see. Yet he went rather as deputed for others than for himself. The excitement was great, so that, though not particularly an excitable person, he felt its effects very strongly. It did not certainly approve itself to his judgment; other things contributed to form it. It was too much of a scene. Previous to the time of exercising the gifts, they read, sung psalms, and prayed, under certain persons' presidency... This being finished, the 'Irish Clergyman' was going away, when another said to him, 'Don't go: the best part is probably to come yet.' So he stayed and heard what has just been related... It may be added, without of course saying anything that could point out the persons, that

<sup>23</sup> Seedbed, *Seven Minute Seminary*.

<sup>24</sup> Paul R. Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* (Milton Kings, UK: Paternoster, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Wilkinson, 193-94.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 194.



female vanity, and very distinct worldliness, did not confirm, to his mind, the thought that it could be the Spirit's power."<sup>27</sup>

Wilkinson's conclusion of the matter is as follows:

"From a careful reading of MacDonald's account, we may reasonably conclude that she was, in fact, advocating a *post*tribulation Rapture, the Great Tribulation being 'the fiery trial which is to try *us*' and which will be 'for the purging and purifying of *the real members* of the body of Jesus'. She also described this period as being 'from Antichrist', when Satan 'will try to shake in every thing *we* have believed', when 'the awful sight of a false Christ [will] be seen on this earth', and when 'nothing but the living Christ *in us* can detect this awful attempt of the enemy to deceive'. MacDonald included herself among the faithful to be tried *after* Antichrist has been revealed and *during* the Tribulation period. These 'revelations' are completely inconsistent with Darby's teaching."<sup>28</sup>

Other careful scholars have agreed with Wilkinson's conclusion:

[Paul] Benware and Gary Nebeker assert that 'no clear evidence exists that Darby got his views from Margaret MacDonald or Edward Irving,' and that any suggestion of a 'directly derivative link' between Darby and Irving is 'unduly reductionist'. Brethren scholar F.F. Bruce also distanced Darby from Irving and MacDonald, and acknowledged that the doctrine of the pretribulation Rapture was 'in the air in the 1820s and 1830s among eager students of unfulfilled prophecy.'<sup>29</sup>

b. John Nelson Darby

Darby (1800-1882) was from a wealthy Irish family. He graduated at the top of his class from Trinity College, Dublin. He was ordained into Anglican ministry in Ireland. At one time, he was winning thousands of Catholics to Christ. For political reasons, he was asked to stop his evangelizing of Catholics. At this, he quit the Anglican Church and helped found the Plymouth Brethren congregation. He is sometimes criticized for being "divisive" because he helped found a separatist congregation, but what looks like divisiveness to some appears as being a man of conviction to others. Darby began formulating many of his theological views of Israel and the Church during a period of convalescence in his sister's home after a fall from horseback. During this time, he had little else to do but read the Bible. It is from his conclusion that the Bible teaches a distinction between Israel and the Church that he concluded the rapture must occur before the tribulation,<sup>30</sup> not from listening to Miss MacDonald.

c. Cyrus I. Scofield

There can be no doubt that the *Scofield Reference Bible* was massively influential in spreading the teaching of the pretribulation rapture. Scofield has an interesting and somewhat checkered history. His life changed demonstrably after he was led to faith in Christ by James Hall Brookes in St. Louis, following which he assisted in the St. Louis evangelistic campaign by D. L. Moody, served as secretary of the St. Louis YMCA, and came under the mentorship of Pastor Brookes. In 1883, Scofield was ordained as a Congregationalist minister, and pastored a small mission church in Dallas, Texas. This church (now Scofield Memorial Church) grew from

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 196.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 104-109.

fourteen to over five hundred members during his pastorate. In 1890, Scofield founded the Central American Mission.

Despite his remarkable conversion and years of faithful ministry, his personal failures have become an occasion for *ad hominem* attacks against the pretribulation rapture. Witherington writes: “With the publication of this Bible, Scofield hit the jackpot, selling millions. What few know about him today is that he was an embezzler and forger who abandoned his wife and children and did time in jail even after his conversion to Christianity.”<sup>31</sup> There is no question that before his conversion, Scofield led a sordid lifestyle as characterized by Witherington. But these problems were mostly limited to his pre-conversion life. To be sure, after coming to faith in Christ, Scofield had his spiritual ups and downs, as do most Christians, but his life took a notable turn towards godliness and spirituality following his conversion. Thomas Ice, executive director of the Pre-Trib Research Center and an authority on the life of Scofield, expressed it this way:

It is disputed whether he “abandoned” his wife and kids. She was a strong Catholic and an ill-tempered woman. Yes, he did do time in jail after his conversion for things he had done before becoming a believer. Like most who have a storied past before becoming a believer, Scofield experienced some of the results of his pre-Christian behavior after getting saved. People who dislike dispensationalism harp on those things.<sup>32</sup>

Following his conversion, Scofield had many great spiritual accomplishments. To write them off due to a few spiritual lapses is unwarranted. Ultimately, the life experiences of C.I. Scofield are not what determine either the truth or falsity of the pretribulation rapture; only serious exegesis of the inspired text of Scripture can determine that. I am frankly surprised that a scholar of Ben Witherington’s caliber would resort to such a cheap, *ad hominem* argument in a serious book on theology.

In addition to the *ad hominem* aspect to this argument, there is a historical aspect as well. As noted above, Witherington stated, “What you need to understand about this is that for 1,800 years of church history nobody believed this theology or thought it was an accurate way of interpreting the Bible.”<sup>33</sup> He also claimed, “I have scoured the patristic fathers, there’s just nothing. There’s nothing in Jerome, nothing in Augustine, nothing in Chrysostom, nothing in Anselm. We could go on, you know. It just didn’t really exist.”<sup>34</sup> Such a statement might have been more convincing twenty years ago, but recent research has proven these claims to be unwarranted. Two important sources were published in the last ten years: William Watson, *Dispensationalism before Darby*,<sup>35</sup> and James C. Morris, *Ancient Dispensational Truth*.<sup>36</sup> These document both dispensational thinking in general, and belief in a pretribulation rapture in particular, well before Darby’s time, even extending back to the patristic era. Some of the most relevant citations are as follows:

Irenaeus, “Against Heresies” V.29.1, ca. AD 186-188  
Those nations however, who did not of themselves raise up their eyes unto heaven, nor

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<sup>31</sup> Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 95.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Ice, Executive Director, Pre-Trib Research Center, in a private email dated Aug. 24, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Seedbed, *Seven Minute Seminary*.

<sup>34</sup> “Is the Rapture false theology?”

<sup>35</sup> William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth-Century Apocalypticism* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Morris, *Ancient Dispensational Truth* (Taos, NM: Dispensational Publishing House, 2018).

returned thanks to their Maker, nor wished to behold the light of truth, but who were like blind mice concealed in the depths of ignorance, the word justly reckons 'as waste water from a sink, and as the turning-weight of a balance – in fact, as nothing;' so far useful and serviceable to the just, as stubble conduces towards the growth of the wheat, and its straw, by means of combustion, serves for working gold. And **therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, 'There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be.'** For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome they are crowned with incorruption.

Victorinus, Bishop of Petau, martyred for his faith in AD304, Commentary on Revelation, ca. AD240

And the heaven withdrew as a scroll that is rolled up. For the heaven to be rolled way, **that is, that the Church shall be taken away.** And the mountain and the islands were moved from their places. Mountains and islands removed from their places intimate that in the last persecution all men departed from their places; **that is, that the good will be removed, seeking to avoid the persecution.**

Ephraem the Syrian, 4<sup>th</sup> cent. theologian and church deacon (possibly Isadore of Seville AD627 [one ms]), sermon "On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World." Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that he may draw us from the confusion, which overwhelms all the world? Believe you me, dearest brother, because the coming of the Lord is nigh, believe you me, because the end of the world is at hand, believe me, because it is the very last time. Or do you not believe unless you see with your eyes? See to it that this sentence be not fulfilled among you of the prophet who declares: 'Woe to those who desire to see the day of the Lord!' **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.**

Robert Maton, 1607-1653, English clergyman, graduate of Oxford University.

When our Saviour comes to reigne over all the earth, he comes not alone, but brings all the Saints with him.... Why shall the Saints come with him, but because they have a share in this Kingdome.... Why shall the elect onely be gathered together and the rest *left behind*.... They shall be left, because the good Angels cannot at once assemble them to the place of Judgement, and the Elect to meete the Lord in the Aire, if these things were to be done at the same particular time. And therefore, as I suppose, they shall *be left, either to perish in that great destruction, which shall come upon all Nations that fight against the Jewes*, whom our Saviour shall then redeem: Or to *bee eye-witnesses of Gods wonders* in all Countreys at that time.

Robert Maton

Although the foresaid prophecies of Saint John and Zechar. doe expressly shew, the coming of our Saviour to be at the time of a battell.... In the 1 to the Thess. and the fourth Chapter, where it is said, *That the Lord himself shall descend from Heaven with a Shout* ... we are told That when the great Day of the Lord's descent shall come, there is to be a generall security: *Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.* And not warring and fighting. For if an end of the warres should be made by the Lords coming,

how would the faithful have time here to rejoice, and to give thanks unto God for their greatest enemies overthrow?

Ephraim Huit, 1591-1604, founder of the first church in Connecticut, 1639.

The coming of the Son of Man in the Clouds" will save the elect from "trials" and allow the Jews to regain their role in God's plan.... He then described the invasion of a reestablished Judah by the King of the North and the King of the South, identified as Turks and Saracens. The Jews "in those times of their restore are said to be very troublous," but they would be finally saved when Christ and "gods Church as a Bride royally attired descends from Heaven.

Nathaniel Homes, 1599-1692, English Puritan Independent preacher.

What may be conceived to be the cause of this rapture of the Saints on high to meet the Lord in the clouds, rather than to wait his coming to the earth. What if it be, that they may be preserved during the *conflagration* of the earth, and the works thereof, 2 Pet. 3.10. That as *Noah*, and his family were preserved from the deluge, by being lift up above the waters in the *ark*, so should the Saints at the conflagration be lift up in the clouds unto their *Ark, Christ*, to be preserved there from the *Deluge of fire*, wherein the wicked shall be consumed.

William Aspenwall, 1605-1662, Englishman who emigrated to Boston and was involved in theological and political discussions.

If God by some voice from heaven, I mean out of his Churches, say *Come up hither*, Rev. 11.12,13. Follow his call, and fear not enemies; though you see them, they see you ascend up to heaven, you shall be safe. Some commotion or earthquake will ensue, but no detriment to you that obey the voice from heaven. The detriment will be to the enemies themselves.

Captain John Browne, 1627-1677, in a detailed order of events for the Last Days, "The next thing that was to befall the Churches, was their falling away from the Truth of that Doctrine that was taught them by the Lord Jesus and his Apostles; and that this the Apostle Paul foretells the Church at Thesalonica, that there shall be a falling away before the man of sin would be revealed, 2Thess.2.3 .... The said falling away ushers in the 3d subsequent thing that we are to treat on, that is the night of darkness.... The hundred forty and four thousand, who are called Virgins, cannot be said to be the Virgins that attend the Spouse, the Lamb's Wife, seeing that they are *upon the Earth after the said Spouse is taken up*.... This a hundred and forty four thousand is the Woman that flyeth into the wilderness [Rev. 12:6].... The Virgins do go forth to meet the Bridegroom.... and then *the City is built*, which bringing back of the ten Tribes will not be completed till *after the Saints are taken up*, when as before that time *both Jerusalem and the Temple will be built*, and Sacrifice offered ... After the calling of the two Tribes for to build and inhabit Jerusalem, the next remarkable thing that will in those days fall out to be, is the rising or manifesting of the Beast, and ten Hornes, or Kings.

M. Marson, 1690s

'For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout.' These are those that are said will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. After the Lord's coming most of the great plagues mentioned in the revelations will be poured out upon the Earth and the Wicked. That Beast and the False Prophet will be then taken alive.

Increase Mather, 1639-1723, Puritan Minister in New England; president of Harvard College for 20 years. Mather wrote a treatise titled, "The Blessed Hope and the Glorious Appearing of the Great God our Saviour Jesus Christ" (1701).

When Christ comes, Believers shall see the King.... in all his Glory, and shall go with him to the Land that is very far off. *Heaven* is the Land that is very far off. Christ has assured believers it shall be thus, John 14.2. 'In my Fathers House are many Mansions'; that is in Heaven.... He will not go back to Heaven and leave them behind him. No, they shall sit together with him in Heavenly places, The Armies of Heaven will follow him, When He shall come to judge the world, the Saints in Heaven will come with Him.

Increase Mather, "Dissertation Concerning the Future Conversion of the Jewish Nation" (1709)

The Living Saints at Christ's coming shall be *caught up into the Air*, that so they may escape that *Deluge of Fire* which will be the Perdition of ungodly Men.... But before this Rapture of the living, the dead Saints shall be raised.... They, as to their Bodies, shall not be with Christ before the Bodies of Saints asleep in the Grave shall be with him....

*Chrysostom* on that Place observes that "the just shall be the first Risers, not only in Dignity, but in Time." As when the Flood came, there was a Difference made between *Noah's* family and the rest of Mankind: Thus when the World shall perish by Fire, no Saint shall be hurt by that Fire, but Sinners shall.... Therefore we may not determine how long the Conflagration shall last. *Noah's* Flood continued for many Days and Months, he was a whole Year in the Ark. The Weapons of *Ezekiel's Gog* are *Seven Years in burning*, Ezek.39.9.... When as the Saints shall rise when the Heavens and the Earth, which now are, shall begin to be on Fire.

Morgan Edwards, co-founder of Rhode Island college (later, Brown University), wrote about the rapture in the early 1740s:

The dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ's 'appearing in the air' (I Thes. iv, 17); and this will be about three years and a half before the millennium, as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many 'mansions in the father's house' (John xiv.2), and so disappear during the foresaid period of time. The design of this retreat and disappearing will be to judge the risen and changed saints; for 'now the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God' (I Pet. Iv.17).

William Watson Concludes:

In the late eighteenth century, more than a generation before Darby, belief in a rapture of the Church before a great tribulation was commonplace in Britain. The belief was held not only by Baptists like Killingworth but also by leading Anglicans like Hort, Broughton, and Hardy, and even by Scottish Presbyterians like Fraser.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Watson, 262. To these citations, mention should also be made of an important article that appeared in 2013, Francis X. Gumerlock, "The Rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah*," *BibSac* 170 (Oct. – Dec. 2013): 418-31, in which he discusses the third century AD treatise, "Apocalypse of Elijah" which contains a clear pretribulation rapture statement.

*The Bible only teaches two comings of Christ, not three.*

This argument is based on faulty logic, rather than on exegesis of specific passages. An appeal is made to Church tradition, which cannot be determinative of doctrine, but the real problem is in the logical fallacy of it. The argument is expressed by Witherington in the following fashion:

There are not two returns of Christ, an invisible one for the rapture, and then a visible one at the end of human history. No, the early church never believed in two returns of Christ, one invisible and one visible. They believed in exactly one return of Christ, whether they called it the “second coming” or the “*parousia*” or whatever they called it. There was only one return.<sup>38</sup>

This claim assumes that all references to a future coming of Christ are referring to the same event. In other words, it assumes what it’s trying to prove, or “circular reasoning.” The Bible talks about Jesus’ future “coming” in a number of different ways. Sometimes Jesus simply said that He would “come,” using a futuristic present tense (John 14:18, 28; Matt. 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27), or an aorist subjunctive (Matt. 10:23; 25:31; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; cf. 1Cor. 4:5; 11:26; 2Thess. 1:10); He also said He will come, using the qualifier “again” (John 14:3); and that the Son of Man “is going to come,” using μέλλω with a present tense (Matt. 16:27); the angels at His ascension promised that He would come (future tense) in the same way in which He departed (Acts 1:8), but His coming is never described in the New Testament as a “*second coming*,” with one exception. Hebrews 9:28 says that Christ “will appear a second time (ἐκ δευτέρου),” but this does not preclude the possibility of there being another (third) “coming” of Christ after this “second time.” If the qualifier “second” meant “second without the possibility of a third,” then Jesus would only have performed two miraculous signs during His earthly ministry, for His “second” (δεύτερος) one was said to be His healing of the nobleman’s son (John 4:54). In fact, the reference in Hebrews 9:28 appears to be a reference to His coming at the rapture in distinction from His future coming to the earth, since it is a coming “for salvation/deliverance (εἰς σωτηρίαν)” to be seen only by a select group of people described as “those who eagerly await Him” (τοῖς αὐτὸν ἀπεκδεχομένοις), as opposed to His coming to the earth at which time “every eye will see Him” (Rev. 1:7).

This argument often compares the rapture passage in 1 Thessalonians 4 with other acknowledged “second coming” passages that describe Jesus’ return to the earth. It is claimed that the similarities are so impressive that they must be describing the same event, not two separate events. A good example of this argument can be found in the table presented in Witherington’s book:

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<sup>38</sup> “Is the Rapture false theology?”

	1 Thessalonians	Matthew
Christ returns	4:16	24:30
from heaven	4:16	24:30
accompanied by angels	4:16	24:31
with a trumpet of God	4:16	24:31
believers gathered to Christ	4:17	24:31, 40-41
in clouds	4:17	24:30
time unknown	5:1-2	24:36
coming like a thief	5:2, 4	24:43
unbelievers unaware of coming judgment	5:3	24:37-39
judgment like a mother's birth pangs	5:3	24:8
believers not deceived	5:4-5	24:43
believers to be watchful	5:6	24:37-39
warning v. drunkenness	5:7	24:49

On the basis of this comparison, Witherington concluded, “These parallels ... make clear an important point. Paul does not think there is some difference between the parousia and the second coming (or glorious appearing).”<sup>39</sup>

This is an argument from similarity and presents another logical fallacy. It is logically much easier to prove that two things are different than it is to prove that two things are the same. To prove that two things are different requires only to demonstrate that they are different in at least one respect. However, to prove that two things are the same, it must be demonstrated that they are the same in every respect. For example, one could argue that a peach and an apricot have so many features in common that they must be the same fruit. But one bite of the fruit will quickly prove the difference. Likewise, the many similarities between Christ's coming at the rapture and His coming to the earth may seem impressive, but the notable distinctions between the two events easily prove them to be separate events. It is not difficult to construct a table illustrating some of these significant differences:

Rapture	Coming to the Earth
Saints meet Christ in the air.	Saints meet Christ on earth (Bozrah, Mt. of Olives, Jerusalem).
All saints – both living and resurrected – receive glorified bodies.	Resurrected saints receive glorified bodies, but living saints remain in mortal bodies.
Saints accompany Christ to the Father's House.	Saints inhabit a renovated earth.
No mention of a battle.	Campaign of Armageddon, much bloodshed.
No mention of sun, moon, stars.	Phenomena of sun, moon, stars.

<sup>39</sup> Ben Witherington III., *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 303–14.

Those who eagerly await Him will see Him.	Every eye will see Him.
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Regardless of how many similarities may exist between these two comings, sufficient differences between them justify seeing them as two distinct comings. The similarities may be explained on the basis of the same Lord who comes on both occasions, coming in similar fashion on both occasions.

*παρουσία and ἀπάντησις in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17, is “Caesar language” that can only be understood as pertaining to the second coming of Christ to the earth.*

Of all the anti-rapture arguments, this one, in my opinion, has the strongest exegetical impact. It rightly seeks to understand the language of the New Testament in terms that people living in the first century, Graeco-Roman world would readily understand. The argument is based on a study of the words “coming” (παρουσία) and “meet/meeting” (ἀπάντησις) that occur in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17. It is insisted that these are technical terms used to describe the arrival of an important imperial official, such as Caesar, to a city. Both Wright and Witherington state this argument as if it were a water-tight case against seeing a pretribulation rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4. However, upon closer examination their appeal to ancient resources appears to be a case of cherry picking the data.

The argument is that these two terms are used in a technical sense to refer to the arrival (παρουσία) of an important royal figure to a city, and of the “welcoming committee” from the city going out to meet (ἀπάντησις) him in order to conduct him with all due dignity back into the city. Thus, it is argued that Christ comes (παρουσία 1 Thess. 4:15) and the believers go to meet (ἀπάντησις 1 Thess. 4:17) Him, and that this must be followed by an accompanying of Christ back to the earth, not a following of Christ to heaven.

Here is how N.T. Wright explains this technical sense of παρουσία:

Scholars and simple folk alike can get led astray by the use of a single word to refer to something when that word in its original setting means both more and less than the use to which it is subsequently put. In this case the word in question is the Greek word *parousia*. This is usually translated ‘coming’; but literally it means ‘presence’—that is, ‘presence’ as opposed to ‘absence’... The word *parousia* occurs in two of the key passages in Paul (1 Thessalonians 4:15 and 1 Corinthians 15:23), and it is found frequently elsewhere in Paul and the New Testament. It seems clear that the early Christians knew the word well, and knew what was meant by it. People often assume that the early church used *parousia* simply to mean ‘the second coming of Jesus’, and that by this event they all envisaged, in a quite literal fashion, the scenario of 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 (Jesus coming down on a cloud and people flying upwards to meet him). Neither of these assumptions is in fact correct... On the one hand, the word *parousia* had two lively meanings in non-Christian discourse at the time. Both of these seem to have influenced it in its Christian meaning... The first meaning was the mysterious presence of a god or divinity, particularly when the power of this god was revealed in healing. People would suddenly be aware of a supernatural and powerful ‘presence’, and the obvious word for this was *parousia*. Josephus sometimes uses this word when he is talking about YHWH coming to the rescue of Israel. God’s powerful, saving presence is revealed in



action, for instance when Israel under King Hezekiah was miraculously defended against the Assyrians... The second meaning emerges when a person of high rank makes a visit to a subject state, particularly when a king or emperor visits a colony or province. The word for such a visit is ‘royal presence’: in Greek, *parousia*. In neither setting, we note, obviously but importantly, is there the slightest suggestion of anybody flying around on a cloud. Nor is there any hint of the imminent collapse or destruction of the space-time universe.<sup>40</sup>

Putting these two stories together, in a typically outrageous mix of metaphors, enables Paul to bring in the third story, to which we have already alluded. When the emperor visited a colony or province, the citizens of the country would go to meet him at some distance from the city. It would be disrespectful to have him arrive at the gates as though they his subjects couldn’t be bothered to greet him properly. When they met him, they wouldn’t then stay out in the open country; they would escort him royally into the city itself. When Paul speaks of ‘meeting’ the Lord ‘in the air’, the point is precisely not—as in the popular rapture theology—that the saved believers would then stay up in the air somewhere, away from earth. The point is that, having gone out to meet their returning Lord, they will escort him royally into his domain, that is, back to the place they have come from. Even when we realize that this is highly charged metaphor, not literal description, the meaning is the same as in the parallel in Philippians 3:20. Being citizens of heaven, as the Philippians would know, doesn’t mean that one is expecting to go back to the mother city, but rather that one is expecting the emperor to come *from* the mother city to give the colony its full dignity, to rescue it if need be, to subdue local enemies and put everything to rights... These two verses in 1 Thessalonians 4, then, have been grievously abused by those who have constructed out of them a big picture of a supposed ‘rapture’. This has had its effect not only on popular fundamentalism, but on a fair amount of New Testament scholarship, which has assumed that Paul really meant what the fundamentalists think he meant. Only when we put together the several different things that he says on the same topic does the truth emerge. This is a typical piece of highly charged and multiply allusive rhetoric. The reality to which it refers is this: Jesus will be personally present, the dead will be raised, and the living Christians will be transformed. That, as we shall now see, is pretty much what the rest of the New Testament says as well<sup>41</sup>

Witherington comments on ἀπάντησις.

But it was also the case that when there was a royal visit to a city, it would be announced by a herald (see Ps 24:7–10) and might well also be announced by a trumpet blast meant to alert those in the city that the king was coming. This imagery is pursued further in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 with the use of the term *apantesin*. Notice, for example, what Cicero says of Julius Caesar’s victory tour through Italy in 49 B.C.: “Just imagine what a meeting/royal welcome (*apanteseis*) he is receiving from the towns, what honors are paid to him” (*Att.* 8.16.2 and cf. 16.11.6 of Augustus—“the municipalities are showing the boy remarkable favor . . . Wonderful *apantesis* and encouragement”). This word then refers to the action of the greeting committee who goes forth from the city to meet the

<sup>40</sup> Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007), 140–141.

<sup>41</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 145–146.

royal person or dignitary before he arrives at the city gate to pay an official visit. The greeting committee will then escort the dignitary back into town on the final part of his journey. “These analogies (especially in association with the term *parousia*) suggest the possibility that the Lord is pictured here as escorted on the remainder of the journey to earth by his people—both those newly raised from the dead and those remaining alive.”<sup>42</sup>

I find it interesting that a generation or two ago, some dispensationalists were trying to support a pretribulational rapture based on the technical sense of *παρουσία*, used for the rapture, in contrast to *ἀποκάλυψις* and *ἐπιφάνεια*, used for the glorious second coming to the earth, and it was the amillennialists that were taking these dispensationalists to task for insisting on a technical sense for these terms, contending rather that they must be understood in a general sense. Dr. Walvoord responded to this debate by actually agreeing with the amillennialists that *παρουσία* and the related terms must be understood in a general sense, not a technical one. At that time, he concluded, “It is the viewpoint of the writer that all three terms are used in a general and not a technical sense and that they are descriptive of both the rapture and the glorious return of Christ to the earth.”<sup>43</sup> In that same article, Walvoord seems to have discovered the source of what would later become the view adopted by Wright and Witherington. He said,

Robertson, citing Deissmann, states, “The word *parousia* was the technical word ‘for the arrival or visit of the king or emperor’ and can be traced from the Ptolemaic period into the second century A.D. (Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 368).” As used in the New Testament, it is obviously not a technical word, however. It has come to mean not simply *presence* but the act by which the presence is brought about, i.e., by the *coming* of the individual.<sup>44</sup>

Deissmann actually has an extended discussion of *παρουσία*.<sup>45</sup> His intention is somewhat limited, namely to illustrate how these passages from ancient Greek literature parallel second coming passages in the New Testament, not to give a universal understanding of all uses of *παρουσία*. While *παρουσία* may at times be used in a special way in reference to the arrival or presence of “a royal or official personage,”<sup>46</sup> it was really a very common Greek term referring to the presence of anyone. In the New Testament, for example, it describes “the ‘coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus,’ Paul’s friends (1 Cor. 16:17), to the coming of Titus (2 Cor. 7:6, 7), to the coming of Paul himself (Phil. 1:26), to the coming of the lawless one (2 Thess. 2:9), and to the coming of the day of God (2 Pet. 3:12).<sup>47</sup> When Wright claims that *παρουσία* is a “‘Caesar technical term’ used of when Caesar has been gone on a journey or campaign and appears at his return to be given his due honor and glory, and everyone goes out to meet him and welcome him back into the city. That’s the *παρουσία*. That what’s going on in 1 Thess. 4,”<sup>48</sup> he disregards the fact that *παρουσία* can be used in a non-technical sense. It can refer to many different kinds of appearances. Limiting its sense in 1 Thessalonians 4 to a “Cae

<sup>42</sup> Ben Witherington III., *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 119-20. The citation at the end of this quote is from F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 103.

<sup>43</sup> John F. Walvoord, “New Testament Words for the Lord’s Coming,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 101 (1944): 284.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>45</sup> Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 368ff.

<sup>46</sup> Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1343.

<sup>47</sup> Walvoord, 285.

<sup>48</sup> NT Wright vs John MacArthur on RAPTURE Doctrine, [youtube.com/watch/6PupqA2YzXU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PupqA2YzXU) 0 Dec 29, 2023.

sar” context is unwarranted. If Paul simply wanted to say “coming” apart from a “Caesar” context, this is the word he would have used (as he did on several occasions in the NT).

To the supposed technical sense of *παρουσία* is added the supposed technical sense of *ἀπάντησις* with the claim that this was a special term that implies a meeting outside the city that must be followed by a return to that city. However, a study of this term when used to describe a meeting with a royal official reveals that it was sometimes used of a meeting that was *not* followed by a return to the city, a meaning parallel to the way a pretribulation rapture view of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 understands it. *ἀπάντησις* is frequently used to refer to meeting an enemy in battle (Philo, *Quod Deus*, 166; 1Sam 4:1, LXX; 1Chr 14:8, LXX); similarly it occurs in 1Sam. 13:15 (LXX) describing when the people of Israel went out to “meet” Saul at Gilgal in order to go out to fight the Philistines. In Cicero, *The Letters of Cicero*, 16.11.6 it refers to a “meeting” of the Roman Senate. In Cicero’s letter to Atticus, he refers in a somewhat demeaning way to those who “are rushing to meet Caesar, and parading their loyalty to him!” (M. Tullius Cicero, *The Letters of Cicero*, 18.16.2). Here, Caesar simply stays in Rome, and others come there to meet him. In this case those who go to Caesar come from all over the empire and go to Rome for the meeting.

The above examples, do not involve inhabitants of a city going out to meet a royal dignitary on his visit to the city; nevertheless, they do illustrate that the word may mean other kinds of meetings than Witherington lets on. Three examples from ancient literature, however, are quite interesting in that they do illustrate instances where a royal dignitary visits a city, and its inhabitants come out to meet him, but they do *not* return with the dignitary back into their city.

Josephus *Antiquities* 7.276 describes King David coming to Jerusalem, but first stopping at Gilgal. There men from all over Israel came to “meet” (*ἀπάντησις*) with David. But from there, they did not accompany David to Jerusalem. In fact, at the urging of Sheva, they joined in a rebellion against David and the tribe of Judah! (*Antiq.* 7.278-9). Here is the text along with English translation:

Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 7

<p>[276] Ἀφικνοῦνται δ' εἰς Γάλγαλα πρὸς αὐτὸν οἱ πάσης φυλῆς πρῶτοι μετὰ πολλοῦ πλήθους καὶ τὴν Ἰούδα φυλὴν κατεμέμφοντο λάθρα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐλθοῦσαν ὡς δεῖν ὁμοῦ πάντα μιᾷ γνώμῃ ποιεῖσθαι τὴν <u>ἀπάντησιν</u>. οἱ δ' ἄρχοντες τῆς Ἰούδα φυλῆς μὴ δυσχεραίνειν αὐτοῦς ἠξίουσαν προληφθέντας: καὶ γὰρ συγγενεῖς ὄντες αὐτοῦ καὶ διὰ τοῦτο μᾶλλον προνοοῦμενοι καὶ στέργοντες φθάσαι οὐ μέντοι γε διὰ τὸ προελθεῖν δῶρα λαβεῖν αὐτούς ἵν' ἔχωσιν ἐπὶ τούτῳ δυσφορεῖν ὕστεροι πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐλθόντες. [277] ταῦτα τῶν τῆς Ἰούδα φυλῆς ἡγεμόνων εἰπόντων οἱ τῶν ἄλλων ἄρχοντες οὐχ ἡσύχασαν ἀλλ' "ἡμεῖς μὲν ἔφασαν ὡ ἄδελφοί</p>	<p>(276) Now the principal men of the country came to Gilgal to him with a great multitude, and complained of the tribe of Judah, that they had come to him in a private manner, whereas they ought all conjointly, and with one and the same intention, to have given him the <u>meeting</u>. But the rulers of the tribe of Judah desired them not to be displeased if they had been prevented by them: for, said they, “We are David’s kinsmen, and on that account we the rather took care of him, and loved him, and so came first to him;” yet had they not, by their early coming, received any gifts from him, which might give them who came last any uneasiness. (277) When the rulers of the tribe of Judah had said this, the rulers of the other tribe were not quiet, but said further, “O brethren, we</p>
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<p>θαυμάζομεν ὑμᾶς αὐτῶν ἀποκαλοῦντας μόνων συγγενῆ τὸν βασιλέα: ὁ γὰρ τὴν ἀπάντων ἐξουσίαν παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ λαβὼν πάντων ἡμῶν εἶναι συγγενῆς κρίνεται. καὶ διὰ τοῦθ' ὁ μὲν λαὸς ἕνδεκα μοίρας ἔχει μίαν δ' ὑμεῖς καὶ πρεσβύτεροι ἐσμέν καὶ οὐκ ἐποίησατε δίκαια λεληθότως ἐλθόντες πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα." [278] Τοιαῦτα τῶν ἡγεμόνων πρὸς ἀλλήλους διαλεχθέντων ἀνὴρ τις πονηρὸς καὶ στάσει χαίρων ὄνομα Σαβαῖος υἱὸς δὲ Βοχορίου τῆς Βενιαμίτιδος φυλῆς στάς ἐν μέσῳ πρὸς τὸ πλῆθος μέγα βοήσας εἶπεν: "οὔτ' ἔχει τις ἡμῶν παρὰ Δαβίδου μοίρας οὔτε κληρὸν [279] παρὰ τῷ Ἰεσσαίου παιδί." καὶ μετὰ τοὺς λόγους σαλπίσας κέρατι σημαίνει πόλεμον πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα καὶ <u>πάντες ἠκολούθησαν ἐκείνῳ Δαβίδην καταλιπόντες: μόνῃ δ' αὐτῷ παρέμεινεν ἡ Ἰούδα φυλὴ καὶ κατέστησεν αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις βασιλεῖον.</u> καὶ τὰς μὲν παλλακάς αἷς ὁ υἱὸς αὐτοῦ συνῆλθεν Ἀψάλωμος εἰς ἄλλην μετήγαγεν οἰκίαν πάντα προστάξας αὐταῖς χορηγεῖν τὰ ἐπιτήδεια τοὺς ἐπιμελομένους αὐτὸς δ' οὐκέτ' ἐπλησίαζεν αὐταῖς.</p>	<p>cannot but wonder at you when you call the king your kinsman alone, whereas he that hath received from God the power over all of us in common, ought to be esteemed a kinsman to us all; for which reason the whole people have eleven parts in him, and you but one part: we are also elder than you; wherefore you have not done justly in coming to the king in this private and concealed manner.” (278) While these rulers were thus disputing one with another, a certain wicked man, who took a pleasure in seditious practices (his name was Sheba, the son of Bichri, of the tribe of Benjamin) stood up in the midst of the multitude, and cried aloud, and spake thus to them: — “We have no part in David, nor inheritance in the son of Jesse.” (279) And when he had used those words, he blew with a trumpet, and declared war against the king; and <u>they all left David, and followed him; the tribe of Judah alone staid with him, and settled him at his royal palace at Jerusalem.</u> But as for his concubines, with whom Absalom his son had accompanied, truly he removed them to another house; and ordered those that had the care of them to make a plentiful provision for them; but he came not near them any more.<sup>49</sup></p>
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Even more to the point is Josephus *Antiquities* 13.101. In the days of Alexander the Great, Jonathan, high priest in Jerusalem, won a great battle against Apollonius Daus governor of Celesyria outside of Ashdod. Then after defeating the city of Ashdod and setting the temple of Dagon on fire, Jonathan came to Ashkelon. “When Jonathan therefore ... had pitched his camp without the city [of Ashkelon], the people of Askelon came out and met him, bringing him hospitable presents, and honoring him; so he accepted of their kind intentions, and returned thence to Jerusalem.” This quote is quite interesting, because in this case, the “dignitary” returns from the meeting to his home (Jerusalem), without going into Ashkelon! Here is the complete text and translation:

Josephus Antiquities Book 13

<p>[91] Παροξυνθεὶς δ' ἐπὶ τούτοις ὁ Ἰωνάθης μυρίους ἐπιλεξάμενος στρατιώτας ὥρμησεν ἐξ Ἱεροσολύμων μετὰ καὶ Σίμωνος τάδελοφου, καὶ γενόμενος ἐν Ἰόππῃ στρατοπεδεύεται τῆς πόλεως ἔξω τῶν</p>	<p>(91) With this Jonathan was irritated; and choosing himself out ten thousand of his soldiers, he went out of Jerusalem in haste, with his brother Simon, and came to Joppa, and pitched his camp on the outside of the city,</p>
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<sup>49</sup> Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 201–202.

Ἰοπηνῶν ἀποκλεισάντων αὐτῷ τὰς πύλας: φρουρὰν γὰρ ἔνδον εἶχον ὑπὸ Ἀπολλωνίου κατασταθεῖσαν. [92] τοῦ δὲ Ἰωνάθου πρὸς πολιορκίαν αὐτῶν παρασκευαζομένου, φοβηθέντες μὴ τὴν πόλιν αὐτῶν ἐξέλῃ κατὰ κράτος ἀνοίγουσιν αὐτῷ τὰς πύλας. ὁ δὲ Ἀπολλώνιος ἀκούσας τὴν Ἰοπην κατειλημμένην ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰωνάθου τρισχιλίους ἵππεῖς παραλαβὼν καὶ πεζοὺς ὀκτακισχιλίους εἰς Ἄζωτον ἦλθεν κάκειθεν ἄρας ἡρέμα καὶ βάδην ἐποιεῖτο τὴν πορείαν, ἐλθὼν δ' εἰς τὴν Ἰοπην ἀναχωρῶν ἔλκει τὸν Ἰωνάθην εἰς τὸ πεδῖον τῆ ἵππῳ καταφρονῶν καὶ τὰς τῆς νίκης ἐλπίδας ἔχων ἐν αὐτῇ. [93] προελθὼν δ' Ἰωνάθης ἐδίωκεν εἰς Ἄζωτον τὸν Ἀπολλώνιον. ὁ δ', ὡς ἐν τῷ πεδίῳ συνέβη γενέσθαι τὸν πολέμιον, ὑποστρέψας εἰς μάχην αὐτῷ συνέβαλεν. [94] τοῦ δ' Ἀπολλωνίου χιλίους ἵππεῖς καθίσαντος εἰς ἐνέδραν ἐν τινι χειμάρρῳ, ὡς ἂν κατόπιν ἐπιφανεῖεν τοῖς πολεμίοις, αἰσθόμενος ὁ Ἰωνάθης οὐ κατεπλάγη: τάξας δὲ τὴν στρατιὰν ἐν πλινθίῳ κατ' ἀμφοτέρα τοὺς πολεμίους ἀμύνασθαι παρεσκευάσατο, καὶ κατὰ πρόσωπον καὶ τοῖς ὀπισθεν ἐπελευσομένοις αὐτὸν ἀντιτάξας. [95] τῆς δὲ μάχης ἕως ἐσπέρας προβαινούσης, δοὺς Σίμωνι τὰδελεφῶ μέρος τῆς δυνάμεως τοῦτον μὲν ἐκέλευσε συμβαλεῖν τῇ φάλαγγι τῶν ἐχθρῶν, αὐτὸς δὲ τοὺς σὺν αὐτῷ προσέταξεν φραξαμένους τοῖς ὅπλοις ἀποδέχεσθαι τὰ βέλη τὰ παρὰ τῶν ἵπέων. [96] καὶ οἱ μὲν ἐποίησαν τὸ κελευσθέν, οἱ δὲ τῶν πολεμίων ἵππεῖς ἐπ' αὐτοὺς ἀφέντες τὰ βέλη μέχρι καὶ ἐξεκενώθησαν οὐδὲν αὐτοὺς ἔβλαπτον: οὐ γὰρ δικνεῖτο τῶν σωματῶν τὰ βαλλόμενα, συμπεφραγμένοι δὲ ταῖς ἀσπίσιν συνηνωμέναις ὑπὸ πυκνότητος ἐπαφιέμενα ῥαδίως ἐκρατεῖτο καὶ ἄπρακτα ἐφέρετο. [97] ὡς δὲ παρείθησαν ἀπὸ πρωὶ μέχρι δείλης ὀψίας ἀκοντίζοντες εἰς αὐτοὺς οἱ πολέμοι, νοήσας Σίμων κεκμηκότας αὐτοὺς συμβάλλει τῇ φάλαγγι, καὶ προθυμῶς χρησαμένων πολλῆ τῶν στρατιωτῶν αὐτοῦ τρέπει τοὺς ἐχθροὺς εἰς φυγὴν. [98] θεασάμενοι δὲ τοὺς πεζοὺς

because the people of Joppa had shut their gates against him, for they had a garrison in the city put there by Apollonius. (92) But when Jonathan was preparing to besiege them, they were afraid he would take them by force, and so they opened the gates to him. But Apollonius, when he heard that Joppa was taken by Jonathan, took three thousand horsemen, and eight thousand footmen, and came to Ashdod; and removing thence, he made his journey silently and slowly, and going up to Joppa, he made as if he was retiring from the place, and so drew Jonathan into the plain, and valuing himself highly upon his horsemen, and having his hopes of victory principally in them. (93) However Jonathan sallied out, and pursued Apollonius to Ashdod; but as soon as Apollonius perceived that his enemy was in the plain, he came back and gave him battle. (94) But Apollonius had laid a thousand horsemen in ambush in a valley that they might be seen by their enemies as behind them; which when Jonathan perceived, he was under no consternation, but, ordering his army to stand in a square battle array, he gave them a charge to fall on the enemy on both sides, and set them to face those that attacked them, both before and behind; (95) and while the fight lasted till the evening, he gave part of his forces to his brother Simon, and ordered him to attack the enemies; but for himself he charged those that were with him to cover themselves with their armor and receive the darts of the horsemen, who did as they were commanded; so that the enemy's horsemen, (96) while they threw their darts till they had no more left, did them no harm, for the darts that were thrown did not enter into their bodies, being thrown upon the shields that were united and conjoined together, the closeness of which easily overcame the force of the darts, and they flew about without any effect. (97) But when the enemy grew remiss in throwing their darts from morning till late at night, Simon perceived their weariness, and fell upon the body of men before him; and because his soldiers showed great alacrity, he put the enemy

<p>φεύγοντας οἱ ἵππεῖς οὐδ' αὐτοὶ μένουσιν, ἀλλὰ πάρεται μὲν ὄντες αὐτοὶ διὰ τὸ μέχρι δειλῆς μάχεσθαι, τῆς δὲ παρὰ τῶν πεζῶν ἐλπίδος αὐτοῖς ἀπολωλείας, ἀκόσμως καὶ συγκεχυμένως ἔφευγον, ὡς διασχισθέντας αὐτοὺς διὰ παντὸς σκορπισθῆναι τοῦ πεδίου. [99] διώκων δ' αὐτοὺς Ἰωνάθης μέχρι τῆς Ἀζώτου καὶ πολλοὺς ἀναιρῶν ἀπογνόντας τῆς σωτηρίας ἠνάγκασεν ἐπὶ τὸν τοῦ Δαγῶνος ναὸν καταφυγεῖν, ὃς ἦν ἐν Ἀζώτῳ. λαβὼν δ' ἐξ ἐπιδρομῆς Ἰωνάθης τὴν πόλιν αὐτὴν τε ἐνέπρησεν καὶ τὰς περὶ αὐτὴν κώμας. [100] ἀπέσχετο δ' οὐδὲ τοῦ Δαγῶνος ἱεροῦ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῦτ' ἐνέπρησεν καὶ τοὺς εἰς αὐτὸ συμφυγόντας διέφθειρεν. τὸ δὲ πᾶν πλῆθος τῶν ἐν τῇ μάχῃ πεσόντων καὶ καταφλεγέντων ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τῶν πολεμίων ἦσαν ὀκτακισχίλιοι. [101] κρατήσας οὖν τοσαύτης δυνάμεως ἄρας ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀζώτου εἰς Ἀσκάλωνα παραγίνεται, καὶ καταστρατοπεδεύσαντος ἕξω τῆς πόλεως αὐτοῦ προῆλθον <u>εἰς ἀπάντησιν αὐτῷ</u> οἱ Ἀσκαλωνῖται ξένια προσφέροντες αὐτῷ καὶ τιμῶντες. <u>ὁ δὲ ἀποδεξάμενος αὐτοὺς τῆς προαιρέσεως ἀνέστρεψεν ἐκεῖθεν εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα πολλὴν ἐπαγόμενος λείαν</u>, ἣν ἔλαβεν νικήσας τοὺς πολεμίους. [102] Ἀλέξανδρος δ' ἀκούσας ἠττημένον τὸν αὐτοῦ στρατηγὸν Ἀπολλώνιον προσεποιεῖτο χαίρειν, ὅτι παρὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ γνώμην Ἰωνάθην συνέβαλεν φίλῳ ὄντι καὶ συμμάχῳ, καὶ πέμπει πρὸς Ἰωνάθην μαρτυρῶν αὐτῷ καὶ γέρα καὶ τιμὰς διδοὺς πόρπην χρυσέαν, ὡς ἔστιν ἔθος δίδοσθαι τοῖς τῶν βασιλέων συγγενέσιν, καὶ τὴν Ἀκκάρωνα καὶ τὴν τοπαρχίαν αὐτῆς εἰς κληρουχίαν ἐπιτρέπει.</p>	<p>to flight: (98) and when the horsemen saw that the footmen ran away, neither did they stay themselves; but they being very weary, by the duration of the fight till the evening, and their hope from the footmen being quite gone, they basely ran away, and in great confusion also, till they were separated one from another, and scattered over all the plain. (99) Upon which Jonathan pursued them as far as Ashdod, and slew a great many of them, and compelled the rest, in despair of escaping, to fly to the temple of Dagon, which was at Ashdod, but Jonathan took the city on the first onset, and burnt it and the villages about it: (100) nor did he abstain from the temple of Dagon itself, but burnt it also, and destroyed those that had fled to it. Now the entire multitude of the enemies, that fell in the battle and were consumed in the temple were eight thousand. (101) When Jonathan therefore had overcome so great an army, he removed from Ashdod, and came to Askelon; and when he had pitched his camp without the city, the people of Askelon came out and <u>met him</u>, bringing him hospitable presents, and honoring him; <u>so he accepted of their kind intentions, and returned thence to Jerusalem</u> with a great deal of prey, which he brought thence when he conquered his enemies. (102) But when Alexander heard that Apollonius, the general of his army, was beaten, he pretended to be glad of it, because he had fought with Jonathan his friend and ally against his directions. Accordingly, he sent to Jonathan, and gave testimony to his worth; and gave him honorary rewards, as a golden button, which it is the custom to give the king's kinsmen, and allowed him Ekron and its toparchy for his own inheritance.<sup>50</sup></p>
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A remarkable parallel to 1 Thessalonians 4:17 occurs in Polybius, *Histories*, 5.43.3. There, ἀπάντησις describes Antiochus the Great “meeting” princess Laodice in Pontus and bringing her as his wife to Antioch to make her queen. This is almost exactly parallel to its use in

<sup>50</sup> Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 341–342.

1Thess 4:17 where Jesus meets His bride, the church, and takes her back to the Father's House for a wedding feast!

Polybius History, Book 5, Chapter 43

<p>[1] ρίαν. ὄντος δ' αὐτοῦ κατὰ τοὺς καιροὺς τούτους περὶ Σελεύκειαν τὴν ἐπὶ τοῦ Ζεύγατος, παρὴν Διόγνητος ὁ ναύαρχος ἐκ Καππαδοκίας τῆς περὶ τὸν Εὐξείνου, ἄγων Λαοδίκην τὴν Μιθριδάτου τοῦ βασιλέως θυγατέρα, παρθένον οὖσαν, γυναῖκα τῷ βασιλεῖ κατωνομασμένην. [2] ὁ δὲ Μιθριδάτης εὖχετο μὲν ἀπόγονος εἶναι τῶν ἑπτὰ Περσῶν ἐνὸς τῶν ἐπανελομένων τὸν μάγον, διατηρήκει δὲ τὴν δυναστείαν ἀπὸ προγόνων τὴν ἐξ ἀρχῆς αὐτοῖς διαδοθεῖσαν ὑπὸ Δαρείου παρὰ τὸν Εὐξείνου πόντον. [3] Ἀντίοχος δὲ προσδεξάμενος τὴν παρθένον <u>μετὰ τῆς ἀρμοζούσης ἀπαντήσεως</u> καὶ <u>προστασίας</u> εὐθέως ἐπετέλει τοὺς γάμους, <u>μεγαλοπρεπῶς καὶ βασιλικῶς χρώμενος ταῖς παρασκευαῖς</u>. [4] μετὰ δὲ τὴν συντέλειαν τῶν γάμων καταβὰς εἰς Ἀντιόχειαν, βασιλίσσαν ἀποδείξας τὴν Λαοδίκην, λοιπὸν ἐγίνετο περὶ τὴν τοῦ πολέμου παρασκευήν.<sup>51</sup></p>	<p>While this was going on, Antiochus happened to be at Seleucia, on the Zeugma, when the Navarchus Diognetus arrived from Cappadocia, on the Euxine, bringing Laodice, the daughter of king Mithridates, an unmarried girl, destined to be the king's wife. This Mithridates boasted of being a descendant of one of the seven Persians who killed the Magus, and he had maintained the sovereignty handed down from his ancestors, as it had been originally given to them by Darius along the shore of the Euxine. Having gone <b>to meet</b> the princess <b>with all due pomp and splendour</b>, <u>Antiochus immediately celebrated his nuptials with royal magnificence. The marriage having been completed, he went to Antioch; and after proclaiming Laodice queen, devoted himself thenceforth to making preparation for the war.</u><sup>52</sup></p>
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The argument that παρουσία and ἀπάντησις are technical Caesar terms that must be understood in a way that requires a posttribulation rapture is based on cherry picked data. To be sure, if one is already convinced of a posttribulation rapture, the cherry-picked data will seem convincing, but there is also evidence from ancient Greek literature that supports seeing these terms in a way that is consistent with a pretribulation rapture view of 1 Thessalonians 4.

I will close this section with one additional quote from N.T. Wright involving this argument. In this quote, one sees the arrogance with which he believes he can easily dismiss the dispensationalist's world view:

The point about the parousia, about the royal appearance of Caesar at a town, is that the citizens go out to meet him. We go to meet the Lord in the air. Whatever Paul thought would be, the objective correlated that not in order to stay there but in order to escort Caesar, or whoever it is, back into the town. So even if you want to take first Thessalonians 4 moderately literally, then you would have to say that the reason for meeting the Lord is not to stay away up in heaven, but in order to escort him to the place

<sup>51</sup> Polybius, "Historiae," ed. Theodoros Büttner-Wobst and L. Dindorf (Medford, MA: Teubner, 1893–).

<sup>52</sup> Polybius, *Histories* (Medford, MA: Macmillan, 1889), 396.

which is his by right, which is this earth. And with that I've basically deconstructed, I think, the world view within which the rapture gets its emphasis.<sup>53</sup>

*Coming on the clouds is a reference to Daniel 7 and the vindication of God's people.*

Wright and Witherington insist that Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 of Christ's coming "in the clouds of heaven" is a clear reference to Daniel 7:13, and that, therefore, the coming in 1 Thessalonians 4 is a coming in order to take vengeance on the enemies of God's people, as it is in Daniel 7. Thus, His coming in the clouds must be a reference to His glorious coming to the earth, not a pretribulation rapture. This argument builds a lot of exegetical significance on seeing 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as necessarily an echo of Daniel 7:13. Daniel's expression, "clouds of heaven" is *נְבִלַת שָׁמַיִם* or *ἐπὶ τῶν νεφελῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ*. The expression in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is *ἐν νεφέλαις*. However, the Daniel reference does not form a parallel for several reasons. First, the prepositions are different (Dan. 7:13 *עַל* and *ἐπὶ*; 1 Thess. 4:17 *ἐν*). Second, Daniel's "τῶν νεφελῶν, LXX" is articular while 1 Thessalonians' "ἐν νεφέλαις" is anarthrous. Third, Daniel makes no mention of a "shout," "the voice of the archangel," "the trumpet of God" or of a resurrection.

Here is how Wright explains the argument: "When he's talking about we being caught up on the clouds, that's a reference to Daniel 7, which is the vindication of God's people after their suffering, after their persecution."<sup>54</sup> Witherington's exposition is:

Daniel 7 is about a ruling on earth of this Son of Man figure, ruling over those who had oppressed God's people. It is not about rescuing God's people out of this world into heaven for an interim period of time. The Son of Man language and imagery taken over from Daniel 7 in the sayings of Jesus in Matthew 24 and here by Paul in 1 Thessalonians provide further proof that 1 Thessalonians 4:13–20 is not about a rapture.<sup>55</sup>

Of the 164 references to "cloud" in Scripture, why have Wright and Witherington singled out this one verse as the necessary parallel? There are quite a few other possible parallels, many of which do not refer to the topic of vengeance for the people of God. Some other common themes associated with God "in a cloud(s)" include: a meeting place with a person or with the people of God, leading the people of God to a new location, the dwelling place of God, and hiding God from the face of man. Aside from Daniel 7:13, one might consider any of the following as significant references indicating possible, suitable parallels for 1 Thessalonians 4:17: Exodus 13:21–22; 19:19, 16; 24:15, 16, 18; 33:9–10; 34:1–5; 40:34, 35; Lev. 16:2, 13; Numbers 9:17; 2 Sam. 22:12; 2 Chronicles 6:1–2; Neh. 9:12, 19; Job 22:12; Ps. 18:11; 97:2 (pl.); 104:3 (pl.); Isa. 4:5; 19:1; Ezek. 10:3, 4; Nah. 1:3. Of particular note, relative to the coming of the Lord at a pretribulation rapture, consider the following six Biblical uses of "cloud":

Exodus 13:21–22 The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel

<sup>53</sup> NT Wright, "Left Behind Rapture Debunked" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OIVJalcTwQ>, Oct 29, 2016

<sup>54</sup> "Dear Tom: do you believe in 'The Rapture'" on Ask NT Wright Anything, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePSbRP7K0pg>, Apr 20, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Ben Witherington III., *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 118.



by day and by night. <sup>22</sup> He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.

Here, the Lord in the cloud directed His people to a different place, contra the insistence of Wright and Witherington on “Caesar language” in which the coming king must be accompanied back into the city.

Exodus 33:9–10 Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the Lord would speak with Moses. <sup>10</sup> When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent.

As opposed to Wright’s insistence that the Lord coming in the clouds must refer to a coming in vengeance, here the Lord in the cloud signifies simply a meeting place for the purpose of instruction. This meeting place is described frequently in the Pentateuch as a *אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד* (33 times in Exodus, 39 times in Leviticus, 55 times in Numbers), *מוֹעֵד* signifying a “place for meeting, assembly point,”<sup>56</sup> thus forming a suitable parallel for 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 where both “cloud” and “meeting” occur in close context.

Exodus 34:1–5 Now the Lord said to Moses, “Cut out for yourself two stone tablets like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which you shattered. <sup>2</sup> “So be ready by morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to Me on the top of the mountain. <sup>3</sup> “No man is to come up with you, nor let any man be seen anywhere on the mountain; even the flocks and the herds may not graze in front of that mountain.” <sup>4</sup> So he cut out two stone tablets like the former ones, and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and he took two stone tablets in his hand. <sup>5</sup> The Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord.

From a pretribulation rapture perspective, it is interesting that here, Moses went *up* to meet the Lord in a cloud and did not direct Him into the camp of Israel.

Numbers 9:17 Whenever the cloud was lifted from over the tent, afterward the sons of Israel would then set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the sons of Israel would camp.

As with the Exodus 13 reference (above), here, the Lord in the cloud directed His people to a different place!

2 Chronicles 6:1–2 Then Solomon said, “The Lord has said that He would dwell in the thick cloud. <sup>2</sup> “I have built You a lofty house, and a place for Your dwelling forever.”

The significance of the cloud here is to indicate the place of God’s dwelling, with no necessary connection to vengeance.

Job 22:12 “Is not God *in* the height of heaven? Look also at the distant stars, how high they are!

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<sup>56</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 557.

Here, Eliphaz portrays God as hidden from the sight of men in clouds. This parallels the rapture conception of Christ in the clouds but hidden from the sight of men on the earth. This parallels what some anti-pretribulation-rapture proponents derisively refer to as the “secret rapture.” This is also one of the few references to “clouds” in the plural when referring to the locality of God.

God’s presence in the clouds is one of the most common Biblical descriptions of the way in which God meets with man. For Wright and Witherington to insist that the only parallel to the Lord in the clouds of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 could possibly be Daniel 7:13, while excluding numerous other possible Scriptural parallels is an extreme case of cherry-picking the data. Numerous possible parallels make perfectly fine agreement with a pretribulationist view of the rapture.

*Belief in the rapture is escapism.*

This is the final “argument” to be considered in this paper. It is not really an “argument” per se, but a charge made against the intentions and motivations of those who believe in a pretribulation rapture. To this charge, Wright adds that belief in the pretribulation rapture consists in a “Gnostic-like duality” in which Christians believe they “should go up to heaven, when the Book of Revelation depicts God and the New Jerusalem as coming *down* to earth. The Christian’s hope is to be with God on earth, not in heaven.” Indeed, there may be some Christians who view the rapture in this way. However, pretribulation rapture scholars who are familiar with the terminology of John 14 recognize that the rapture depicts the Father’s House as a place of temporary stay (μονή), not permanent residence, and that His raptured saints will accompany Him to earth at the glorious coming of Christ to the earth.<sup>57</sup> For Wright, So, Wright’s charge is something of a straw man argument. But what Wright fails adequately to take into consideration is that the New Testament does urge us to set our affections on things above, not on the earth (Col 3:1) and identifies our living hope as “reserved in heaven for us” (1 Pet 1:4).<sup>58</sup>

Added to this charge of Gnosticism is the following expansion of the straw man argument:

Note, though, something else of great significance about the whole Christian theology of resurrection, ascension, second coming and hope. This theology was born out of confrontation with the political authorities, out of the conviction that Jesus was already the true Lord of the world who would one day be manifested as such. The ‘rapture’ theology avoids this confrontation, because it suggests that Christians will miraculously be removed from this wicked world. Perhaps that is why such theology is often gnostic in its tendency towards a private dualistic spirituality, and towards a political laissez-faire quietism. And perhaps that is partly why such theology, with its dreams of Armageddon, has quietly supported the political status quo in a way that Paul would never have done.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See e.g., George Gunn, “Jesus and the Rapture: John 14,” in John Hart, ed., *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism* (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 109-12.

<sup>58</sup> Write understands “heaven” here as a circumlocution for “God,” and takes the verse to mean that the precious things about our future salvation on earth are currently kept in store for us by God (*Surprised by Hope*, 164). He also explains away Phil. 3:20, “Being ‘citizens of heaven’ (Philippians 3:20) doesn’t mean you’re supposed to end up there. Many of the Philippians were Roman citizens, but Rome didn’t want them back when they retired. Their job was to bring Roman culture to Philippi” (*Surprised by Hope*, 305).

<sup>59</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 146.

Wright's contention that "the whole Christian theology of resurrection, ascension, second coming and hope... was born out of confrontation with the political authorities, out of the conviction that Jesus was already the true Lord of the world who would one day be manifested as such" is an assumption based on an "already, not yet" view of the kingdom. It assumes that Christ is already reigning as Messianic King in some capacity, and that it is the responsibility of His subjects to bring about kingdom-like characteristics to society today. This is a major focus of Wright's eschatology, as he urges Christians to be involved in areas such as ecological stewardship of the earth, social justice, etc. There is nothing wrong with these things, but they simply are not the fulfilling of the great commission. Here is how Wright expresses God's calling of Christians to social action:

God's eventual kingdom will, as I have said, be a fresh gift of transformation and renewal from the Architect himself. But it is enough to indicate the way in which there is continuity, as well as discontinuity, between the present life and the work we do in it, and the ultimate future life in which God has gathered all things together and transformed them, 'making all things new' in Christ. What we do in the Lord is 'not in vain'; and that is the mandate we need for every act of justice and mercy, every programme of ecology, every effort to reflect God's wise stewardly image into his creation. In the new creation the ancient human mandate to look after the garden is dramatically reaffirmed,<sup>60</sup>

Witherington thinks of the pretribulation rapture as merely a wish to escape from hard times. He connects (incorrectly) the teaching of the pretribulation rapture with times of hardship and suffering. He writes,

The teaching of the rapture might have remained a relatively obscure matter confined to one small Protestant group in the British Isles except for the fact that Darby made numerous evangelistic trips to America between 1859 and 1877 and won many American converts to the rapture theology. Note carefully the dates of these trips. Darby showed up on the brink of the Civil War, during the war, and after the war, right when many Americans were quite vulnerable to an escapist theology that promised they would not have to go through the great tribulation. The timing could not have been better for promulgating such a theology... American Christians are looking for the theological equivalent of comfort food and escapist entertainment, and Dispensational theology is readily meeting these needs.<sup>61</sup>

And when interviewed by Dale Norman, he explained it as follows:

One of the things that's characteristic is that, when we're in a really difficult time, culturally speaking, for example in the American history the civil war in the 60s in America, this theology of "beam me up, God," plays really well, because you'd like to get out of the horrible situation you're in on earth, and that's happened time and again. I mean, it's interesting to me that, if you sort of chart the history of dispensational literature in the 20th century, when did it play big? When was the Thompson Chain Link Bible with dispensational notes by Scofield, when was that playing big? World War I, World War II the Korean War, the Gulf War, etc. I mean, it's a form of escapist theology

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<sup>60</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 221.

<sup>61</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 94, 96.

that's appealing to Christians who are very ill at ease at what's happening in the culture in various ways, but it's certainly not what the Bible says.<sup>62</sup>

Should motives and intentions be considered as criteria for determining the correctness of a doctrine? I suppose if those motives and intentions were demonstrably sinful, one might legitimately question the orthodoxy of the theological conclusions. However, even the demons can be right about some points of doctrine (James 2:19). But is the desire to escape suffering and hardship a sinful thing? If it is, then Paul was sinful in desiring to "depart and be with Christ, which is far better" (Phil. 1:23), Noah and his family must have been sinful in building the ark, and the children of Israel must have been sinful in desiring to leave their Egyptian bondage. We could multiply examples of godly people desiring to be free from the suffering and hardship faced in this sinful, fallen world. I find nothing wrong with Christians delighting in the promise of Christ's coming to deliver them from the horrors of the Tribulation Period.

### *Conclusion:*

It is surprising to me that some intelligent, Bible-believing scholars deny the Biblical truth of a pretribulation rapture. Unfortunately, they have chosen – either wittingly or unwittingly – to perpetuate a number of ill-supported anti-rapture arguments, and to ignore a vast amount of research that has been collected over the past couple of decades. Their arguments may sound convincing to some, but under careful examination these arguments are shown to be based on straw man arguments, cherry-picked data, *ad hominem* argument, lack of thorough research, theological bias, and appeal to emotions. Both N.T. Wright and Ben Witherington III are competent scholars who have demonstrated responsible, exegetical work in the past in many areas. They should know better than to jump to quick conclusions based on flimsy research and preconceived theological conclusions. I am afraid, however, that when it comes to their arguments against a pretribulation rapture, their responsible, scholarly practices have been "left behind."

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<sup>62</sup> "Is the Rapture false theology?"

*Appendices*

Appendix 1: Matthew 24 in the Original Scofield Reference Bible

Appendix 2: Transcripts of Ben Witherington III YouTube Videos

Appendix 3: Transcripts of N.T. Wright YouTube Videos

Appendix 1: Matthew 24 in the Original Scofield Reference Bible  
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<p>ders; inasmuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.</p>	<p><sup>1</sup> Matt. 24: 24 <sup>2</sup> Thos. 2: 1-3 <sup>3</sup> Gen. 1: 21 <sup>4</sup> Lk. 11: 22, 23 <sup>5</sup> Thos. 2: 1-3 <sup>6</sup> 1 Pet. 4: 11-12 <sup>7</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>8</sup> Matt. 24: 24 <sup>9</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>10</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>11</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>12</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>13</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>14</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>15</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>16</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>17</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>18</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>19</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>20</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>21</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>22</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>23</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>24</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>25</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>26</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>27</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>28</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>29</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>30</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>31</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>32</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>33</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>34</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>35</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>36</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>37</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>38</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>39</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>40</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>41</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>42</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>43</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>44</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>45</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>46</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>47</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>48</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>49</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>50</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>51</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>52</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>53</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>54</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>55</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>56</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>57</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>58</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>59</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>60</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>61</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>62</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>63</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>64</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>65</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>66</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>67</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>68</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>69</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>70</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>71</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>72</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>73</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>74</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>75</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>76</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>77</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>78</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>79</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>80</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>81</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>82</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>83</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>84</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>85</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>86</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>87</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>88</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>89</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>90</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>91</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>92</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>93</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>94</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>95</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>96</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>97</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>98</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>99</sup> 1 John 4: 4 <sup>100</sup> 1 John 4: 4</p>	<p>gels of heaven, but my Father only.</p>
<p>25 Behold, I have told you before.</p>	<p>37 But as the /days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.</p>	
<p>26 Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe if not.</p>	<p>38 For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark,</p>	
<p><i>The Olivet discourse: (5) the return of the King in glory (Mk. 13: 24-37; Lk. 21: 25-36).</i></p>	<p>39 And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; /so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.</p>	
<p>27 For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; /so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.</p>	<p>40 Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.</p>	
<p>28 For whosoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.</p>	<p>41 Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left.</p>	
<p>29 Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken:</p>	<p>42 Watch therefore: for ye know not /what hour your Lord doth come.</p>	
<p>30 And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see /the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.</p>	<p>43 But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up.</p>	
<p>31 And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.</p>	<p>44 Therefore be ye also /ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.</p>	
<p><i>Parable of the fig tree (Mk. 13: 28, 29; Lk. 21: 29-31).</i></p>	<p>45 Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season?</p>	
<p>32 Now learn a /parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh:</p>	<p>46 Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.</p>	
<p>33 So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.</p>	<p>47 Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods.</p>	
<p>34 Verily I say unto you, /This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.</p>	<p>48 But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, "My lord delayeth his coming;</p>	
<p>35 Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.</p>	<p>49 And shall begin to smite his fellowservants, and to eat and drink with the drunken;</p>	
<p>36 But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the an-</p>	<p>50 The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of,</p>	
	<p>51 And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p>	

<sup>1</sup>Gr. *genos*, the primary definition of which is, "race, kind, family, stock, breed." (So all lexicons.) That the word is used in this sense here is sure because none of "these things," i.e. the world-wide preaching of the kingdom, the great tribulation, the return of the Lord in visible glory, and the regathering of the elect, occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, A.D. 70. The promise is, therefore, that the generation — nation, or family of Israel — will be preserved unto "these things"; a promise wonderfully fulfilled to this day.

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shall shew great signs and wonders; inasmuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

35 Behold, I have told you before.

36 Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not.

*The Olivet discourse: (5) the return of the King in glory (Mk. 13. 24-37; Lk. 21. 25-36).*

37 For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

38 For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.

39 Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken:

40 And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

41 And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

*Parable of the fig tree (Mk. 13. 28, 29; Lk. 21. 29-31).*

42 Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh:

43 So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.

44 Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

45 Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.

46 But of that day and hour

A.D. 33.

\* Isa. 28. 26; 1 Thes. 5. 1-3.

† Gen. 7. 11; Lk. 12. 35, 36; 1 Thes. 5. 1; 1 Pet. 3. 3; 3. 4.

\* Also vs. 27, 28, 44. See Mk. 1. 28, note.

† A great tribulation (see Gen. 7. 1; Rev. 18. 14; 19. 11.)

\* Day of Jehovah. vs. 29-31; Mt. 25. 31-46. (See 2. 23-25; Rev. 19. 11-13.)

† Christ (Second Advent). Mt. 24. 30-35. (See 28. 1.)

\* Psal. 54. 5; Mt. 12. 41.

† Hab. 1. 4, note.

† Angel of prophecy. Gen. 1. 1-3; 22. (See 1. 2, 3; Rev. 21. 2.)

† Parousia (N. T.) vs. 30, 31; Mt. 25. 1-13. (See 5. 12-14; Lk. 21. 29-31.)

\* vs. 31; 1 Thes. 4. 1-4; 1 Cor. 15.

\* Mt. 12. 40; 23. 35.

\* Psal. 118. 26; 136; 137; Isa. 51. 9; Mt. 2. 13; 1 Pet. 1. 21, 22.

\* vs. 40; Acts 1. 1; 2 Cor. 4. 4; 1 Pet. 3. 20.

† Christ (Second Advent). vs. 30-35; Mt. 24. 31-35. (See 28. 1; Acts 1. 9-11.)

\* Mt. 25. 13; Rev. 3. 3.

\* on other day.

† Mt. 24. 19; Lk. 12. 35-40; 21. 29-31.

† Lk. 12. 42-46; 1 Cor. 4. 5. It is difficult to see, not ability, in the Lord's service that is first approved by Him.

† John 21. 15; 1 Pet. 5. 2.

\* Hab. 1. 17; 2 Pet. 3. 4, 5; Rev. 22. 7, 12, 30.

\* Kingdom (N. T.). vs. 29-31; Mt. 25. 31-46; 1 Thes. 1. 10; 2 Cor. 5. 10.

\* Mt. 7. 21, 23, 25; 1. 11, 12; 1 Pet. 1. 20-22.

\*knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.

37 But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

38 For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark,

39 And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

40 Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

41 Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

42 Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.

43 But know this, that if the good-man of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up.

44 Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.

45 Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season?

46 Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.

47 Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods.

48 But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming;

49 And shall begin to smite his fellowservants, and to eat and drink with the drunken;

50 The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of.

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<sup>1</sup> Gr. *genea*, the primary definition of which is, "race, kind, family, stock, breed." (See all lexicons.) That the word is used in this sense here is sure because none of "these things," i.e. the world-wide preaching of the kingdom, the great tribulation, the return of the Lord in visible glory, and the regathering of the elect, occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, A.D. 70. The promise is, therefore, that the generation—nation, or family of Israel—will be preserved unto "these things"; a promise wonderfully fulfilled to this day.

## Appendix 2: Transcripts of Ben Witherington III YouTube Videos

### Is the Rapture Doctrine Biblical? (Ben Witherington)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch/cg8IRGqtMHc>

I like to say a text without a context is just a pretext for whatever you want it to mean. If you look carefully at Matthew 24, which is one of the major proof texts for the study of a theology called the rapture, we have not only the phrase “one will be taken and the other left behind one grinding the mill will be taking the other will be left behind one standing on a roof will be taken the other left behind,” but before that, Jesus tells us the story of Noah and what happened in his generation. And what he says, of course, is that all of humanity was swept away by the flood and those left behind were the righteous ones, Noah and his family. So, in the Noah story, it’s good to be left behind its not good to be taken away. That is the context for what Jesus says. After that, when he's saying one will be taken and another left behind, it’s the one that’s left behind going, “Whew! I’m really glad to be left behind,” because what “taken” means is what it meant in the Noah story - taken away in judgment, taken away in the flood, taken away for judgment, right? So, ironically, when you have the Left Behind series going for you, it would be better to be left behind, and it would be not so good to be taken away, because what “taken away” means, in those kinds of texts, is judgment.

The other major proof text for a theology of the rapture in the Bible, of course, comes out of first Thessalonians. And what Paul says in 1st Thessalonians 4 is, he’s trying to comfort Thessalonians who, some of whom, who have died from persecution in Thessaloniki. Members of the church have just died, and the Thessalonians have a question: Are they going to miss out on the resurrection? Are they going to miss out on the route [?] the Lord? That’s their question. The question is not, when will the rapture happen? Their question is are they going to miss out on the blessings of when Kingdom comes fully on earth? That’s the issue. What Jesus says to them is, No. In fact, the dead in Christ, he says, when the Lord returns, and the trumpet blows, and the Lord comes back to establish the kingdom fully on earth so that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ when he comes back, what’s going to happen is, this “the dead in Christ will rise first and then the living will be transformed” and “we will meet the Lord in the air.” Now, “air” does not equal heaven. This is not about a rapture into heaven; it’s about meeting the Lord and greeting the Lord, being the greeting committee to go out and meet the Lord in the air and the return with Christ to reign upon the earth. The destination of the story in 1st Thessalonians 4 is not heaven the destination is returning as part of the royal entourage with Christ to earth, to reign on the earth with Christ. And the imagery that Paul is using here is the image of a royal return of a king to his city, right? So, you have this picture of a walled city. You have watchmen on the wall, like in Psalm 24. The watchman on the wall says, There’s the cry out in the road, and the cry out in the road, the trumpet blows, and the cry on the road goes, “Lift up your heads, o ye gates! Be lifted up, you ancient doors, so the King of glory may come in.” This is an entrance liturgy, right? And the watchman on the wall says, “Who is the king of glory? Stand and identify,” right? And then the reply comes back, “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.” So this is a sort of entrance liturgy, and Paul is going to depict the return of Christ, as like a king coming back to his city. Now, everybody who lived in a walled city knew what the protocol was. The protocol was,



once you knew it was the king, and you heard his herald blow the trumpet, and you knew he was out there, you don't leave him standing out there. You send out the greeting committee. The greeting committee goes out from the city to meet the king on the road, and where they go from there is, not back down the road, but into the city. Similarly, Christ is coming from heaven with his angelic and saints entourage. The people on earth go forth to meet him in the air, and then return to earth to reign with him on the earth. This is not a story about a pre or mid-tribulation rapture. This is a story about the return of the king and to welcome him back to earth, to reign on the earth with those who are raised in Christ.

Is the Rapture false theology? Interview of Dr. Ben Witherington III by Dale Norman, Jan. 16, 2022

<https://www.youtube.com/watch/MQHyyWuZY0>

DN –I’ve been doing a lot of investigating on the end times, and in particular the sequence of events that a lot of scholars claim will happen. In particular, the one I’d like to ask you about the most is the rapture, which I know you’ve done a lot of online videos. So, is it true, then, my first question would be that this idea of rapture, and I suppose dispensationalism, did not exist prior to, what would that be, 1700 something?

BW – Yeah, there may be some indication in a couple of Baptist places in the late 1600s, but not, so far as I can see, there's just no evidence of any compelling nature, of the whole idea existing before the 1700s, not really. And certainly, I mean, I have scoured the patristic fathers, there's just nothing. There's nothing in Jerome, nothing in Augustine, nothing in Chrysostome, nothing in Anselm. We could go on, you know. It just didn't really exist. And part of the reason for that is that, the further you get towards the Middle Ages, the less interest in future eschatology, and the more theologizing of dying and going to heaven. That's really the story of church history. By the time you get to the Middle Ages, we're a religion that, if you want to talk about the afterlife, you're talking about dying and going to heaven or somewhere else. And that's the theology. For example, think about Dante's *Divine Comedy* for a minute. What's in that? Well, he describes hell, purgatory and heaven, nothing about the new creation, nothing about the future return of Christ really. You know, I mean, it's like the end of the book of revelation just got locked off and people forgot about it. So, there's not a lot there. So, yes, this is a modern protestant theology, not catholic, not orthodox, a particular modern low church protestant theology. It seems mainly to have been galvanized by a revival in Glasgow. There was a young woman there named McDonald. Shock! A Scot named McDonald! I’ve never run into any of those in my time in Saint Andrew’s. And she has this vision of some kind of pre-tribulation rapture. And, you know, that might have come and gone, and really made no difference, except that reverend Darby was there. And he got religion about this idea. And then we were kind of off to the races, because it became one of the major tenets of the Plymouth Brethren, the so-called Plymouth Brethren, and that whole movement there. And even then, it might have been confined to northern England and places in England, but the thing is, Darby came to America, and he became an enormous influence on Dwight L Moody, and Moody picked up that ball and ran with it, And that's really how that whole theology took off in America. And one of the things that's characteristic is that, when we're in a really difficult time, culturally speaking, for example in the American history the civil war in the 60s in America, this theology of “beam me up, God,” plays really well, because you'd like to get out of the horrible situation you're on on earth, and that's happened time and again. I mean, it's interesting to me that, if you sort of chart the history of dispensational literature in the 20th century, when did it play big? When was the Thompson Chain Link Bible with dispensational notes by Scofield, when was that playing big? World War I, World War II the Korean War, the Gulf War, etc. I mean, it's a form of escapist theology that's appealing to Christians who are very ill at ease at what's happening in the culture in various ways, but it's certainly not what the Bible says. And one of the ironies of course, is that dispensationalism prides itself on understanding eschatology, especially apocalyptic prophecy from the Old Testament, like Daniel, or summing up Ezekiel or Zechariah. And the irony is, they badly misunderstand the nature of that kind of prophecy. I mean, for example, in the book of revelation, when you hear John, it says, “I was in the spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard a

voice say, Come up here, and I'll show you what must soon take place." I mean, this is apocalyptic language about a vision into heaven. It's not about a physical transportation on Air Ruach from earth to heaven, you know. And, that's not what it's about. In apocalyptic literature, you've got people seeing all kinds of things while their feet are planted firmly on *terra firma*. But it's in a vision that they see these things, and so this whole language of "going up into heaven" is metaphorical; it's dealing with the nature of the vision that's seeing into heaven, while John of Patmos is still squarely on the island of Patmos. So, none of those texts are even remotely relevant to a discussion of an actual bodily rapture.

And the sad part, of course, is the same is true with like a text like Matthew, where Jesus says, "It will be in those days like the days of Noah," and then He uses this phrase, you know, "one will be taken the other left behind," and He gives an example of two grinding at a mill, or two standing on a roof, or whatever, but of course if you'd really paid attention to the context, and I like to say a text without a context is just a pretext for whatever you want it to mean, if you'd really understood the context, think about it for a minute, who was taken away in the flood? Those who were lost. Who was left behind? Noah and his family. It was good to be left behind. So, the valence of the reading of that text is just the opposite of what dispensationalism told us it was. Those who are taken are taken away for judgment - and you don't want to be taken. You want to be the person at the at the grinding mill left behind, going, "Whew, the authorities didn't come and get me." So, I mean, it involves a 180-degree mistreating of the text. It's just not there, anywhere in the gospels at all.

But, of course, the ultimate lynch-pin text is first Thessalonians 4. That's the big dog text right there. And again, not knowing the context, when Paul says, "The dead in Christ will rise first, and then we will meet the Lord in the air and be with the Lord forever," people simply assumed that, well, that's rapture into heaven. Five problems with that, which I will name very quickly: number one, the meeting is not in heaven, it's in the sky, because Christ is returning with his angels. It's His visible return. There are not two returns of Christ, an invisible one for the rapture, and then a visible one at the end of human history. No, the early church never believed in two returns of Christ, one invisible and one visible. They believed in exactly one return of Christ, whether they called it the "second coming" or the "*parousia*" or whatever they called it. There was only one return. And the real corker is that Paul is writing to the church in Thessaloniki, which is a walled city. It's named after the sister of Alexander the Great, and it had umpteen visits by royal people who came. Well, how does a royal visit work? Well, what happens is, you have a herald coming in front of the king who's going to play some kind of trumpet-like instrument, and say lift up your head oh you gates, be lifted up, ye ancient doors, so the king may come in, and then the watchman on the wall says, "Stand and identify who is this king," and then, when they're satisfied with the answer to that question, then what happens is, the greeting committee goes out to meet the king, because he's making an *epiphania*, an appearance. He's making a "coming" to the city, and where they go from there is not back down the road where the king came from. Where they go from there is into the city. Now, that's the imagery which Thessalonian people knew upside down and backwards, which Paul is using to describe the second coming. And the whole assumption is that everybody would understand, that when the greeting committee goes out to meet the Lord in the air, what's going to happen thereafter is a return to earth, so Christ can reign on earth. That's what's going to happen. So, in fact, we have zero percent rapture texts in the New Testament at all.

Now, the thing about this is, in any case, this was a layperson generated theology, in the first place. It was not generated by people who knew Hebrew and Greek and Aramaic, or who were Biblical scholars in any way. And the sad truth is, it was mainly propagated by a really shyster of a businessman named C.I. Scofield. If you read his story, meaning he abandoned his family, he was in jail for fraud and various things like that, and then he made a fortune selling the *Scofield Reference Bible*. And the key thing about that Bible was, it had notes. But it not only had notes it had headings that he had put into the text. For example, the heading above Matthew 24, which was right in the text which gave the illusion that it was part of the Bible itself, was "Jesus predicts the rapture." Oh, well, it's right in the gospel of Matthew. How could we possibly not believe that, if it's right in the gospel of Matthew? And, unfortunately, the notes were based, not on a Greek or Hebrew text, but on the King James Bible, so there were all kinds, in the early editions of all this, there were all kinds of misinterpretations of what was going on, based on a misreading of a particular English translation, not the original language text at all. Now, that might have come and gone as a lay witness mission of a particular kind, but what actually happened, at least in America, is that Moody Bible Institute was founded, and then Dallas Dispensational Training Center, which became Dallas Theological Seminary was founded. And the whole reason for that was to provide and shore up scholarly support for this theology. And the theology was already out there and being embraced by thousands of people, and so, by golly, we need scholarly backup and apologetics on behalf of this theology. And then we're off to the races, and people continue to buy the *Scofield Reference Bible*, etc., you know. And so, that's the sad history of this particular theology. Now, the irony is that, in fact, many early Christians were preterists [sic]. They believed that on the basis of revelation 20, and partially from reading first Corinthians 15 and a few other texts, that, yes, Christ would come back and he would reign on earth for a long period of time before the last judgment, before the new heaven and new earth, before the final resurrection of those who were lost, and that sort of stuff. And of course, that comes from a fairly literal reading of revelation 20 because it talks about two resurrections, and etc. But, nonetheless, there were many pre-millennial Christians, especially in the second century and into the third century, and the father of church history, Eusebius, hated it. I mean, he really did not like it. And he did everything he could to say, "Well, this is overly earthly theology, overly literal reading of text." And the person who followed him was, of course Augustine. And it really is Augustine that put his stamp on the idea that the church is the representation of the kingdom come on earth. And so, in fact, eschatology began with the incarnation of Jesus, and we have been in the so-called church age, the millennium, ever since the coming of Christ. So, he was basically what today is called "amillennialism," we're already in the millennium. Big problem with that: Satan seems to be doing quite well during this age; whereas, revelation 20 says he's in a jail cell, and can't get out, and can't deceive anybody. Well, that certainly doesn't adequately describe church history at all. But it's because of the influence of people like Eusebius and Augustine that you have of the rise of an amillennial theology. And when you get to the reformation, the big problem is nobody understands apocalyptic prophecy. Luther really didn't much like the book of Revelation. It's the only book Calvin wouldn't do a commentary on, because he said, "I don't understand it." Wesley simply crib-notes from Johannes Bengel, a German scholar, in his *Notes on the New Testament*, with this proviso, this disclaimer: This is the best interpretation I can find of this book. I do not say it is all correct, period. So, the Reformers really didn't know what to do with Jewish apocalyptic literature. They just did not. And that's probably one of the reasons why, in Protestantism - you know nature abhors a vacuum - since apocalyptic prophecy was being ignored by Protestantism between like the 1500s until the 1700s.

Well, there began to be speculation by Baptists and others along the way, and then Plymouth Brethren, and then we really were off to the races with all of this sort of stuff. So, that's sort of a short survey of why we have this theology, why it's so popular, and where it came from, and whether or not it's biblical.

DN - Is it true nowadays, people who believe in a literal seven-year tribulation need the rapture to be true, because they keep talking about the church will be taken out, and then God will deal with the Jews once again? Is that why they need the rapture to be true would you say?

BW – Well, that's part of it. And see, this this is another part of the problem. In the Bible, there are not two peoples of God at any one point in time. There's only one people of God, only one. And that is why for example Paul in Romans 11 talks about Jews who have rejected Christ have been broken off from the people of God. Paul's vision of who the people of God are during his lifetime are Jew and Gentile, united in Christ. He did not foresee how successful the Gentile mission would be, and that the church by the late second century was overwhelmingly Gentile. He had not foreseen that. But in any case, in the Old Testament, the Jews are God's chosen people. In the coming of Christ, and then with the Pentecost, it's Jew and Gentile united in Christ. None of them ever thought, "Well, there's two people of God. There's a Jewish one, and there's a Gentile one, or there's a mostly Jewish one, and a most Gentile one." No. This is one of the big no-nos about dispensational theology. They think some of the prophecies are about Israel, and some of the prophecies are about the church, and never the twain shall meet. And so, yes, we need get the church off the earthly scene, so all of those Old Testament prophecies that seem to be unfulfilled to dispensationalists can be fulfilled in Israel. Wrong! Not true! No! The prophecies were fulfilled, and are fulfilled, in Christ, and not outside of Christ, none of the prophecies! The New Testament writers are very clear. It's one-stop shopping in Jesus. All of the prophecies, all of the promises, all of the religious institutions, like the temple and the sacrifices, you name it, it's all fulfilled in Christ. It's not fulfilled somewhere else, not fulfilled in some non-Christian group of any kind. Anybody who's going to be saved has to be in Christ. That's the big deal with all of that. And so, yes, the answer to your question is, yes we need to get the church off the scene so we can get all of those Old Testament prophecies that are only going to be fulfilled for and in Israel, period.

Now, here's another part of the problem: The Zionistic way of reading the Old Testament assumes that the Israel that was established in 1948 is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, that despite the fact that that Israel is a secular democracy, with a parliamentary form of government, and a president and a prime minister. And indeed, it was founded by David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir who were secular Jews following the teachings of Karl Marx. This has nothing to do with the regathering of all Jews from the diaspora to form a biblical Israel, because they, as even the Ultra-Orthodox in Jerusalem will tell you today, no, this is not really Israel. We're waiting for the Messiah to come. On every shabbat on Friday night, they go to the wailing wall, and they chant, "We want messiah; we want messiah now," because they know perfectly well that Netanyahu has nothing to do with the fulfillment of biblical Israel prophecies. And they're right. They're absolutely right that. The Israel that exists now exists because of enormous guilt from World War II, because of the holocaust, the killing of six-million Jews by the Nazis, and it was compensation to give Jews a place to go that could be their own. Never mind that there was a huge number of Palestinians already there. So, that's a part of modern history, but it really has nothing to do with the fulfillment of prophecies of God regathering Jews into a biblical Israel at all. The only time that's going to happen is when Jesus comes back. And, all of a sudden, Jews

realize, Oh, well, okay, He's the Messiah. My Bible teacher at Carolina, Bernard Boyd, used to meet regularly with the local Rabbi, and one day they were talking about Isaiah 53, and Dr Boyd asked the rabbi in a very congenial way, "Well, who do you think the suffering servant is in Isaiah 52 and 53?" And the rabbi said, "If, when Messiah, blessed be He, comes, He has the face of Jesus, we will accept it. After all, He was a Jew." And I thought, yeah, exactly. That's exactly right. Phat Paul promises and says in romans 11 is that when the redeemer comes forth from heavenly Zion at the second coming, all Israel will be saved, by which he means a huge number of Jews will accept their messiah. So, when is all that going to be fulfilled? Again, in Christ, and not outside of Christ. When Christ returns. In the meantime, all of history is wars, rumors of wars, and earthquakes, and famines, and pandemics, and one mess after another, with human beings behaving badly. And none of that gives any clear indication in regard to the timing of the return of Christ. I like to say, God reveals enough about the future to give us hope, but not so much that we don't have to live by faith every day. He's not going to give us a timetable. He never was going to give us a timetable about those things. We need to live every single day as though this might be the day when the Lord comes back, and we're prepared. And that's what the warnings in the New Testament are about, since you don't know the time, since he's coming like a thief in the night, well, you need to be prepared for the Lord to return, and raise the dead, and all that good sort of stuff. So, yes, there are plenty of prophecies that are as of yet unfulfilled, especially the ones about resurrection, the return of Christ, and the new heaven and the earth. That's all true of course, that's true, but the problem is that we want to have our hands on the levers of time. We want to know how much time is left, so we are in control of our own lives, and our own futures, and frankly, God is not ever going to give us that kind of information. Every single attempt to predict the timing of the second coming has had a hundred percent failure rate. Now, you know, if you had a weatherman that every day came on the news and got it wrong, you would stop listening to that weatherman, if he was 100% unsuccessful in telling you whether it's going to be dull today in the middle of England, or patchy sun today in the middle of England, or spotty clouds. Now, if you've got a weatherman who can't even do that, he needs to stop making predictions, period. So, you know, that's the way I would approach this whole issue. I'm not interested in abandoning the faith of the earliest Christians, that the Lord could return whenever, and that we need to be prepared for that. I'm not interested in abandoning Revelation's promise that when He comes, there's going to be a lot to do before we get to the New Creation. Even first Corinthians 15 says He's got to put all of his enemies under his feet, and the last one will be death. So, there's this process that's going to happen when Christ returns. The dead and Christ will be raised first; there's a period of him reigning on the earth; and then et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Okay, so there is a premillennialism to the faith of the earliest Christians. It's just not dispensational pre-mil.

One last thing: [the] tribulation, according to Mark 13, what Jesus says is, if God had not shortened the tribulation, nobody would stand. Now, in every generation of church history, in every generation of church history, there's always been trials and tribulations, persecutions, prosecutions, and executions, martyrdoms. Why should we in the late 20th or early 21st century think that we Christians will be exempt from such tribulations? What makes us special? Nothing. Nothing at all! The book of Revelation, in fact, teaches us be prepared to serve, suffer, be prepared to be faithful unto death. It's a book of the martyrs, is what really the book of Revelation is. It's warning, Don't try to take justice into your own hands. Vengeance's mine saith the Lord; I will repay. He will resolve the issues of justice and redemption in the future. You

need to leave it in His hands and keep your hands off the levers and manipulations of time and other things, and not mislead God's people by false promises and false readings and prophecies.

DN - I suppose, Ben, the idea of God taking us out in a rapture, theologically, what would that do to the idea of God being comforter you know, or present in time of trouble? Would that really endanger that theology?

BW – [27:01] Well, I think what it does is it nurtures a false theology that, if you're a really good, faithful Christian, you should be exempt from extreme suffering. There are prosperity gospel preachers in America that will just come out and flatly say, "Well, you got this cancer because you didn't have enough faith." So, I think what it endangers is a proper theology of suffering. But let's think about this for a minute okay? If you have the gift of everlasting life in Christ, the worst thing that could possibly happen physically to you is that you suffer and die. But guess what? If that happens, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" and eventually, there will be a resurrection and bodily life all over again. That's not a bad outcome! That's a good outcome. And so, you know, if I'm thinking like God is thinking, why should we expect him to exempt us from the worldly troubles that we have? Jesus said, "In this world you have trouble." And you're going to have trouble, and you're going to have tribulations and trials and tests and temptations and all of that sort of stuff. But I have overcome the world. What He didn't say is, "I'm taking you with me at the ascension," you know? No. "It's just Me that's leaving; I'm leaving, and I will send the Holy Spirit as my advocate when I do so. I think indeed this theology is escapist. And I'll tell you some of the bad implications: in America you know, I've been very concerned about having a proper creation theology, and creation care, caring about the environment, caring about the pollution, caring about the purity of our rivers, and all of that sort of stuff. I have heard dispensationalists say, "Well, we don't need to worry about that. I mean, we're all going to be beamed up. Why should we be caretakers of the world? It's all going to hell in a handbasket anyway, right?" This is bad theology. It encourages people not to care about the creation that God created good, and wanted us to be caretakers of. One of the ways you can tell when you're dealing with a really bad theology is if the implications of it are equally bad. If you play it out, and the applications of it are just bad, then there's something seriously wrong with this theology, and indeed there is.

DN – Yeah, This is sort of a different question, Ben, but I've been asking the people I've been interviewing, "Do you see the book of Revelation as a book that was dealing with first century issues as well as some futuristic elements? Or would you go with one more than the other?"

BW – Well, I think clearly, Revelation 2 and 3, the letters to particular churches with particular problems, is dealing with "the already." But the situation was on the ground that John was trying to help churches in western turkey. I think that's clear. But then once you get to revelation 6 through 19, the interesting thing about all of those judgments, you know, unsealing the seals, the bowls, the trumpets, all of that sort of stuff is, none of that is final judgment. These are all preliminary judgments that are intended to be disciplinary. That's why, when you get to number six, there's a pause in heaven, as God waits to hear if people have repented and turned back to Him or not. So, none of the stuff in revelation 6 leading up to revelation 19, none of that stuff is about final judgment. Now, final judgment in the book of Revelation doesn't even come up till 19 and 20, That's really quite clear. So, is it true that during the history of salvation history, both in the Old and New Testament times, there are judgments of God that fall upon the earth without eliminating the human race, or starting all over again? Well, yes of course. Of

course there are. So, there's a relevance to reading revelation 6 and following carefully, and understanding that as the Old Testament says, "Judgment begins with the household of God." It begins not with the wicked, but with the faithful. That's who it begins with. So, why should we expect to be exempt from God chastening those? He chastens those that He loves. He disciplines those that he cares about, and of course rightly so, because He's not only a God of love. He's a God of *holy* love, and of justice, not only a God of compassion, but a God of righteousness. And so, that's true. So, yes, I think the book of Revelation tells us something about the first century church that was being persecuted and executed, but it certainly also is directly relevant to understanding ourselves. And even Revelation 2 and 3 raises important questions about us. Have we lost our first love? Are we prepared for Christ to evaluate us? A lot of people have the picture of Jesus standing at the door and knocking. And you notice that there's no door handle on Jesus's side. The door has to be open from the inside. But what they don't realize is that image from Revelation 3 is about Jesus coming to judge persons who have not been entirely faithful. It's not about Him coming to take you home, or having a warm cuddle with Him or anything like that. That's just not what the text is about. So, yet again, we've got a bad Christian misinterpretation of the book of Revelation. But that's happened in every generation of Christian history, sadly enough. But, yes, I think the book is enormously relevant, but **what I tell my students is, since apocalyptic prophecy is enormously complex, and since you really need to read it in the context of early Jewish apocalyptic prophecy, not only in the Old Testament, but in the intertestamental period, to understand the nature of it, I mean, this is the last place you should start in trying to understand the New Testament, or Jesus Christ, or your future.** This is the last place you should start. I mean, I think there was a great wisdom to the reformers who said, "I don't get it; I'm not fully sure what this is about." Calvin says, "Hands off." Luther said, "Not sure." You know, I mean, under provocation, he eventually said, "Well I think that Mr. 666 is the pope," but this was after he had been excommunicated, and this, that, and the other. and Wesley was very reticent to use that as a basis for his revival. So, you know, **the good news about dispensationalism is that they've revived an interest in the eschatological text in the Bible, and it is an important part of the Bible, and it shouldn't be neglected.** The bad news is, it's led to all sorts of misinterpretations of that material.

DN – [35:17] Yes that would lead to my next question. How do you see the next year's proceeding? Do you think these misunderstandings will just grow, and grow?

BW - Well, if history is any indicator, whenever the church is under pressure, whenever it's facing like a plague, - consider in the middle ages, the bubonic plague, consider the pandemic – people are prone to want a way, an easy way out of course. So, the fact that in America, some churches are meeting with social distancing, but it's like only a quarter of the population who goes to church, and most of them are just watching online through Zoom, right? Of course, there are Christians who would like to get out of this situation sooner, rather than later. And sadly, especially in America, there are a lot of Christians who are just behaving badly. They're not social distancing; they're not wearing masks; they're not putting others before themselves. No. They're protesting in Frankfurt, Kentucky on the steps of the capitol building, because they want their freedom to do whatever they want to do, without social distancing en masse. This is Christians behaving badly, unfortunately. So, yes, I think it's putting enormous pressure on the church. Lots of churches were already suffering all kinds of weaknesses and having problems with attendance. I know this is a big issue in the churches in UK; it's not just in North America. This has not helped, this whole pandemic has not, and our response to it, which could have prevented a lot more deaths, if we had really been serious about quarantining and all of that. This



has not helped the whole willingness to turn to Christianity for answers, because the church really hasn't offered a lot of answers. In fact, they've been adamantly protesting that we need to ignore this whole thing and just get on with worshiping, and whatever. This is a terrible witness to the world. In America we now have 200,000 people who have died since March. 200,000! If the church wanted to lead this situation, we would be the first ones to talk about social distancing, quarantining where necessary, wearing masks, making sure that we protect the most vulnerable in our society. Of course, that's what Jesus would want us to do. But are we really consistently doing that? No. We're busy arguing with each other, you know. It's like my wife says, it's like two fleas on the back of a dog arguing over who owns the dog. Well, I have news for you, none of us has control over this pandemic, and we probably won't before there's a vaccine. So, in the meantime, we should act with wisdom and circumspection, and ask the question, how best can I protect my neighbor and show my love for my neighbor? How best can I do that? That would be leading.

DN – Yeah, well thank you so much, Ben, and that is all the questions I wanted to ask. I would like to thank you very much for your time.

BW - You are most welcome, and blessings on your ministry. And I hope that we all see the end of this soon, and very soon, but I don't think anything definitive is going to happen until next year sometime at the best.

DN – Yes, I get the feeling that would be the same over here as well. So, yeah, wonderful, thank you so much, Ben, and have a great day. It was wonderful to talk to you.

BW - All right God bless you.

DN - God bless. Thank you.

Israel & the Rapture: Real Questions with World Renowned Bible Scholar Ben Witherington III

<https://www.youtube.com/watch/3OBGd9IFgtk>

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for joining me today on J Slay made in the USA, where we explore truth, expose deception, and inspire. Courage guys, about two to three months ago, around, you know, October and everything that went down in Israel, I had already been exploring the idea around political Zionism. What is it really? Is it just that the Jewish people deserve to have their own nation state, and should be able to protect their borders? Or is it something more on top of that? The idea of the rapture became very interesting to me again, because, look at the times that we're living in! There's a lot of signs of the times that seem to be, if you hold to a futurist view of Revelation, these things kind of seem to be playing out with all the globalism, the mass deceptions people falling for these mass deceptions, which seem rather obvious. So, on both counts, when it comes to Israel, or when it comes to globalism and potentially moving right into the end times, these things really matter right now. And I began to do a deep dive that I'd really been doing for about a year, but two months ago I wrote an article talking about my own upbringing in a very, very Zionist Protestant Christian culture that supported Israel almost blindly, as well as kind of the "Left Behind" mentality on the Rapture, and that, you know, the first thing that's going to happen is Jesus is going to appear in the clouds secretly to the Christians that are believers currently, and then you got a seven-year tribulation, and then beyond that - man it gets complicated! We're going to get into some of that today. The problem is, there's a lot of people like me that think they're waxing eloquent, but really, you know, we're just researching on our own. We're doing the best we can. We're opening up the Scriptures, but there's not a lot of academic punch, maybe, to what we're saying. We don't necessarily have the letters behind our names. That can be a good thing or a bad thing these days, but we need some some people that are willing to to step up to the plate and say, Hey, I've studied this my whole life. I've got the credibility to back up what I'm saying. And one of the people I ran into in my research, on YouTube mostly, was Ben Witherington III. He's a Bible scholar. He's an Amos professor of New Testament for doctoral studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, which that, man, that place got put on the map last year with the revival that happened there. He's also an emeritus of the doctoral faculty at St Andrews University in Scotland. He's gotten a masters of divinity degree from the Gordon Conwell theological Seminary, and a PhD from the University of Durham in England. He's considered one of the top Evangelical scholars in the world, and is an elected member - these are acronyms I don't know - prestigious SNTS a society dedicated to New Testament studies. He's taught at Ashland theological, Vanderbilt, Duke, Gordon Conwell, so I could go on, and on and on. It's an awfully long and distinguished bio. I'm honored to have you today, Professor Witherington. Thanks for coming on.

[BW] - My pleasure! Glad to be with you.

[JS] – Absolutely. Well, as we dig into this, let's start with you. You know, like I said, that is a long bio! You know, I read a third of it there. I could have kept going. What's day-to-day look like for you? I know we tried to make this happen back in December, but you were busy with school type stuff. So, what's work life look like?

[BW] – Well, we have 57 biblical studies PhD students in Old and New Testament. That's enough to eat my lunch every single day, so that's a lot of work to get them to the point of

being full-fledged Bible scholars, serving the church, or colleges, missions, various things like that. So, you know, I teach four courses a year - two in the fall two in the spring. About half of them are doctoral seminars for the doctoral students; otherwise, I'm teaching Master's level students, and, you know, I do a lot of events. I do a lot of Church events. I do, you know, the Society of Biblical Literature, the SP, I go and give lectures for them. I write for the Biblical Archaeology Review magazine. I lead tours to the lands of the Bible. I'm a busy guy.

[JS] - Sounds like it! And didn't you say you were just at the Bible Museum as well recently?

[BW] – Yeah, I give lectures to the dozens, the people who lead, and try to train them to have a better level of biblical literacy, as they guide people through the Museum of the Bible. So, you know, I'm doing that as well. On top of which, I've written 60 books in my life, so I have not eaten the bread of idleness during my 40 years of ministry.

[JS] - It doesn't sound like it, and speaking of books, one thing we're we're going to bring up later today - I'll go ahead and put it on the screen - you have a recent book called *Sola Scriptura*. I believe that's the official title of it. I'm looking for the way to pull it up right now. Tell us a little bit about that as I'm looking for the screenshot.

[BW] - Well, you know one of the things that's happened in America is increasing biblical illiteracy. And, on top of which, the other thing that's happened is that even in Christian contexts – colleges, churches, etc. - the final authority of scripture is being compromised or even rejected on certain issues, like the issues of human sexuality, right? And I'd had enough of that, because, in fact, the Bible does have some very specific things to say about what is appropriate human sexual expression, and what counts as marriage and what doesn't. So, you know, what I wanted to show, which is really interesting to me, is throughout church history, there's always been since New Testament times an affirmation by some, and in some cases many, of the final authority of Scripture, not the final authority of human experience, not the final authority of human reason, not the final authority of the church, or some leader in the church, like the pope. No, the final authority of scripture itself. It's the norm amongst norms. And what was interesting to me, which shocked me, is that the people who were beating this drum before there was a Protestant Reformation, were people like Dante who wrote *The Divine Comedy*, William of Occam, famous philosopher in England, also a Catholic beating this drum, various other people who are critiquing the corruption in the papacy. And so, this idea of *sola scriptura* is not particularly a Protestant idea, right? Protestants were happy to wave the banner, but they were by no means the first to do so. So, what I'm arguing for is that in regard to matters that Scriptures teach, that it's still the final authority, okay?

[JS] – Authority, yes! And there's the book right there That's just the Amazon little clip right there. You can go to Amazon, look up *sola scriptura*. It's the first thing that comes up, and I'll put a link in the description to that as well. Okay, so, you know, with my intro there, I talked about a few big topics. Some in the audience may know exactly what I'm talking about. Others may be like, Where's this going? What's this interview about? So, let's start with this: I'm going to let you define some terms for everybody here. Here's the ones I'd like to define right out of the gate. So, from a 10,000-foot level, let's talk about premillennial dispensationalism. We don't have to get in the Weeds on it, but generally speaking, how old is it, and what is it?

[BW] – Okay, so far as I can tell, as a student of church history, as well as the Bible, this whole theology is a modern theology. It really didn't exist before the 17th century, and it didn't

become sort of a dominant Theology of any kind before the 19th century, before the Plymouth Brethren, before revival in Glasgow, before the the leader of Plymouth Brethren influencing D.L. Moody, who was really the Billy Graham of his day. And then of course, there was the Scofield Reference Bible, right? And then also, there was Dallas Theological Seminary, as well as Moody Bible Institute. And then of course there's popular treatments of this subject in my lifetime: *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsay, various *Left Behind* series, which may I just say to your audience now, the *Left Behind* series should be, wait for it... left behind!

[JS] - Hey, you know who else left it behind, Ben? You know who else left it behind? Kirk Cameron. He just he came to my church a couple months ago, and he and my pastor are good friends. And behind closed doors, asked my pastor - he'd be fine me sharing this with the audience - but Kirk Cameron no longer subscribes to that belief at all.

[BW] – Well, praise the Lord! And I will tell you you that some of the most adamant persons who were advocates of this theology have become something else. They call themselves now Progressive Dispensationalism. And to those who call themselves that, I say, Keep going! You're progressing; you need to progress beyond dispensationalism. So, what are we talking about is two second comings, two - an invisible coming of Christ to rapture the saints out of a big old tribulation mess, or just before a big old tribulation mess, into heaven, so that they don't have to suffer, bless their hearts. Unfortunately, this theology is something the church never affirmed from the first century on. The battlecry was, be prepared to suffer, and if necessary, even be martyred. And you can't be any more dead than dead, so why exactly should the supposed last generation of Christians be exempt from such suffering or martyrdom? Answer: They shouldn't be. In fact, the Book of Revelation says not get ready to rumble or get ready to be raptured, it says be prepared to suffer and die, like Antipas did in the Revelation two and three. I could be wrong - I could be wrong on this - but I almost feel, as well, that modern day Christians, like I'm not talking about every person, because there's some really wonderful people that are close to the heart of God, no doubt about it, that are willing to suffer, but it almost seems like we are less worthy than the the the early church. And other times throughout history where, you know, like now, like if anybody deserves to go through tribulation, it might be us.

[JS] – Well, yeah, the the funny thing to me is, I mean, I've been teaching my Sunday school class here in Lexington, Kentucky. The Book of Revelation, they wanted to hear it. They wanted to hear it. I said this is the most complex piece of literature in the whole Bible. Let's not start there. They said it's time for Revelation. I said, okay.

[BW] - And please don't call it “Revelations,” plural. Anybody that starts a sentence like that doesn't know what the Book of Revelation is. It's the revelation of John the Divine, and so, you know, we've been studying this and studying this and I tried to explain to them that the various places for example in the Book of Revelation where John says, “And I was on the spirit in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard somebody say and I saw come up here now.” This is a visionary experience. This is not him flying air *ruach* into heaven. He's on the island of Patmos. He's in exile. He's not leaving planet Earth. He's having a visionary experience where he sees things that are going on in heaven. That's all. There's absolutely no Rapture theology in the Book of Revelation at all. None! And what is sad, however, is that, even if Christians physically suffer, or even have to die, they will be spiritually protected through the suffering, right? Not exempt from the suffering; not beamed up from the suffering. *Through* the suffering. And so, we've had to talk about that. We've had to talk about Matthew 24. Jesus draws an analogy between what happened in the days of Noah and what's happening, when in fact we have this big kaboom later,

and what he says is, it will be as it was in the days of Noah. Now, let's think about that for a minute. Remember these little sayings, two grinding at the Mill one is taken the other left behind. I sing a solo at church about it, you know? One man walking up a hill. Well, guess what? It's good to be left behind, because the ones that are taken away are taken away for judgment. This is exactly the story of Noah. Noah and his family are going. We were left behind; thanks be to God. Yeah, it's those who were taken away that are being judged. It's not those left behind. So this whole idea that there's a theology of, you want to be out of here, when let's get ready to rumble happens, is simply not good biblical theology at all. And even in 1 Thessalonians 4, where we will meet the Lord in the air, the dead in Christ will be raised, and we'll meet the Lord in the air - air, sky, is not heaven. And in fact, that whole story is set up like we're going out to meet a king and welcome him back to earth, right? There are not two sets of passages about Christ coming. There's one set, the visible, noisy, loud second coming. And when that happens, the dead in Christ will be raised. We will go to greet him, and meet him in the air, and come back to rule with him on the earth. **There is no pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, post-tribulation Rapture theology in the Bible.** That is a modern theology imposed on the scriptures, and it's not what the first through 19th century Christians believed. And, frankly, worldwide it's also not what most Christians, the billions of Christians in the world, believe today.

[JS] - That's very interesting. And you're hitting on something that really helped me turn the corner. So, the thing that was most upsetting to me, and honestly, it was upsetting as I began to interview, not necessarily people with your academic background, but pastors, or missionaries, or others, that weren't, you know, necessarily from the Southern Baptist group, or whatever, I would ask them questions about their end times theology, but I would do it on the air, and I would notice they'd kind of skirt the question, and then later on they would bring up to me, they'd say, you know, I really want to talk about where I really stand, because I might get some backlash from my publisher, or from my denominational backers, or what have you, but they would tell me they'd, like, I used to hold to the Rapture theology; I don't necessarily anymore. And I'd say, why. And they would say, many of them would say, because as I researched where that came from, and I realized it was only a couple of hundred years old. A lot of them would point back to Darby you alluded to. Even in the 17th century there were a few small groups that were kind of like toying with the idea. I didn't want to believe that, so I chose not to look at it. And then, I'd begun to do some research about a year ago, and realized, like, this is true, that this is a very recent phenomena [sic] within the church. But, Ben, I want to ask you a question about can you prove that going back prior to let's say Darby, where was this theology? How did it come about?

[BW] – Well, let's start with the beginning (a very good place to start), like Genesis one, or, which beginning? Oh, let's just start with the gospel, with the coming of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus. The end times began; the eschatological end times began with the ministry of Jesus. We're not looking forward to the end times in the future. There's only the end of the end times that we're awaiting, okay? We've been in the end times for over 2,000 years, frankly. That's the real truth of the matter, okay? So, we've been in this eschatological age. And in every age of church history there have been wars and rumors of wars, and false prophets, and false Messias, and plagues, and on and on and on. All of those things that Jesus warned about have been characteristic of every age of church history, all of them including now. Look at Israel, look at Ukraine ,etc, etc. We have been in the end times for a very long time, and in regard to the end of the end times, Jesus says, of that day or hour, nobody knows.

[JS] - How do you define the end of the end times? Because the return of Christ, and the resurrection of the dead, so you don't feel like there's going to be a progression of the the wars the rumors of wars. People would say, now that doesn't hold to your position well. Look around, it's getting worse. I mean, I even mentioned in the intro to the show, it seems to be this globalism is at a level that we've never had it, and that does tend to be a a Biblical revelatory idea.

[BW] – Well, let me remind you that at the end of World War II, we discovered that the Nazis had killed six million Jews in concentration camps, and World War II was widely viewed as we are at the end of the end times in in pastoral circles. Were they saying that absolutely all over the country indeed Adolf Hitler is number 666? No question. And, you know what? That was also true during World War I. It was also true during the Civil War. We could just keep going. So, no, I don't think we're in any better or worse condition than we were before. And then, of course, there was Oppenheimer. We went and obliterated two whole cities of Japan, right? You know, if that didn't wake up the apocalyptic clock, nothing will! So, really and truly, first of all, it will happen. Christ will return in God's timing. Jesus is very clear that of the day, or the hour, or the timing in general, that of the second coming nobody knows, not even the angels in heaven know. It even says in Mark 13:32, not even the Son knows. Only the father knows, and He's not telling, right? So, all of these prognostications of how close we are to the end, and when Jesus is coming back, have had a 100% failure rate.

[JS] - That's right. You know, if you have a 100% failure rate, you just stop, you know? You give up, because we don't know the first big one. The first big one that I remember, Ben, you know I was only six, seven years old, but again, based on the Protestant circles that I was in, the Southern Baptist in Tennessee, everybody was talking about 1988. I think there was another one in the early 90s, but I think how Lindsay's big prediction, he was the *Late Great Planet Earth* guy, and people like Jimmy Evans, *The Tipping Point*. If you read the beginning of his *Tipping Point* book, which is all about the rapture, and all about end times, he's like my mentor and hero in all of this, is Hal Lindsay. And you know, he had said '88 and then '88 came and went, and I remember, again I'm six, seven years old, but I remember it happened again in the 90s. Then it happened again with Y2K, and like it just kind of keeps going, and it's almost like a cottage industry.

[BW] - Well it is, and it sells a lot of books. Well, yeah, let me explain to you one of the fundamental things that's wrong with this whole theology. It's escapist. It's escapist theology. It's a “beam me up, Scotty” theology. We don't want to have to be responsible for doing good works in the earth. We don't want to have to be involved in creation care. Heavens no! It doesn't matter that the world's going to blow up, or burn up. We don't care, you know? It's not the theology of the New Testament; it just isn't. It's a very escapist theology, and I would just remind people that the talking about dying and going to heaven anyway, is a minority theology in the New Testament. The primary theology is, Christ will return, the dead in Christ will be raised, etc. In other words, the final future we're looking for is not somewhere out there. The final future is right here on earth, when Christ returns, and the new creation happens. We do not need an escapist theology. I'll tell you a quick funny story. There's a Baptist College, which shall not be named in Texas, that invited me to come and give my two lectures on dispensing with dispensationalism. Okay, now this school had in its faith statement dispensationalism, so I already found this a very peculiar request, but I was happy to do it you know, so I go, and give these lectures. People ask lots of good questions. They were very polite, etc. And then I began to ask the faculty why, since this is part of your faith statement, did you invite me to do this, and

you didn't sort of set me up to have somebody ride in on a white horse and refute what I was saying. And they said, well two reasons: we wanted the students to hear another point of view, but, frankly, many of those on the faculty don't believe in the Rapture theology anymore. And I went, Shazam, this is Texas. Are you kidding me, you know? So. what they wanted, because they didn't have the courage of their convictions, is they wanted the Lone Ranger to ride into town, fire the silver bullets, influence the students to rethink this whole thing, and then leave, and they could say they had plausible deniability, because they'd say, well that's just Ben, and, besides, he's a Methodist; he's not a Baptist. So, bless his heart, he's wrong. Yeah, you know what I found really odd about that whole situation? There's an awful lot of serious, and quite rightly, doubt about that theology, because it keeps not coming true. Yeah, I remember watching Pat Roberts in 1999 having one of these prognosticators on all about Y2K, and Jesus will come back exactly in 2000 AD, because it's exactly 2,000 years after his birth, and I just laughed and laughed and laughed. Where's that in the Bible? Jesus was born somewhere between 2 and 6 BC. He should have already come before this program aired in 1999, if that was true. We don't know. And here's the real big problem with this prophesying: When the second coming is an attempt for humans to get hold of the timetable, God is not letting go of the timetable. It's in God's good time. We don't know when it's going to be. What we know is the fact of the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the new creation. We don't know, and we're not supposed to know, the timing. So, you can look at the world and ring your hands all you want. Until you actually hear the trumpet blast and Jesus coming down from heaven, just live your life as if each day might be the last, but there may be many more days, and don't waste your time trying to draw up charts about the end times.

[JS] - It's a good point. Let me ask you real quick. I've put together just a real brief timeline, and I want to hear where I'm in error, or if this is generally right. Again, this is just 10,000 foot level, so, you've got in the 1820s Edward Irving, and you've got Margaret McDonald, and then John Darby took hold of that, and brought it over to the United States. He was a Scottish Plymouth Brethren Pastor, brought it over to the States. And then you had the Moody Bible Institute, and the colleges get a hold of it. Then the Dallas Theological school got a hold of this theology. It kind of surrounded the the whole nation at that point. Then you had pop culture really get on board with *Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series. Is that generally right, or is that fairly right?

[BW] - But the big disseminator of this theology was the *Scofield Reference Bible*

[JS] - Eid I miss that?

[BW] - Yes, you did.

[JS] - Oh yeah, I had it in there. I just didn't read read it. Yes, tell me about that piece of it, from Darby to Scofield.

[BW] - Scofield was a rascal. He ended up in jail, abandoning his wife, stealing money, etc. But the *Scofield Reference Bible* was the the bestselling Bible when it came out for many, many decades. And here's the worst part of this the whole dispensational schema; it was implanted into the text of the Bible. For example, you have a heading Matthew 24 that says "Jesus predicts the Rapture." I got news for you, in the original, who wrote that Darby, I mean, I'm sorry, did Scofield write those headings? Scofield did. It was Scofield who did this, right? Who was telling him to do that? Surely, he didn't come up with it on his own. No, he did not. There were others thinking about... I mean, understand there was a huge crisis after the Civil

War. There was reconstruction. There was poverty. I mean that war killed more Americans than all the rest of the wars since then combined. We lost more citizens in the Civil War than in World War I, the Korean War, Vietnam War, you name it, okay? It was a huge cultural problem, right? And Scofield was offering them a way out of poverty, a way out of alcoholism, a way out of all kinds of stuff. By the way, and here's the real bad part, Jeremy, the the original dispensational schema, involving the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, didn't involve studying the Hebrew text; it didn't involve studying the Greek text; it involved putting pieces together from the King James Bible, which is a translation. And as you know, every translation is already an interpretation. And the King James Bible is today by no means the best translation you could use to study these matters. And so, we were off to the races. Now, ordinary Joe-lay or Betty-layperson are not going to know that the *Scofield Reference Bible* is guiding him in the direction of dispensationalism. The headings are right there. I mean, I was a pastor of four Methodist churches when I came back from my doctoral work in North Carolina, and one day, I went to visit a little old lady. She had a gigantic family Bible, King James of course, old one, and open the front cover, and right there it says, King James Bible. And I said, "Ma'am, you do realize that King James didn't write this Bible." She says, "It says on the front page, 'King James Bible.' Of course the king took time out of his schedule to write that Bible. Absolutely!" You know, here's the problem: Sometimes you're going to confront adamant, invincible, ignorance. What you going to do with that, you're just going to have to pray that the grace of God hits them at some point, and they learn how to listen to the truth about these Scriptures, for sure. Didn't you know I recently got a King James Bible, and in the beginning - now maybe this isn't in all of the Bibles - but there's a letter written to King James about how they hope that it's worthy of the times. They hope that that he'll accept it, you know. But is that not in all of the King James Bibles? No. It's not, but here's the other part about this: King James's dictates to the Oxford and Cambridge teams that were going to do the Bible were, don't do anything new; just follow the Coverdale Bible, the Geneva Bible, William Tyndale, John Wickliffe, previous attempts at translating into English, and just give us the greatest hits of the those previous English translations. It is not even an original translation of the Greek and Hebrew text. It is a recapitulation of previous English translations of the Bible. The King James Bible didn't drop from the sky, like the Book of Mormon is claimed to have done, and be uncovered. It was intended to standardize, to have one English translation for everybody, that everybody would love. And to me one of the most interesting things you can do is read the original 1609 King James and compare it to William Tyndale's translation. Guess what? Shazam! All those most familiar idioms and phrases were in Tyndale before they were even in the King James Bible by a hundred or more years. I mean, for example the Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Yeah, that's not the King James Bible; that's Tyndale. We escape by the skin of our teeth. That's Tyndale. Am I My Brother's Keeper? That's Tyndale. We could go on and on and on about this. Generally, though, whether it's King James or Tyndale, is it reflecting the original context and the original author's intention, those phrases? Well, here's what: Yes, those particular phrases, yes, but here's the thing, you're only as good as the original manuscript you have in front of you, that you're translating from, right? In the time of the King James they had like four or five medieval Hebrew texts of the Old Testament, and Greek manuscripts that were no earlier than like the 7th century AD. Today, we have 5,450 manuscripts, part or whole of the Greek New Testament, some of which go back to the 2 Century AD. Wouldn't it be better if we got back to the original, inspired text? Well, that's what translators are trying to do today, whether it's the NIV, or some of these other translations. That's what they're trying to do. The truth of the matter



is that modern translations done in the 20th and into the 21st century are far more accurate than the King James was. And why? Because they're closer to the original text; that's why, okay?

That's good good to know. I'm on a journey of understanding the whole translation game, you know, which Bible am I going to use? Typically, I'm getting deeper in that myself, so I appreciate that. Let's switch gears for a second. I mentioned the name Edward Irving, and then, obviously John Darby. I think those guys were rubbing elbows quite a bit at the time, back in the 20s and 30s. I'm gonna say some things that I think I know. Ben, you can correct me, and then I've got some questions about it. So, as I'm reading Edward Irving's work, and he fell in love with the idea of of the rapture, of two second comings of Christ. He also fell in love with the idea of the modern nation of Israel coming back together. And God kind of like a renewing of his vows to to ancient Israelites, and the Covenant was never broken, etc. Darby in a sense, fell in love with the same two ideas. And then, that came to America. Am I generally right so far?

[BW] - Well so far, so good. But the question is, what was Israel supposed to look like when the diaspora was over, and Jews returned to the Holy Land? And in what way were they supposed to reform themselves, right? Were they supposed to set up a secular democracy? No. They were not, in fact. They were supposed to have a king, i.e., the Messiah. Right now, if you go to Jerusalem today, and go to the Wailing Wall, and you run into the Ultra Orthodox that are praying at the Wailing Wall on Shabbat, on Friday night, what they're praying, what they're singing: We want Messiah; we want Messiah now, because they know that the current state of Israel is not biblical Israel. It's not biblical Israel. The Orthodox and the ultra Orthodox are waiting for the Messiah to show up, and when that happens, then they hope they will have the king that they need, and they will recover the land, and etc. Now, if that's what you mean by Zionism, fine. But what we have right now with Israel, and Netanyahu, and all this sort of stuff, is not biblical Israel period. There's a (and to my mind, and I'm still exploring these issues my next few articles are going to be about this), but there's a deeper subversive thing going on here. I mentioned the the 20s and the 30s. At that same time was when I found four separate historical articles from from the US, newspaper articles, that talked about the Rothchilds at that time, buying land in Jerusalem, and a good amount of land! Now, it's not they they didn't have the deed title right there in the newspaper, but they were talking about this happening as a historical event - four separate articles! It's that same time period. And then when Edward Irving, as well as the Scofield Bible later on, but when Edward Irving translated the coming of Messiah and Glory this Jesuit who was pretending to be a Jew, it happened at the Oxford University press, which at that time, maybe still today, was owned by the Rothschilds, so I'm not looking to get into this big conspiratorial thing with you here, but I am saying it's strange that that time period would have that family driving forward this this idea of Zionism that I think you're talking about, which is a geopolitical move. Well, let's think about this for a minute. In fact, if you look at what happened leading up to World War II, and after World War II, you have famous Jews who don't agree with Nazism, the good examples would be for example Sigman Freud who fled to Vienna the famous psychologist, right? You have Karl Barth who fled, who had a Jewish background, who who fled to Switzerland.

[SJ] - Did you say Karl Barth?

[BW] - Yes.

[SJ] - Barth. Was that what's his name, the famous Theologian we talk? Eric Maxus wrote a book on him, but it was like his mentor.

[BW] - Oh yes, absolutely. You have Einstein. Einstein definitely a Jew. You have an Oppenheimer, also a Jew. You have the man who came and started the NASA program, whose name escapes me at this minute, but in any case, you had Jews who really realized that history was not inevitably going to produce biblical Israel, and they were afraid, in fact, that Jews were more in danger of being exterminated, not supported. And in fact, six million Jews in the Holocaust, the *Shoah* as Jews call it, were killed in Nazi concentration camps. People, they were the Nazis, were trying to exterminate Judaism, right now. Here's the thing, at the time that that was going on, you have still Britain running Palestine, and they call it "Palestine," okay? Europe in their Collective guilt for what happened to Jews in Europe during World War II said, we need to help set up a secular Israeli State. That's what we need to do. 1948, you have David Ben Gurion you have Golda Meir and others, none of whom are Orthodox Jews. They're secular Jews, and they are more influenced by the teachings of Karl Marx. I'll give you one example, all these kibbutzim that you still have in Israel, guess where that idea comes from? It doesn't come from the Old Testament; it comes from Karl Marx. We should share all our goods in a community, and live together, right? So, 1948 is not a fulfillment of prophecy, of we now have biblical Israel. It's not. It never was. And so, you know, what we're dealing with here is a mythology called "Zionism." That's what we're talking about. Now, do I believe that Israeli Jews have a right to be in the Holy Land? Of course I do. The Old Testament says so, and I believe they have a right to be there. But how are they supposed to treat the stranger in the land, whoever is a non-Jew living there? Well, that's not what's happening right now in Gaza, right? That's not what's happening.

[SJ] - Just real quick side note, you know there's a lot going on right now over there. What is the lay of the land over there right now from your perspective? I mean, we know what happened on October 7<sup>th</sup>, but since that time, what's it look like?

[BW] – Well, first of all Hamas is a terrorist organization. The the leadership of Hamas, the political and military leadership of Hamas, clearly a terrorist organization, like ISIS, like Hezbollah, okay? Nobody should be happy about them, okay? But they are basically cowards. They hide behind innocent men, women, children. They built tunnels under Gaza go to under. They hide in hospitals. That sort of thing. Nobody should like them. But on at the same time, the Israeli response is out of all proportion to what a targeted attack on Hamas should have been. There are thousands and thousands Palestinians that have now been killed. I heard 24,000 recently. Yeah, I was in DC this past week there were close to a 100,000 Palestinians protesting next to the White House, and and rightly so, because what's going on is the genocide of Palestinians. Now two wrongs don't make a right. Hamas was wrong. This kind of huge heavy-footed response to Hamas is also wrong. It's not Humane. It's not Old Testamental. It's wrong. It's murder is what it is.

[SJ] You don't have to answer what I'm about to say, but I have looked from the year 2000-2001 until today on. You've got terrorists that attack Israel from time to time. They take a few lives, or in the case of October 7 a lot, and the retribution every time is at least four times or more against the Palestinian people. And they'll say, well, we've got to be able to defend ourselves, right? But every time, the encroachment of Israel's territory versus the Palestinian territory, it always goes against Palestinian every single time, and I feel like the Christian response is very Old Testament, in the sense of, like, where God said, hey go in and and kill every man woman and child, because now we believe they're God's chosen people. It's almost

like we look the other way, and we say, you know, because they're God's chosen, they've got a mandate; they can kind of do this. We're just not going to talk about it.

[BW] – Yeah, and the question we should have been asking, if we're Christians, is this: What would Jesus do? What Jesus would do to the Palestinians, absolutely, positively, definitely, and not least because, guess what? Many of the Palestinians are Christians. Hello! How many, what percentage - let's be, I want to get some specifics on that statement; when I was growing up it was 40% of the population of the West Bank and Gaza were Christians. Wow! 60% were Muslims. Now it's less than 20%. You know why? Because smart Palestinian Christians, if they were able, left, got out of there. They moved to the United States. I mean, that's why there were 100,000 Palestinians in Washington protesting all this. That number is going to shock a lot of people, because even 20%, I would have said five, I would have said maybe 5% would call themselves "Christian." You're telling me that even now, 20% of the Palestinian people - you're not talking about missionaries - you're talking about people that live there. Well that's the most recent statistics I've seen. And see, I'm talking about Palestinian Roman Catholics, Palestinian Orthodox, sure, and Palestinian Protestants. I mean, I have trained Palestinians at Asbury Seminary who are pastoring in places like Nazareth. No. B Samar was one of my students, and this is a huge tragedy, I may have you know, it may be somewhat less than 20% now. I think it's continuing to decrease, to be honest. Well, because they're caught between a rock and a hard place, they're caught between the Israelis and the the Palestinian Muslims.

[SJ] - Well, if you're not alive, you can't really have much of a witness.

[BW] – So, that's right, but let me just say to you, to this day, Bethlehem and the citizens of Bethlehem are majority Christian the mayor of Bethlehem in modern time since 1948 has never been anything but a Christian. I don't think most people know this. So do this, because I think a lot of people are going to hold the first thing we talked about, premillennial dispensationalism as it pertains to the rapture, they'll hold that in one hand, say that's important that I hold, the same people will say what their support of the modern day geopolitical Israel is a separate issue that they hold. They don't understand maybe the historical link there.

[SJ] - Can you flesh that out for for me and for the audience?

[BW] – Well, let's be straight up about this. Is there in the New Testament evidence that there's a future for Israel? Paul in Romans 11 says that when Christ returns after the full number of Gentiles have been saved, a very large number of Israelites, even all Israel, will be saved by the return of Christ. Okay? So, yes, there's a future for Israelites in Christ. It's not a separate future. And this is another part of this: Salvation is not a two-track model. Salvation is not over here the Jews are saved through keeping the Mosaic Covenant; whereas, over here the Gentiles are saved by following Jesus. Paul is very clear, the people of God are Jew and Gentile united in Christ, now and in the future. And in the future, it's not a casting off of the Jews.

[SJ] - And that's the way that I've, as I've come to consciousness about what's really going on in this issue, and the way that American Christians many times view it. I'll hear pastors even my own say, God did not say that he was done; he did not cast off the Jews after Jesus Christ. And I'm thinking, no, nobody made that claim in Christianity. I think, if anything, the veil was torn within the temple, saying, now all of us, the Gentiles have access to what the Jews always had access to, but it's going to be through the person of Jesus Christ.

[BW] – Exactly. That's exactly right. That's exactly what the New Testament says again and again and again. Absolutely, that's right.

[SJ] - So, some of the most respected, I mean, they're polished, and being well spoken, and having a big stage. That's one thing, and that could almost be a problem, but really, guys that I respect, I brought up the name Jack Hibbs earlier - I'm not looking to trash the guy, because I love a lot of his teaching. I could name many pastors in the same way. I mean, here locally, I've got Alan Jackson at World Outreach church, love the man's teaching and world view and Christian faith in a big way, but when it comes to this issue of Israel, it's very just I'm all in with support, because that's what God tells me to do; however, what you're saying, Ben, I mean, you you know, you've got the credentials, and the academic standing to back yourself up on this. Like, why are they are they just choosing not to see what you're seeing? I don't understand it.

[BW] – Well, I think part of it is, when you embrace a particular ideology with both hands, right? And you think you found how to connect A to B the Bible to Zionism or the Bible to dispensationalism and then when you find a way to connect A and B to C, and you think it's all in the Bible, well then you're off to the races. In fact, there are deep problems with not only this dispensationalism, but also with that kind of blind Zionism, as well. And, yes, I mean, I grew up in a largely Jewish neighborhood in High Point, North Carolina. Many of my friends are Jews, okay? I love them. Jesus loves them. But the thing about all of that is that most of my Jewish friends do not love at all what's going on in Israel right now. Even the devout ones, they think Netanyahu is number 666. They think it's terrible, and see Christians are naive about all of this.

[SJ] – Yeah, they think if they support the government of Israel obliterating Palestinians, well, this is just part of God's plan, and no, it's not.

[BW] – Yeah, no, it's not.

[SJ] - Do you think that as Christians, I know I assume that you would tell us, as Christians, we need to take all of the Bible seriously, right?

[BW] – Absolutely! Okay, but you have to do critical thinking, right? You have to do critical thinking about it, and understand that the Mosaic Covenant was one thing. Paul in fact says the Mosaic Covenant was like a pedagogue. This is Galatians 4, that is, it was an overseer of God's people until the time of Christ. Now, the Covenant that God wants to be shared with the world is the New Covenant, with everybody.

[SJ] – Yeah, are we getting ourselves in a bind by not paying attention? Again, I'm not going to shy away from this, because Jesus said it, Billy Graham has talked about it to Richard Nixon. You know, it's in the Bible. There is a difference that the Lord chose to make when he said not all is Israel's. Faithful Israel, that's one thing, and then also in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9, he was saying there are those that say they they are Jews, but are not Jews. So, anything I say right now can't be anti-semitic, because I'm not talking about actual Jewish people; I was only taught growing up about the verses in Genesis and the early Old Testament about God's covenant to the Jewish people, and that, you know, those who bless Israel I will bless; those who curse, I will curse. And it was like that I didn't even know about Revelation 2:9 or any of these other things that are in the Bible until recently. Why is there such an uneven weighing of the scales in this?

[BW] – Well, because it's easier, “Don't confuse me with the facts; I know what I know.” And here's a mind-blowing one, let's think about Abraham for a minute. Where did Abraham come from? He came from Ur of the Chaldeans. ... and what was the religion of him and his family? They were worshipping a god called Sin, believe it or not. They were pagans; they were Gentiles. Are you with me? ... In any case, here's the thing: God had to reach out to Abraham and change his name, and Abraham trusted God. And at that point, it was credited to him as righteousness, right? Okay, this is the beginning of the Hebrew people. And by the way, they are Hebrews long before they were Israelites, because that has to do with a place, Israel. So there's Hebrews, then there's Israelites, then there's Jews, both in the holy land and outside the holy land. So they've had three names: “Hebrews,” “Israelites,” “Jews.” I can hear people saying though, no he's wrong, it's not about a place; it was someone's name. It was. It was the new name. That's right, but what was the promise given to Jacob? The land. There's a place for you, and you're going to have it. It's going to have the same name as you. That's the deal there.

[SJ] - That makes sense.

[BW] - We need to understand that God, from the beginning, was interested in saving not just Jews, but Gentiles all the way back to Abraham, right? And so, it's not a shock when Jesus comes along and says that Messianic banquet that's going to come eventually, who's going to sit down at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob? Guess who's going to sit down at table with them? Gentiles. Yeah, coming from the east and the west. The vision was always of salvation of all the fallen human race. That was always true. That's why the Gospel of John says God so loved the world. It's the world that God loves, not just a particular people, or two particular peoples. The world. That's why he sent Christ into the world to save the world, you know, not just the frozen chosen, or the elect. The world. Christ died for the sins of the world. Wait for it... the world.

[SJ] – Yes, and with you saying that, I'm reminded of some of your videos about Calvinism versus Armenianism, but that could be a part two, because I'd love to dig into some of that. I want to ask you, before we go here, probably the most important question in all of this. I think that these issues matter, but I don't know how important they are in terms of, at the end of the day, what consequences befall us, if we are getting it wrong on the rapture, and Zionism, and all of those things, but we're getting it right on, I love the Lord Jesus Christ; he saved me from my sins; I expect, whether it's to be on a New Earth or in heaven. If I get all this stuff we've talked about wrong today, but I'm right on Jesus Christ and his atonement for me, does it matter?

[BW] - It certainly does matter if you care about being faithful to what the Scriptures actually teach. In other words, you cannot truncate the theology of the Bible down to just soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, okay? This is a huge mistake. There's a doctrine of creation; there's a doctrine of sanctification, there I could go on and on; there are a lot of crucial doctrines in Scripture, and if you truncate everything down to, well, I'm saved, and that's all that matters, well then, what have you done? You've forgotten that the future is bright as the promises of God, and God has a future in mind for the earth, and for the resurrection of the dead, and for the return of Christ, and for a new creation. Now, why would God want to exchange all of that for a few scrawny souls in heaven? No, that's not witness of the Scripture. Read the end of the Bible right now.

[SJ] - That's good, that's good. Have you had major push back in any way, based on the positions that you hold, in America?

[BW] – Well, sure. Individuals. I haven't really had push back in the Guild of biblical scholars, not really, you know.

[SJ] - That's almost surprising to me. But maybe it's the area of the country I'm in, but we are overwhelmed. I mean, you would think, based on the messages, you know, preached from different major churches around here, that there must be a Hamas supporter like in every aisle of the pews. And we got to get them straight. And in reality, like there's nobody around that's supporting Hamas. But, man, it sure is a the political, geopolitical, Zionism is a big deal around here. Where was I going with all that? I was gonna ask you, so it surprises me, I mean, where in the world are you? I'm in Franklin Tennessee, but even when I was in Atlanta, and just being in the south, in Protestant Christianity, especially with a Baptist background, it's major. It is Major.

[BW] – Oh, I understand. I grew up in the Buckle the Bible Belt, naming North Carolina God's southern part of Heaven, you know. But in a Jewish Community.

[SJ] - That that surprised me.

[BW] - Well no, it's just that there were lots of Jews in High Point, North Carolina, and they were my friends. I would go to Bar Mitzvah, and Bat Mitzvah. These were my friends on the same block I lived on. And they were very good friends. And I'll tell you an interesting story about this, just briefly. One of my friends was named Cheryl Robinson. They had changed their name from Rabinowitz, so it didn't seem obvious that they'd be a target as Jews, right? And we were seniors in high school, high point Central High School. And she came to me one day and said, Ben I have a favor to ask. And I said, sure Cheryl, we've been friends for many many years. And she said, would you take me to the promise the country club? And I said, sure. She said, here's what you need to know, no Jew is allowed into the country club; they're banned from the country club, banned from the country club, right? And I began to see the world as she saw it. In other words, there was an awful lot of anti-Semitism in white America, and there still is, you know? And one of the things I'd like you to think about is, Zionism is a colossal overreaction to anti-Semitism. That was very prevalent in white South, in the white South and elsewhere, and it still is.

[SJ] - I'm in the what would be considered the white South. 85% white people in Franklin, Tennessee. I'm yet to meet someone that would speak out anything against Jewish people yet.

[BW] – Well, that's good; that's good. That's a sea change, because I used to hear it all the time growing up in High Point. Not based in that sentiment coming from, well, that they were God's first chosen people, and they're not anymore, among other things you know? Anyway, Cheryl and I went; had big time; danced a night away at the Country Club; and nobody threw us in jail. But just being able to look at life through the eyes of a Jewish friend, that really opened my eyes to what happens when you're a tiny minority, or a small minority in a country where there's rampant prejudice against all kinds of people, against blacks, against Jews. etc, you know? There's no place for any of those prejudices in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or in the body of Christ, thank goodness! Jesus and Paul made that clear, and I would hope that we would believe that God has a plan for, and cares for, everyone. That's on the money.

[SJ] - One last thing, because you close it out nicely in terms of the Jewish people, Zionism. What about on the other side, somebody that's, you know, you've kind of maybe cracked open a door a little more for them, because they've always believed in the rapture;

they've looked upon it with hope. Now that might be kind of like off the table to some degree, and, as they they go down that road, there might even be like a grieving process for them with that. What would you say in response to that person who's exploring that like you said, progressing?

[BW] – Well, I would say the early church was absolutely standing on tiptoe, looking forward to and excited about the second coming of Christ, from the first century on. They really, really were. But what happened, of course, is the closer you get to the Middle Ages, the more the preaching of the church focused on dying and going to heaven. That's really not the emphasis in the New Testament. I mean the only time Paul really mentions that, is when in 2 Corinthians he says, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord”; otherwise, he's all about eschatology, and the return of Christ, and the resurrection of the Dead. We need to put the emphasis on the right cabbie [?]. The future return of Christ is our blessed hope. That's the only time that all this mess is going to be sorted out and solved, when Jesus comes back.

[SJ] - I love it. That's a good way to end a very complex deep topic that can go really deep. Where would you go if you're watching this and you want more information on these topics in terms of either Israel, Zionism, or the the rapture in end times eschatology? Where would you go?

[BW] – Well, I would recommend two of my books, okay? *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* would be one, an iniversity book, easy enough to find, readily available on Amazon. And the other would be the two chapters about dispensationalism in my *The problem of Evangelical Theology* the title of both chapters is “On Dispensing with Dispensationalism,” because, here's the thing, there's a much brighter, better, wholesome, truly biblical, theology to be embraced about the future.

The Rapture Doctrine Refuted in Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians - Ben Witherington

<https://www.youtube.com/watch/IrgNm6Uq4n4>

If you look carefully at Matthew 24, which is one of the major proof texts for the study of a theology called, “the rapture,” we have not only the phrase, “one will be taken and the other left behind, one grinding the mill will be taken, the other will be left behind, one standing on the roof will be taken, the other left behind,” but before that, Jesus tells us the story of Noah, and what happened in his generation. And what he says, of course, is that all of humanity was swept away by the flood, and those left behind were the righteous ones, Noah and his family. So, in the Noah story, it's good to be left behind. It's not good to be taken away. That is the context for what Jesus says after that, when he's saying “one will be taken and another left behind.” It's the one that's left behind that's going, “I'm really glad to be left behind,” because what “taken” means is what it meant in the Noah story, taken away in judgment, taken away in the flood, taken away for judgment, right? So, ironically, when you have the “left behind” theories going for you, it would be better to be left behind, and it would be not so good to be taken away, because what “taken away” means, in those kinds of texts, is judgment. The other major proof text for a theology the rapture in the Bible, of course, comes out of 1 Thessalonians. And what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4 is, first of all he's trying to comfort Thessalonians, some of whom have died from persecution in Thessaloniki. Members of the church have just died, and the Thessalonians have a question: Are they going to miss out on the resurrection? Are they going to miss out on the return of the Lord? That's their question. Their question is not, When will the rapture happen? Their question is, Are they going to miss out on the blessings of when kingdom comes fully on earth? That's the issue. What Jesus says to them is, No. In fact, the dead in Christ, he says, when the Lord returns, and the trumpet blows, and the Lord comes back to establish the kingdom fully on earth, so that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, when he comes back, what's going to happen is this: The dead in Christ will rise first, and then the living will be transformed, and we will meet the Lord in the air. Now, “air” does not equal “heaven.” This is not about a rapture into heaven. It's about meeting the Lord, and greeting the Lord, being the greeting committee to go out and meet the Lord in the air, and the return with Christ to reign upon the earth. The the destination of the story in 1 Thessalonians 4, is not heaven. The destination is returning as part of the royal entourage with Christ to earth, to reign on the earth with Christ. And the imagery that Paul is using here is the image of a royal return of a king to his city, right? So, you have this picture of a walled city. You have watchmen on the wall, like in Psalm 24. The watchman on the wall says, “Here's the cry out in the road, and the cry out the road goes the trumpet blows, and the cry on the road goes lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, so the King of glory may come in.” This is an entrance liturgy, right? And the watchman on the wall says, “Who is the king of glory? Stand and identify,” right? And then the reply comes back, “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.” So, this is a sort of entrance liturgy, and Paul is going to depict the return of Christ as like a king coming back to his city. Now, everybody who lived in a walled city knew what the protocol was. The protocol was, once you knew it was the king, and you heard his herald blow the trumpet, and you knew he was out there, you don't leave him standing out there. You send out the greeting committee; the greeting committee goes out from the city, meets the king on the road, and where they go from there is, not back down the road, but into the city. Similarly, Christ is coming from heaven with his angelic and saints entourage; the people on



earth go forth to meet him in the air, and then return to earth, reign with him on the earth. This is not a story about a pre or mid-tribulation rapture. This is a story about the return of the king, and to welcome him back to earth to reign on the earth.

Seedbed, *Seven Minute Seminary*, "Where Did Rapture Theology Come From?" Ben Witherington III

[https://www.youtube.com/watch/d\\_cVXdr8mVs](https://www.youtube.com/watch/d_cVXdr8mVs)

So, where did dispensationalism come from? Let me tell you the story. First thing to be said about a dispensational reading of the Bible is, it didn't exist before the 19th century. In fact it didn't exist before about 1820 or so. And it really began in a little Revival in Glasgow in Scotland. There was a teenage girl named McDonald, a good Scottish name, who claimed to have a vision of a pre-tribulation Rapture of the church, out of this world, into heaven. Now, this event might have come and gone and not left much of a mark on the church itself, except that there was a certain reverend named Darby there who uh heard this became convinced that that this theology was correct began preaching this. Reverend Darby was one of the founders of the Plymouth Brethren denomination in the 19th century. Now again, this might have been a flash in the pan, a very small Christian sect with a peculiar belief that nobody in the first 1800 years of church history had believed in, except that Mr. Darby took his gospel of the rapture to the United States. And he came in contact with the Billy Graham of his day - his name was Dwight L. Moody, founder of the Moody Bible Institute and Moody press and all of that. Moody became the sort of worldwide disseminator of this theology of dispensationalism and a pre-tribulation rapture on both sides of the Atlantic and for a very long time. And then we were off and running. What happened next is, there began to be novels, not the Left Behind series, but earlier novels. One was called *Jesus is coming* written by a Chicago entrepreneur who had become enamored with this theology of Dwight L. Moody of Moody Institute founded in Chicago. He had a lot of influence in Chicago. Then even later than that, we have what is known as the *Scofield Reference Bible*. C.I. Scofield is the person who came up with this idea of not merely having a study Bible with chain references in the margin, but actually putting headings in the biblical text, like "Jesus Predicts the Rapture," and then having study notes at the bottom of the page, so that the ordinary person who buys a Bible would go, "Well, look, it's right there in my Bible, the heading in the middle of Matthew 24 says Jesus predicts it, so it must be true, right?" So, we're really off to the races now in the early part of the 20th century with the *Scofield Reference Bible* and other resources. Somewhere in the mid-20s, this lay theological movement - and I would stress this was a theological movement not based on the study of the Greek New Testament or the Hebrew Old Testament, but a lay theological movement that spread throughout the United States and in various places around the world. Somewhere in the mid-1920s, there was a felt need to shore up this theology with scholarly support and scholarly exegesis, and so you had the Dallas Theological Institute founded in the 1920s by a presbyterian Minister. This eventually became Dallas Theological Seminary, so that you had two major centers of study of dispensationalism in America, one in Chicago and one in Dallas, and both in the Midwest of the United States. Now, if you study the history of Dallas Theological Seminary, and you look at the names of their presidents, involving a lot of well-known names along the way, you'll discover that most of those folks contended to propagate the gospel of dispensationalism by writing books of various kinds of books, like *Armageddon and Mid-east Oil* by Professor Walvoord, or President Walvoord, and then of course the famous Timothy LaHaye and Jerry Jenkin series, "The Left Behind" series, which led to this most recent movie about a rapture and the left behind phenomenon. What you need to understand about this is that for 1,800 years of church history nobody believed this theology or thought it was an accurate way of interpreting the Bible. Today, when we look at it we can realize it's a relatively modern phenomenon. And as a modern phenomenon. it's unique to the western church, it's unique to certain forms of Protestantism; in other words, it's not a

Catholic theology; it's not an orthodox theology; and actually, only a minority of Protestants have embraced this theology. So, what we need to say about this is that, if it's not well grounded in the exegesis of the Bible, it should not be embraced. And in fact, it isn't. There is no theology of the Rapture in the New Testament. So, what I like to say about all this is, the "left behind theology" needs to be - wait for it - left behind/

### Appendix 3: Transcripts of N.T. Wright YouTube Videos

"Dear Tom: do you believe in 'The Rapture'" on Ask NT Wright Anything, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePSbRP7K0pg>, Apr 20, 2024

Q - Let's turn to Rick in Columbus Ohio who asks a very simple question, how do you view the Rapture?

A – Oh, the Rapture. Do you know, I never heard about the Rapture until I got married. And that may sound odd but, the reason for this is that my late father-in-law, God rest him, was an old style Pentecostal who had got his Scofield reference Bible, and the whole thing was mapped out. And I had never met somebody expounding that before, because in my Anglican circles, it was never read, and if we did read first Thessalonians 4, we kind of rolled our eyes and thought, I have no idea what that's about.

Q - For those who don't have immediate Bible recall, just explain first Thessalonians.

A - In first Thessalonians 4 Paul has been asked, Oh dear, some people in our community have died we thought that wasn't going to happen before the Lord returned. What do we think about that? And Paul has this extraordinary sort of mixed metaphor, where he says look, in order to comfort you, let me tell you how it's going to be. And he says, The Lord himself will descend from heaven. He says, I don't want you to be ignorant about those who've died like those who have no hope. In other words, yes grieve but don't grieve hopelessly. So, the whole thing is about hope. So, if we believe that Jesus died and rose, even so God will bring with Jesus all those who have died in him. For this I tell you that we who are alive, waiting for the coming of the Lord, will not anticipate those who fallen asleep. In other words, people were worried that Jesus would return and the people who were dead would stay dead and they would miss out on the new day. So then he says, The Lord will descend from heaven, a sudden great blast of a trumpet, and the voice of the Archangel, and the dead in the Messiah will rise first, then we who are left alive will be snatched up with them on the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, so we will always be with the Lord. So now, people have taken that literally - some people have taken that literally - actually not just types of Protestants but also some Greek Orthodox interestingly.

Q - There's been whole book series and films made it.

A – Precisely. And the danger about being “Left Behind” (all sorts of things one could say about that), the problem is that's not what that passage is about. Paul is awfully good at mixed metaphors. In the next chapter he goes on to say that the night is almost over, so it's daytime, so you mustn't get drunk, but you must stay awake, and you must put on your armor, and so on. I think, hang on, don't try this at home, right? These are too many different images all clashing. In the same way, here he describes the Lord coming down from heaven in words taken from the descent of Moses on the mountain with the law, hence the blast of the trumpet, and so on. When he's talking about we being caught up on the clouds, that's a reference to Daniel 7, which is the vindication of God's people after their suffering, after their persecution. And then when he talks about meeting the Lord, the word “meeting” there is the word you'd use if you were a Roman citizen in Philippi or Thessalonica or something, and Caesar was making a state visit. The leading citizens would go out to meet Caesar, not in order to have a picnic out in the countryside, but in order royally to escort him back into the City. And Paul just throws these two

things into the mix all together, not in order to say, here is what you would see on a video camera if you were around at the time, but the only way we can talk about these ultimate events is by bringing together images from Scripture, to talk about God's ultimate purpose, to talk about the vindication of his people, etc. So, the return of the Lord, yes, but when Jesus comes back it isn't to snatch people away from earth, it's to transform earth with the life of heaven, and to transform us as well. The antidote to the wrong reading of that is the right reading of Philippians 3:20 and following when he says that the Messiah will change our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body he doesn't come back to take us away he comes back to heal the world, and to heal and transform his people

## NT Wright EXPOSES Rapture Doctrine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch/Anm7S8vGdaQ>, Sep 7, 2023

There is a major problem here, which you better name right off the top, which is the problem which looms more large, again, I'm sorry, in America than anywhere else, because American dispensationalists, with the idea of the Rapture, has actually turned the idea of Jesus second coming into its opposite. In the New Testament the second coming is not Jesus coming back to scoop up some people and take them off to heaven with him. In the second coming passages in the New Testament Jesus is coming back to rule and Reign and transform the world and make it over anew. And that is actually part of the whole New Testament package of new heavens and new earth. To put it another way, there's a couple of verses in the New Testament which instead of talking about Jesus *coming* talk about Jesus *appearing*. This is in Colossians 3 and 1 John 3 if anyone is wanting the references. What does it mean, "appearing" rather than "coming"? And here we have a problem because of our implicit cosmology. We have an implicit cosmology in which Heaven is a long, long way away, probably up in the sky somewhere. What that says about Australia and New Zealand I'm not sure. But we think of Heaven as a long way up in the sky, and then we think of earth as all the way down here. So, we think of Jesus as coming like a spaceman, having to make a long trip from somewhere else. And I've had letters from them, there are a lot of people who take that as completely literal language, as though heaven is a space within our cosmos. That is not how the Bible uses the word "heaven." The word "heaven" has a multiplicity of meanings, but in this sense, "heaven" is God's space, and God's space is supposed to be eventually integrated with our space; call it "earth" if you like. And the point is, that at the moment it is as though there is a great curtain hanging down through the middle of ordinary reality, so that at any point in any place God is not far away Jesus is not far away. It's just that they're currently invisible. But one day the curtain will be pulled back, and it won't be like *coming* it'll be like *appearing*. You imagine the gasp, as if somebody were to yank a great curtain back there [motioning behind him with a sweep of his arm], and we suddenly realized all sorts of things going on behind that curtain that were actually integrated with our reality and we didn't realize it. That's as good a picture as the idea of him coming. Now, part of the difficulty here is that some of the passages in the gospels, which have traditionally been taken as predictions of Jesus coming back after a long period, are not. In fact, they are predictions of the fall of Jerusalem. In Mark 13, for instance, and the parallel passages, it doesn't begin with the disciples saying, "When are you coming back?" It begins with Jesus saying, "All this stuff's going to come crashing down," and the disciples saying, "When will that be?" The difficulty is - this is a real difficulty, especially at eight o'clock at night when my body clock is telling me it's one o'clock in the morning, excuse me - that the language which they use used to describe events like that, was what some people have sometimes called "apocalyptic language," that is to say, things like the sun will be turned into darkness and the moon will be turned into blood and the stars will be falling from heaven. Now, generations of Christians have thought that Jesus was predicting the end of the space-time universe; however, when you trace that language back into the Old Testament - and that bit about the sun and the moon and the stars comes from Isaiah 13 - it isn't talking about the collapse of the space-time universe, it's talking about the fall of Babylon, which was the greatest empire of the day when that was written, or around the time that was written. Because when this huge empire, which has dominated the horizon suddenly falls with a crash, what language are you going to use? What poetry can you use to signal that? And when it's Jerusalem, and if you're a Jew who believed that that was the city where God had promised eventually to come and live forever, if that falls with a crash and the temple is burnt to

the ground, you're going to talk about the sun and the moon and the stars. I mean even in our political discourse, we talk about landslides and earthquakes, and we all know that that's a metaphor. Well, they all knew that this language was a metaphor. My colleague John Barton in Oxford, I remember saying in a lecture once, that we ought to know as a matter of literary genre that if an ancient Jewish text says the sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood and the stars will fall from heaven, we ought to know that the next line is not going to be, "The rest of the country will have scattered showers and sunny intervals." You know, this is not a primitive weather forecast. The Prophet Jeremiah had prophesied that Jerusalem would fall and he said that that would be like the whole of creation going back to *tohu wa bohu*, which in Genesis means "without form and void," to a primeval chaos. Now, for a long time, Jeremiah lived with the possibility that he might be a false prophet, because Jerusalem had not fallen. But when Jerusalem did fall, nobody was going to accuse him of being a false prophet, because the earth had not gone back to chaos, that was what that language had meant. So, we have to be very careful - and I appreciate this is technical stuff to take on board at this time of night - but a lot of the prophecies are not about, in fact, the collapse of the of the universe. They're actually about the fall of Jerusalem. One other thing, Jesus told stories, many stories, Jesus told stories two in particular, one in Matthew, one in Luke, about somebody going away on a journey, giving his servants money to trade with and do business with, and then coming back to see how they were getting on. Many Christians have read those stories as though this is about the second coming at the end of the Christian history when the church will be judged according to whether it's done what Jesus wanted it to do in the meantime. It's actually very clear, particularly in Luke's version of that story in Luke 19, that's not what's going on at all. And here's something which most modern Christians have not even begun to get their heads around: Jews in Jesus day, lived in hope and the center of the hope was that the God who had abandoned them at the time of the exile 450 years earlier or so, would eventually come back in all His shining glory to live in the temple at last. There is no scene in the whole second temple period which says he's come back at last. Jesus is telling stories about the God who left his people things to do, but would come back. And he's telling those stories because Jesus himself in coming to Jerusalem is embodying the return of Israel's God to Zion. This is a whole huge theme which I think most people, as they read the gospels or Paul, have not even begun to imagine, but it looms very large in the Jewish writings of the period, and somehow we have to factor it in. So, yes, the Second Coming is important, but the thing which was going to happen within a generation was the fall of Jerusalem, and we don't find in the second century or the third century people saying, "Oh gee, it hasn't happened yet." They still say, "No, it might happen at any time." Then they are not stuck on the "this generation" thing. I mean, let me say one more thing about this, because it is a huge thing which has dominated the horizon. This particularly became a matter of problematic interest in the middle of the 20th century in German scholarship, for all sorts of reasons, one of which was that many German philosophers and cultural critics - people like Walter Benjamin whose work you will know, in the middle of the 20th century and the first half of 20th century - had lived on the Marxist hope that history was actually going somewhere, getting on the right side of history, and when that turned out to be a false hope, and for Walter Benjamin it was when you had the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Hitler-Stalin Pact, towards the beginning of the war, they panicked, and they said, We have nothing more to hope for from history. All that can happen now is a totally new event, a new Messianic moment; that's what we need. And it didn't happen. A great deal of European culture in the middle of the 20th century was horrified at the failure of hope. Interestingly, at exactly that time, a lot of the theologians in Europe started writing

particularly about the failure of hope in the early church. And it seems to me that there's a lot of projection going on there which has yet to be unpicked.



N.T. Wright, "How will we know when Jesus is coming back?" The Veritas Forum, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BlcjeFL-dyY&t=54s>. Jan. 30, 2023. Accessed 7/22/2024

Q - One of the oddest features you might say of the Gospel accounts is Jesus talking about his return. He does of course appear to Paul on the road to Damascus, but otherwise one is left thinking, Well, when is this coming? And I think in the early church there was a sense this was coming very soon. And now after 2000 years, we think, Well maybe not so. What how do you interpret those verses?

A - Yes, Jesus does at the very end say things like that, and when Jesus finally appears, there is this rather odd record in the book of Acts, where an angel says this same Jesus who you've seen go will come in the same way. There is a major problem here which you better name right off the top, which is the problem which looms more large, again I'm sorry in America than anywhere else, because American dispensationalism with the idea of the Rapture has actually turned the idea of Jesus second coming into its opposite. In the New Testament the second coming is not Jesus coming back to scoop up some people and take them off to heaven with him. In the second coming passages in the New Testament Jesus is coming back to rule and Reign and transform the world and make it over anew, and that is actually part of the whole New Testament package of new heavens and new earth. To put it another way, there's a couple of verses in the New Testament which instead of talking about Jesus *coming* talk about Jesus *appearing*. This is in Colossians 3 and 1 John 3 if anyone is wanting the references. What does it mean, "appearing" rather than "coming"? And here we have a problem because of our implicit cosmology we have an implicit cosmology in which Heaven is a long long way away probably up in the sky somewhere (what that says about Australia and New Zealand I'm not sure), but we think of Heaven as a long way up in the sky and then we think of Earth as all the way down here. So we think of Jesus as coming like a Spaceman, having to make a long trip from somewhere else. And I know, because I've met them, and I've had letters from them, there are a lot of people who take that as completely literal language as though Heaven is a space within our Cosmos. That is not how the Bible uses the word "heaven." The word "heaven" has a multiplicity of meanings, but in this sense, Heaven is God's space and God's space is supposed to be eventually integrated with our space - call it Earth if you like - and the point is that at the moment it is as though there is a great curtain hanging down through the middle of ordinary reality so that at any point in any place God is not far away Jesus is not far away it's just that they're currently invisible. But one day the curtain will be pulled back, and it won't be like coming it'll be like appearing. You imagine the gasp as if somebody were to yank a great curtain back there [gesturing towards the curtain on the stage behind him] and we suddenly realized all sorts of things going on behind that curtain that were actually integrated with our reality and we didn't realize it. That's as good a picture as the idea of him coming. Now part of the difficulty here is that some of the passages in the gospels which have traditionally been taken as predictions of Jesus coming back after a long period are not in fact. They are predictions of the fall of Jerusalem. In Mark 13 for instance in the parallel passages it doesn't begin with the disciples saying when are you coming back it begins with Jesus saying all this stuff's going to come crashing down and the disciples saying, When? When will that be? The difficulty is - this is a real difficulty especially at eight o'clock at night when my body clock is telling me it's one o'clock in the morning, excuse me - that the language which they used to describe events like that was what some people have sometimes called apocalyptic language. That is to say things like "the sun will be turned into darkness and the moon will be turned into blood and the Stars will be falling from heaven," now, generations of Christians have thought that Jesus was predicting the end of the space-time Universe; however,

when you trace that language back into the Old Testament, and that bit about the sun and the moon and the stars comes from Isaiah 13, it isn't talking about the collapse of the space-time Universe. It's talking about the fall of Babylon which was the greatest Empire of the day when that was written, around the time that was written, because when this huge Empire which has dominated The Horizon suddenly Falls with a crash, what language are you going to use, what poetry can you use to signal that? And when it's Jerusalem, and if you're a Jew who believed that that was the city where God had promised eventually to come and live forever, if that falls with a crash and the temple is burnt to the ground, you're going to talk about the sun and the moon and the stars. I mean even in our political discourse we talk about landslides and earthquakes, and we all know that that's a metaphor. Well, they all knew that this language was a metaphor. My colleague John Barton in Oxford I remember saying in a lecture once that we ought to know as a matter of literary genre that if an ancient Jewish text says the sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood and the Stars will fall from Heaven, we ought to know that the next line is not going to be the rest of the country will have scattered showers and sunny intervals. You know, this is not a primitive weather forecast, and it's a very telling, the Prophet Jeremiah had prophesied that Jerusalem would fall and he said that that would be like the whole of creation going back to *tohu wa bohu* which in Genesis means "without form and void," to a primeval chaos now for a long time Jeremiah lived with the possibility that he might be a false prophet because Jerusalem had not Fallen, but when Jerusalem did fall, nobody was going to accuse him of being a false prophet because the Earth had not gone back to chaos. That was what that language had meant. So, we have to be very careful, and I appreciate this is technical stuff to take on board at this time of night, but a lot of the prophecies are not about, in fact, the collapse of the of the universe, they're actually about the fall of Jerusalem. One other thing, Jesus told stories - many stories - Jesus told stories, two in particular: one in Matthew, one in Luke, about somebody going away on a journey, giving his servants money to trade with and do business with, and then coming back to see how they were getting on. Many Christians have read those stories as though this is about the second coming at the end of the Christian history when the church will be judged according to whether it's done what Jesus wanted it to do in the meantime. It's actually very clear, particularly in Luke's version of that story in Luke 19, that's not what's going on at all. And here's something which most modern Christians have not even begun to get their heads around: Jews in Jesus day lived in Hope, and the center of the Hope was that the God who had abandoned them at the time of the Exile 450 years earlier, or so, would eventually come back in all his shining glory to live in the temple at last. There is no scene in the whole second temple period which says he's come back at last. Jesus is telling stories about the God who left his people things to do, but would come back. And he's telling those stories because Jesus himself in coming to Jerusalem is embodying the return of Israel's God to Zion. This is a whole huge theme which I think most people as they read the gospels or Paul have not even begun to imagine, but it looms very large in the Jewish writings of the period, and somehow we have to factor it in. So, yes, the second coming is important, but the thing which was going to happen within a generation was the fall of Jerusalem, and we don't find in the second century and the third Century people saying, "Oh dear, oh dear, it hasn't happened yet. They still say, No, it might happen at any time. They are not stuck on the "this generation" thing. Let me say one more thing about this, because it is a huge thing which has dominated The Horizon. This particularly became a matter of problematic interest in the middle of the 20th century in German scholarship for all sorts of reasons, one of which was that many German philosophers and cultural critics - people like Walter Benjamin whose work you will know - in the middle of the

20th century and the first half of 20th century, had lived on the Marxist hope that history was actually going somewhere, getting on the right side of History. And when that turned out to be a false hope, and for Walter Benjamin it was when you had the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, the Hitler-Stalin pact towards the beginning of the war, they panicked, and they said, We have nothing more to hope for from history. All that can happen now is a totally new event, a new Messianic moment. That's what we need, and it didn't happen. A great deal of European culture in the middle of the 20th century was horrified at the failure of Hope. Interestingly, at exactly that time a lot of the theologians in Europe started writing particularly about the failure of Hope in the early church, and it seems to me that there's a lot of projection going on there which has yet to be unpicked.

Left Behind Rapture Debunked - N. T. Wright, Oct 29, 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch/-OIVJaIcTwQ>

It seems to me that the rapture theory as normally conceived tries to base itself on a couple of verses towards the end of first Thessalonians 4 but reads them out of context and puts them into a framework of thought which is strictly speaking a dualistic framework in which the name of the game is to leave earth behind and go to heaven. Instead, whereas the whole point of the last scene in the book of Revelation 21 is not that people are going up from earth to heaven, as in the so-called rapture but that the new Jerusalem is coming down from heaven to earth. The rapture theology gets its mileage particularly as I was saying last night in a lecture from that implicit Gnosticism which regards the world as a shabby or bad or dangerous place and sees the point of religion as being to escape the world, but the whole point of Jesus' teaching and proclamation, the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's prayer, is that God's kingdom shall come and his will be done on earth as in heaven. And at the end of Matthew's gospel Jesus says all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. He doesn't say I'm off to heaven and the sooner you can come and join me the better that's not how it works.

And in first Thessalonians 4 Jesus will appear and Paul is doing three things in first Thessalonians four echoing on the one hand Moses coming down the mountain the blast of the trumpet and so on. On the other hand, Caesar coming to a town or city part of his empire and the citizens going out to meet him somewhere outside the town, because they wouldn't just stay in town waiting for him. That would be very impolite and perhaps politically dangerous. And thirdly, he's echoing Daniel chapter seven. Now Paul does this, Paul mixes his metaphors, he takes different images and he shoves them together. In the next chapter, in first Thessalonians 5, he warns people that the thief is coming in the night, so the woman is going to go into labor, so you mustn't get drunk, but must stay awake; you can put on your armor now. So, when he says that there is coming a time when it'll be a bit like Moses coming down the mountain, and the people looking up see him, it'll be a bit like Daniel 7 the Son of Man coming up on the clouds, and it'll be a bit like Caesar arriving at a city. We shouldn't expect to get a woodenly literal historical picture out of that, and the point about the parousia, about the royal appearance of Caesar at a town, is that the citizens go out to meet him. We go to meet the Lord in the air. Whatever Paul thought would be, the objective correlated that not in order to stay there but in order to escort Caesar, or whoever it is, back into the town. So even if you want to take first Thessalonians 4 moderately literally, then you would have to say that the reason for meeting the Lord is not to stay away up in heaven, but in order to escort him to the place which is his by right, which is this earth. And with that I've basically deconstructed, I think, the world view within which the rapture gets its emphasis. And it seems to me that a fully biblical eschatology has to talk, not about that, but about the new heavens, and the new earth, the new creation which is our birthright as Christians, and over the whole of which Jesus is Lord.

N.T. Wright on Heaven & Rapture Theology

<https://www.youtube.com/watch/I9ln9Jq5Y-E>, Oct 26, 2012 ABC News Podcast, Interview by David D. Flowers

DDF - According to a British Bishop it's the one thing we leave till last the question of Heaven.

NTW - The question of what happens after death is one which a lot of people in our culture try to put off as long as they can.

DDF - It's also one of life's certainties

NTW - But sooner or later it suddenly swings around and looks him in the eye.

[Excerpt] Believers and unbelievers have strong views about what happens when you die. For centuries Christians have believed that their destiny after death is heaven a spiritual place where they, along with a myriad of Angels, sing praises to God for eternity. But is it possible that Christians may have got this part of their faith badly wrong?

DDF - Bishop Tom Wright, based in the north of England, is one of the world's foremost theologians teaching at a range of universities from Oxford to Harvard. He says that many of us only started thinking about heaven after we got a glimpse of hell.

NTW - September the 11<sup>th</sup> happened, an awful lot of people - I was working in London at the time - were asking, Oh my goodness, death, you know, what is this all about? Because for a lot of people, they don't expect folk to die in their 20s and 30s, you know. So suddenly it was hitting people.

DDF - The specific event of 9/11 was a factor in making you reflect, think about this issue

NTW - 9/11 was a factor in making me realize that some people were ready to ask the question.

DDF - And that question of what happens when we die, is one that he says Christians have been confused about for centuries.

[Excerpt] Silence the pianos and with muffled drum.

DDF - Bishop Wright points to films like the romantic comedy "Four Weddings and a funeral" where people invent ideas about the afterlife that are not in scripture.

[Excerpt] Scribbling on the sky the message, he is dead.

NTW - There's a lot of funeral services, sadly, which go that route these days. Death is nothing at all; I've just slipped away into the next room, and so on. Anyone who's grieved and anyone who's worked with anyone who's grieved, knows that it's a lie. Death is a monster. Death is horrible.

DDF - So now, in a radical departure from traditional belief, Bishop Wright says that Christians are not ultimately destined for heaven. Instead, he says that at the end of time God will literally remake our physical bodies and return us to a newly restored planet.

NTW - Heaven is important, but it's not our final destination. If you want to say that when someone dies, they go to heaven, fine, but that's only a temporary holding pattern. That is, life after death. And what I'm much more interested in - well the New Testament is much more interested in - is what I've called "Life After Life After Death."

DDF - So, we have this period of heaven and then at some point, we don't know when, there's going to be a resurrection and all things will become new on the earth, that's what you're saying.

NTW - Heaven and Earth joined together in a new reality.

DDF - And that somehow, our identity will continue across that process - we don't know how; we don't know if we'll recognize ourselves. Do you think we will?

NTW - I think we will recognize ourselves and one another.

DDF - Do you think you'll recognize your relatives, your loved ones?

NTW - Sure, yes.

DDF - But this interpretation is the exact opposite of what many American Christians believe.

[Excerpt] Great, people are missing; dozens of seats empty. Patty, it's a big airplane. People are probably in the lav. I'm telling you they're not here; they're not anywhere.

DDF - The hugely successful "Left Behind" series of movies and books that have sold more than 65 million copies is an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world, a view shared by many evangelicals. According to those who believe it, the end of the world will start with the so-called Rapture when all Christians will be taken up to heaven in one momentous swoop. The earth then enters a period of cataclysmic wars until it eventually disintegrates in a final chapter of fire. But Bishop Wright says that this is more mythical than biblical.

NTW - The whole left behind kind myth is just that, it's a myth. It is an attempt to make sense of some bits of the New Testament.

DDF - So you don't believe in the Rapture either?

NTW - No.

DDF - He says that, instead of destroying the Earth, God will somehow rebuild and restore the universe to its original intended form of physical perfection; otherwise, he says, what's the point in caring about the planet or its people?

NTW - If you really believe that what happens at death is that you leave behind the world of space, time, and matter, you're never going to be bothered with it again, you're never going to have a physical body again, and that ultimately God is going to throw this whole world on the rubbish heap somewhere, then what's the fuss to work for justice in the present? What's the fuss about AIDS? What's the problem about global debt? You know, these are trivial and irrelevant; what matters is whether you're going to heaven tomorrow or next week.

DDF - Although *Surprised by Hope* is about the afterlife, Bishop Wright wants Christians to focus on how their final destination should affect their lives in the here and now.

NTW - Though I work in a very tough area of Britain, there are all sorts of conditions of poverty and deprivation, and if all I thought was, oh well, if I teach these people the truth, then

they'll go to heaven when they die, then why would I bother working with often desperately needy people? And it's because I believe in God's kingdom of justice and peace, this gives me the energy and the focus to work for the kingdom of God in the present.

NT Wright vs John MacArthur on RAPTURE Doctrine Dec 29, 2023 [This video contains two video clips of NTW speaking in various venues, followed by an interview of JM with his presentation of the rapture. It is not a face-to-face debate between NTW and JM.]

[youtube.com/watch/6PupqA2YzXU](https://youtube.com/watch/6PupqA2YzXU) 0

NTW [first video clip] - It seems to me that the Rapture Theory, as normally conceived, tries to base itself on a couple of verses towards the end of 1 Thessalonians 4, but reads them out of context, and puts them into a framework of thought, which is strictly speaking **a dualistic framework**, in which the name of the game is to leave Earth behind and go to heaven instead; whereas, the whole point of the last scene in The Book of Revelation, Revelation 21, is not that people are going up from Earth to Heaven, as in the so-called Rapture, but that the New Jerusalem is coming down from Heaven to Earth. The Rapture theology gets its mileage particularly, as I was saying last night in a lecture, from that implicit gnosticism which regards the world as a Shabby or bad or dangerous place and sees the point of religion as being to escape the world. But the whole point of Jesus' teaching and proclamation: The Sermon on the Mount, The Lord's Prayer, is that God's kingdom shall come and his will be done *on Earth* as in heaven. And at the end of Matthew's gospel Jesus says all authority in heaven *and on Earth* has been given to me. He doesn't say I'm off to heaven and the sooner you can come and join me the better. That's not how it works, and in 1 Thessalonians 4, Jesus will appear. Paul is doing three things in 1 Thessalonians 4: echoing, on the one hand, Moses coming down the mountain the blast of the trumpet and so on; on the other hand, Caesar coming to a town or city part of his Empire and the citizens going out to meet him somewhere outside the town, because they wouldn't just stay in town waiting for him (that would be very impolite and perhaps politically dangerous); and thirdly, he's echoing Daniel chapter 7. Now, Paul does this; Paul mixes his metaphors. He takes different images and he shoves them together. In the next chapter in 1 Thessalonians 5 he warns people that the thief is coming in the night so the woman is going to go into labor so you mustn't get drunk but must stay awake and put on your armor. So, when he says that there is coming a time when it'll be a bit like Moses coming down the mountain and the people looking up see him; it'll be a bit like Daniel 7 the son of man coming up on the clouds; and it'll be a bit like Caesar arriving at a city. We shouldn't expect to get a woodenly literal historical picture out of that. And the point about the *parousia*, about the Royal appearance of Caesar with at a town, is that the citizens go out to meet him we go to meet the Lord in the air, whatever Paul thought would be the objective correlate of that, not in order to stay there, but in order to escort Caesar, or whoever it is, back into the town. So, even if you want to take first Thessalonians 4 moderately literally, then you would have to say that the reason for meeting the Lord is not to stay away up in heaven, but in order to escort him to the place which is his by right, which is this Earth, **and with that I've basically deconstructed, I think, the world view within which the Rapture gets its emphasis.** And it seems to me that a fully biblical eschatology has to talk, not about that, but about the new heavens and the new Earth, the new creation which is our birthright as Christians, and over the whole of which Jesus is Lord.

NTW [second video clip] - This eschatology is to be articulated in the face of Caesar and his Imperial hope. And when Paul uses the word *parousia*, second coming or appearing, *parousia* is not an Old Testament technical term, it is a Caesar technical term. It's what happens when Caesar has been away from Rome on a journey or fighting a battle, and he comes back, his royal appearing, his royal, and perhaps divine, appearing, because by this time some of the Caesars at least started to give themselves divine honors. And everyone goes out to meet him, to



welcome him back into the city. That's the *parousia*. That's what's going on in 1 Thessalonians 4. Jesus is coming back, and it is at His name that every knee will bow. Philippians 3, where Paul has been saying, I want you to imitate me, and, well, he just been talking about how he gives up his privileges as a Jew, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and all the rest of it. How can the Philippians give up their privileges? Well, they're not Jews, most of them, but they are, some of them at least, citizens of the Roman Empire, and they all benefit from Rome. He says I want you to sit light to that; I want you to sit loose to it; because their God is the belly; they glory in their shame, with their mind set on earthly things, but our citizenship is in heaven. And let me tell you, we didn't discuss this this afternoon, though he might have done, **when Paul says our citizenship is in heaven, he does not mean therefore one day we'll be going there**, because of how the whole logic of citizenship works. Rome had founded colonies around the Greek world - some way to the east of them, because they'd fought all kinds of Civil Wars a century before the time of Paul, and there were all these old Soldiers out there, and the last thing Rome wanted was those old soldiers coming back to Italy, or let alone to Rome. Old soldiers coming back with too much loot and booty on their hands, but nowhere to live are a real pain for a small city that's already overcrowded like Rome, so you found colonies who are citizens of Rome but colonizing Greece, or whatever they are, with Roman culture. When Paul says our citizenship is in heaven, he doesn't mean, so when we retire we'll go back there; he means you are the people who are bringing the civilization of Heaven into the world in which you are placed. And it is from Heaven that we expect the Savior, the Lord, the King Jesus - those are all Caesar words - who will change the body of our humiliation to be like the body of His glory by the power which enables him to subject all things to himself. Paul, as often, quotes Psalm 8: What is man that you are mindful of him the son of man that you take thought for him you've made him little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor, putting all things in subjection under his feet. Paul would have said that is the Adam picture, and it is also the Jesus picture, and it is the picture because of which we know that Jesus is Lord and Caesar.

JM interview begins here:

Q - I referenced in a previous episode, that many people don't understand or have strong convictions regarding the beginning of scripture, nor do they have strong convictions or understanding regarding the end of scripture. So my question for you is, What is the Book of Revelation about? What is the Tribulation? And when in the tribulation is there a Rapture, and a returning Jesus Christ? Can you help provide some wisdom for us? A big question!

JM – Yeah, yeah. Well, just let's just say this at the beginning: God is very precise. Okay? God is very precise. He didn't come to the end of the Bible and lose his train of thought, and then say I can make up anything you want. So, I flew 35 hours one night, day and night, ended up in Kazakhstan. Right? I'm in Kazakhstan, it's the first pastor's conference, there's 1600 pastors jammed into this building first one in history after the breakup of the Soviet Union and they want me to teach the doctrine of the church in six days so about the third day the guys call me in and they say when are you get into the good part and I said what do you mean the good part you know I'm working hard to get this stuff across and they said well the part about the future when you get into that and I said you know like when the Lord comes when are you going to get to that because they had very little food they had big pots out behind the church and it was raining so they always had soup because the rain just filled up the soup thing they throw potatoes in and I mean they didn't have much so they were they were looking for for Christ to come back so I said okay on Friday I'm going to do that so on Friday I said here's how it goes it's going to be

the Rapture of the church that's an unsigned event in other words there's no sign preliminary to that event it's going to be sudden in a moment in the twinkling of an eye snatching out the church then there's going to be a period of seven years of tribulation um Daniel refers to that period and that period is laid out in the Book of Revelation repeatedly even the numbers are laid out um the events are laid out from Revelation 6-9 I went all through that and I said that's going to be followed by the return of Jesus Christ to establish his Thousand-Year Kingdom and it I think it uses the word thousand in Revelation 20 about six times so it's not obscure and at the end of the Thousand Years Satan has a rebellion Satan's Rebellion is basically ended and then the entire universe as We Know It uh literally implodes in an atomic implosion and the Lord creates a new Heaven and the new Earth and I I unpacked that one whole day and at the end of the day the leaders came to me that no schools no training there are no Bible schools in the former Soviet Union they have no training and the leaders came to me and said we believe what you believe and I said really you would have to go to school to get that wrong it's Crystal Clear you have the church on Earth in Revelation 1:3 all of a sudden the church is in heaven and Revelation 4 and 5 which indicates the Rapture tribulation breaks out in Revelation 6 runs to 19 in 19 Christ comes establishes his kingdom the kingdom runs for a thousand years then the new Heaven and the new Earth at the end of The Book of Revelation that is the simplest that is the simplest book in the New Testament if you're looking for a chronological outline so you you got to somebody's got to tell you it's not true just like genesis have to say oh no no no the evolution happened in Genesis and oh no no it can't be that simple it can't be chronological like the Book of Revelation and yet the Book of Revelation starts by saying this blessed is the one who reads and understands this book I'm not that smart I just took the book and here are these guys who never had any formal training all they had was Bible and they could see that understood it well what you said I love about the earnestness of those Pastors in Kazakhstan they're telling us tell us about the future or they're telling you that what would be the present was pretty harsh sure yeah no and and so what would be your kind of the importance that you would place on even us as Believers anticipating a returning Jesus Christ I think it's often neglected we don't pray often and you don't I don't hear it often Jesus come quickly what is the importance of in anticipating the return of Jesus Christ for the life of a Believer well I mean we're told to set our affections on things above and not on things on the earth uh we we get too too Earthbound uh and you know I I would say that's not always the same in every culture or in every period of History uh it's tougher for us because we have so much if if you're living in a mud hut in Africa and you become Christian Christian you you're going to long for the coming of Christ in ways that we don't because we have too many distractions so uh in this living in this culture we have to hack our way through to even think about heaven uh Heaven seems um how can I say it not even as good an option as Disneyland because we're so into running from one thrill and one high to another we don't experience the Pains of Life they're basically leveled out in a highly technical culture like ours is and with all the medical stuff that we've got and we don't face death I mean death is even hidden from us when it happens so I think it's easy to forget about heaven uh and become Earthbound for me the attraction of heaven I'm I'm happy for the Pearl Gates and I'm happy for the gold streets but the attraction of Heaven is literally a weariness with the Flesh and if you're like 15 or 18 years old you you're you're not weary with the flesh yet I mean maybe you haven't even gotten married and you're you're looking for the right Define what you mean by that tired of the battle with sin tired not only in and the struggle in your own life with it but tired of the struggle around you with it I'm like I'm in my 80s and I my Ministry hasn't slowed down at all I'm constantly fighting on all kinds of fronts you know it's like Paul said um when he referred to Ephesus he said there's a wide

open door in many adversaries Paul said at the end of his life I fought the good fight I mean it's a fight it's a fight it's a fight against sin in in our own lives and weakness and and failure and then in all the people around us and we're trying to move the kingdom forward one life at a time and I've even said to some people you know you're going to have to reintroduce yourself to me when I get to heaven because I'm not going to recognize you when you're perfect um but I but I I think there's a kind of time when you just say Okay Lord um um anytime is fine with me when the battle's over and you just want to be faithful to the end I'm thankful it's a reality you know Peter says we have an imperishable undefiled inheritance stored up for us who are in Christ and we need to reserved for you reserved for us yeah and that's something that Believers need to contemplate and consider and anticipate and as you said it's not obscure it's clear and it's right there for us in the scripture so thank you Pastor John

**“What do we mean by heaven, the Resurrection of Jesus and the rapture?” Ask NT Wright Anything. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8li-yWVDbBc>. March 30, 2024. Accessed 07/25/2024**

I think the obvious place to start is with the resurrection of Jesus himself. We celebrated the fact that one day God will make his new world and raise all his people from the dead. In the ancient world a heaven plus Earth reality is a temple. That's what temples are. His daughter would say, “Daddy when do we get to the no tears place?” That's really good. When Jesus comes back, it isn't to snatch people *away* from earth; it's to transform earth with the life of heaven and to transform us as well. Hang on, don't try this at home. Too many different images all clashing.

Q - Why don't we dive in and get going with some questions? That's what we're here for. Josianna asks, “How do we explain to ordinary people about the resurrection if they've been taught all their lives that to be saved is going to heaven - that your soul floats off when you die and that the soul is a kind of spiritual substance more important than the body that needs to be saved, and all the beliefs that come with that about the material world etc. This is sort of getting to the heart of what you were talking about.

A – Right. All these questions about how you'd explain to somebody like this, or somebody like that, I would want to preface them by saying, it depends entirely on who they are in the context, because I've done a lot of work with a lot of people, and conversations go very differently depending on whether it's a young person in a coffee shop, whether it's a worried old person at the back of the church, whatever. So, having said that, I think the obvious place to start is with the resurrection of Jesus himself. Very often, Christians have really glossed over the resurrection ironically, as though it's the sort of happy ending after Good Friday. And many Easter services in churches talk about Jesus being raised from the dead; therefore, we're going to heaven when we die. But that's not what the four gospels actually say. So, I'd like to start on the firm ground of saying, let's actually look at John 20 and 21, at Matthew 28, at Luke 24, at Mark 16 (though that's a very short and probably truncated chapter), and say what are these stories actually about. They simply aren't about, Oh, he's died for our sins so that we can go to heaven. They are about new creation. I think you see this most clearly in John. When you look at John 20 and 21 and see how it works in relation to the whole book, the whole Gospel of John right back to the beginning: In the beginning was the Word. You see that the great biblical story which John is collecting together in his story of Jesus, is about the goodness of the original creation and God's intention to rescue and renew it, as opposed to: Creation's a rather shabby old thing, and God's going to chuck it away and take us somewhere else, somewhere which isn't spacio-temporal and physical. I totally agree that much Western Christianity has got this simply wrong. I hate saying that, because I like to get on with people; I don't like to tell them they're wrong. I'd rather find points of agreement. But the thing I say to the students the whole time is, if you go back to the first century looking for somebody who taught that we have souls which are in exile from our true home which is heaven and that we're looking forward to going back there one day, then there is somebody who says that very clearly, his name is Plutarch, and he's a pagan priest at the Shrine at Delphi. He's a philosopher; he's a biographer; he's one of the great intellectuals of the first century, but he's a Platonist. He is in, technical terms, what we call middle Platonism between early Platonism and the Neoplatonism that was going on the fourth and fifth centuries

and so on. It's quite a straightforward belief, and it's what many modern Western Christians imagine is the gospel. So, I'd like to start with the resurrection of Jesus, which is the solid ground that as Christians we ought to be prepared to stand on and work out from there.

Q - And yet, in my view, probably the vast majority of Christians today do have a sort of dichotomy of the body and the soul being transported to some other version of reality.

A - Yes they do, and of course this comes particularly poignantly at a funeral when somebody says, "Where are they now?" I was at a funeral a couple of months ago of a dear person, a 35-year-old godson of mine, who died of cancer, leaving a widow and two little children, and it was a wonderful Christian funeral, but I was sad, because there was almost nothing about resurrection, which was to me bizarre.

Q - What do you say then, because this chimes in very neatly though with a question that came in from Mike who says, what you talk about in terms of Heaven coming to Earth, rather than us going to heaven, feels so right, but my father died a couple of months ago. Where is he now?

A - Well, I would say the first question is, Is this father somebody who is a believing and baptized member of the body of Christ. Because then the answer is comparatively easy. If not, then the answer might be harder, because we always say that a person's faith is ultimately known to God alone, and, because of all sorts of circumstances, there are many people who actually do have a basic faith, but it isn't overtly expressed. So, having said that, I'll take Mike to the funeral that I presided over which was for my mother, which was four or five months ago, she was a day short of 95 and was ready to go, bless her, and we prayed with her and it was kind of a relief to her finally at last to be out of her tiredness and so on. So, we celebrated the fact that one day God will make his new world and raise all his people from the dead including mom, and that we are happy to leave her at the moment, safe with Jesus. Paul says in Philippians 1, My desire is to depart and be with the Messiah, which is far better. Now, being with the Messiah doesn't tell you *where*, it just it focuses on *who*, actually, that Jesus is looking after his people, and here's the strange thing, and I don't think there's been enough theological work done on this, in Revelation 6 it talks about the souls under the altar who are saying, How long, oh Lord, how long? They're waiting for Resurrection. In John 14 Jesus says, I'm going to prepare a place for you and then I'll come again and take you to myself, but the word for "mansion" or "room" or "dwelling" or whatever, is a word that you would use in Greek, not for a place you'd go and live forever, but for somewhere you would stay and rest before continuing your journey. The Greek word is *monē*. And if you look it up in the dictionary, that's what it means, a wayside inn, or something like that. It's a blissful place; in Luke 23 Jesus says to the brigand crucified next to him, Today, you will be with me in Paradise. Now, Paradise, again, is rather like CS Lewis' the wood between the worlds. It's the blissful, lovely place where you're waiting before proceeding to the Final Destination.

Q - But do you do you think that that Final Destination essentially is a sort of reunion with the physical in some sense?

A - Absolutely, yes, very emphatically. Paul says in Ephesians 1 God's desire is to sum up all things in heaven and on Earth in the Messiah. The whole point is New Creation, but actually this goes back to a reading of Genesis. Genesis is the creation of a heaven plus Earth reality. Now, in the ancient world a heaven plus Earth reality is a temple. That's what temples are. Many Old Testament Scholars have said Genesis 1 is describing the creation of a temple,

and guess what? It's got an image in it, as a temple should, so that you know who the God is, and so that the influence of the God may be felt in the world. When you read Genesis 1 like that, all sorts of things go click, click, click, but then when you read John 20, Revelation 21, Etc., you realize this this is where that whole story was going. Heaven and Earth together, not separated.

Q - So in conclusion to Mike's question in terms of where is his father now, if a believer is in Christ, we know he is with Christ, so we can't say exactly what that state of existence is.

A - It's very difficult to say too precisely. It's almost as though there's a kind of divine conspiracy of Silence at that point, because historically many different cultures have obsessed about trying to get in touch with the dead. But we are simply told again and again in Scripture, No, they're okay, don't worry about them, don't try and contact them, trust God.

Q - But in terms of the popular image some people have of, well, Auntie Maud is looking down at Me Now from Heaven; Is that not a helpful image, as far as you're concerned?

A - different Christian Traditions have wondered about whether the saints, for instance (whether Auntie Maud is a saint or not we'll leave that open for the moment), whether the saints do have a role in sharing in the intercession of Christ for his people on earth, we're told that Jesus is himself interceding for us, Paul says in Romans 8, and some people have seen those who are in Christ sharing that intercession. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, we pray for the saints and they pray for us. The fact that there's no consensus among Christians on that, I think is quite important. But here's the thing, if we believe that the Holy Spirit has indwelt us in the present time, and if we don't believe that then you know we're lacking something basic about being Christian, then when we die, I think it's appropriate to say that the Holy Spirit has in some way been affected, shaped by who we have become, just as we are shaped by the Spirit. So, every bit of genuine Christian discipleship in us - uniquely in us - has also shaped who the Spirit now is, so that the Spirit, as it were, is re-memorizing us, holding our members together against the day when the Spirit will then raise us from the dead. That's something to be explored.

Q - Here's a question from Katherine Bentley. She asks, after reading *Surprised by Hope*, and noticing how children are taught, well sort of, since most of the adults don't know it themselves, about heaven, death, resurrection, and so on at church, I wonder if you can give tips how to address the problem of children referring to Heaven as a place in the sky, or as a synonym for Paradise, or a place where God looks after the dead, as a 5-year-old told me yesterday at Sunday school. Any tips on how to get the message across to children would be greatly appreciated. If we don't get our teaching right with them, we mustn't be surprised when we get grown-up Christians who muddle everything up.

A - Absolutely! I totally agree. It seems to me, we have tended to concentrate on the spatial thing of going up to heaven, or whatever or hymns talking about "Way Beyond the blue," and Jesus going to his home above the sky, and stuff like that, that's really not helpful. Heaven in the Bible is sometimes spoken of like that, because the Hebrew *shamayim* does duty for the sky and God's space, but actually, when you then look at what the Bible says about God's space, it isn't up above the sky. Solomon says heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you how much less this house; nevertheless, heaven and earth somehow do meet in the temple. And then, in the gospels, Jesus himself becomes the temple, and in the epistles the Holy Spirit constitutes the church as the temple. And each time that means we are at the dangerous overlap of heaven and earth. So, getting away from that spatial upstairs/downstairs thing is helpful, but also the time question, because people don't realize when they're looking ahead, that we are promised that

world history as we know it will have an extraordinary day *pneuma* [?] in which as Paul says in Romans 8, The creation itself will be set free from its slavery to decay in order to inherit the freedom which comes when God's children are glorified. So, it's not just up there. It's way out in front of us. And here's the thing, one of my students a few years ago, said that trying to explain this to his little daughter, which is the question we've been asked, he was reading Revelation 21 and said to her, Sooner or later, God will make a time when there will be no more tears, and he said that really resonated. A 5-year-old child knows about things that cause you to cry, and he said that thereafter, his daughter would say, Daddy, when we get to the no tears place... - that's really good. There will be a no tears place, because God himself will wipe away all tears from all eyes. And so, the fact that that is going to come, and that in the resurrection of Jesus it has already begun, we are on this time track between the launching of new creation and the completion of new creation. And then, within that story we can talk about heaven and earth coming together.

Q - It feels like it's a long-term project though both for adults and children to rethink the way we talk about heaven.

A - It is. There's two major things going on here: On the one hand, from the 18th to 19th century, particularly Western Christianity has become more and more platonic and you can observe this historically, and so we have to go back to scripture again and again, and instead of reading the bits of the Bible that seem to support this platonic vision, we have to talk about creation. It's the first article of the Creed: "God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." He didn't make junk. He's going to rescue and renew it. That's basic. But then, at the same time, while we're doing that, we have quite different stories from our secular culture, that either say it's all rubbish or give us wild and wacky ideas. And so, as a Christian, as a Biblical Theologian, we're fighting on two fronts: against Christian misunderstanding, and against the wide misunderstandings that are out there in the world.

Q - Speaking of which let's turn to Rick in Columbus Ohio who asks a very simple question **how do you view the Rapture?** [13:28]

A - Do you know I never heard about the Rapture until I got married, and that may sound odd, but the reason for this is that my late father-in-law, God Rest him, was an old old style Pentecostal, who had got his scofield reference Bible, and the whole thing was mapped out. I had never met somebody expounding that before, because in my Anglican circles it was it never imagined, and if we did read 1 Thessalonians 4, we kind of rolled our eyes and thought I have no idea what that's about.

Q - For those who don't have immediate Bible recall just explain first Thessalonians 4.

A - Well, in first Thessalonians 4 Paul has been asked, "O dear, some people in our community have died. We thought that wasn't going to happen before the Lord returned. What do we think about that? And Paul has this extraordinary sort of mixed metaphor where he , Look, in order to comfort you, let me tell you how it's going to be. And he says, The Lord himself will descend from heaven. He said, I don't want you to be ignorant about those who've died like those who have no hope. In other words, yes, grieve, but don't grieve hopelessly, so the whole thing is about hope. If we believe that Jesus died and Rose, even so God will bring with Jesus all those who have died in him, for this I tell you, that **we who are alive, waiting for the coming of the Lord will not anticipate those who fall asleep. In other words, people were worried that Jesus would return, and the people who were dead would stay dead, and they would miss out on the**

**new day.** So, then he says, The Lord will descend from heaven, a sudden great blast of a trumpet, and the voice of the Archangel, and the dead in the Messiah will rise first, then we who are left alive will be snatched up with them on the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, so we will always be with the Lord. Now, people have taken that literally - some people have taken that literally actually, not just types of Protestants, but also some Greek Orthodox, interestingly.

Q - There's been whole book series and films made of it.

A - Precisely and the danger about being quote, Left Behind, unquote (all sorts of things one could say about that), the problem is that's not what that passage is about. Paul is awfully good at mixed metaphors. In the next chapter, he goes on to say that the night is almost over, so it's daytime, so you mustn't get drunk, but you must stay awake, and you must put on your armor, and so on. I think (hang on don't try this at home, right? Too many different images all clashing). In the same way here, he describes the Lord coming down from heaven in words taken from The Descent of Moses on the mountain with the law. Hence the blast of the trumpet and so on. When he's talking about we being caught up on the clouds, that's a reference to Daniel 7, which is the vindication of God's people after their suffering after their persecution. Then, when he talks about meeting the Lord, the word meeting there is the word you'd use if you were a Roman citizen in Philippi or Thessalonica or something, and Caesar was making a state visit. The leading citizens would go out to meet Caesar, not in order to have a picnic out in the countryside, but in order royally to escort him back into the City. And Paul just throws these two things into the mix all all together, and not in order to say, Here is what you would see on a video camera if you were around at the time, but the only way we can talk about these ultimate events is by bringing together images from Scripture to talk about God's ultimate purpose, to talk about the vindication of his people etc. So, the return of the Lord, yes, but when Jesus comes, back it isn't to snatch people away from Earth, it's to transform Earth with the life of heaven, and to transform us as well. The antidote to the wrong reading of that, is the right reading of Philippians 3:20 and following, when he says that the Messiah will change our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. He doesn't come back to take us away. He comes back to heal the world, and to heal and transform his people.

Q - Let's turn to Anders in Stockholm in Sweden who emails in to say, Jesus' Second Coming is something we're all waiting for, but, according to William Lane Craig, NT Wright's view is quite different, and I would like some clarification. Now to set the scene, William Lane Craig is a well-known Christian philosopher from the USA. I know that he's been working on his own research in atonement and so on, and obviously looking into your views. Anyway, this is the piece that's quoted by Anders from William Lane Craig saying NT Wright has this very peculiar view, that the son of man returned in AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. Anders is looking for clarification on that quote.

A - Sadly, I mean I've known Bill Craig for quite some time, and we've argued in public, and sometimes we've agreed in public, as well as disagreed. And that's fine. And, yes, he is working on atonement, and, yes, he disagrees with my view on that, and that's fine too. This is how we learn from one another hopefully, but he's wrong in terms of saying that I say in Mark 13 and Matthew 24 and Luke 21 and so on, that the son of man is returning at AD 70. The problem comes with the idea of the *coming* of the son of man. When you read Daniel 7, which is one of the most important biblical texts for the early Christians and for Jesus himself, you have to realize what's going on, and sadly, I may not have made this clear in *Jesus and the victory Of God*, but I had a whole long chapter on this - I thought I had made it clear, that the way that



Daniel 7 is being read in the first century, is not about somebody called the Son of Man coming *downwards* from Heaven to Earth but about this figure, one like a son of man coming *on* the clouds *to be seated beside* the Ancient of Days, who is God. So here's the scenario, and actually, there's a kind of a kids version of it in the previous chapter, because in Daniel chapter 6 we have Daniel himself in the Lion's Den. So what is this about? Daniel is a human being. He's put down into this Den, surrounded by man-eating monsters, and in the morning the king comes and looks down into the lion's den, Lo and behold! Daniel is still alive and well, and the lions are still hungry, and the King brings up Daniel out of the den and makes him the second ruler in the Kingdom. That is exactly the same picture that you then have in Daniel 7, where you have this image of the great sea monsters, the monsters coming up out of the deep, which, as anyone who knows the Jewish literature of the time knows, these are not literal prophecies about sort of "Day of the Triffid Monsters" coming up out of the Mediterranean, you know. These are great world Empires; they are they are nations and kingdoms, and can be variously interpreted Babylon, Syria, Greece, Rome, whatever. But then, when the fourth and last one has done its worst, then one like a son of man is brought up to sit beside the Ancient of Days. And there's no question as to what that means in the text itself, because it's interpreted twice. There's a short interpretation, then it's an expanded interpretation. And it's about, quote, the people of the Saints of the most high, i.e. the faithful Israelites, will receive the kingdom, and will reign forever and ever. In other words, God will vindicate his people, and *they* will be the judges of the world, and the monsters will get their comeuppance. And when Paul says in First Corinthians, that, don't you know that we will judge angels, and we want to say, "Uh, no, actually Paul, we didn't know that, thank you very much, tell us more," I think this is the sort of Passage he's referring to, that actually this is in second temple Jewish thought, this is how the scenario is going to play out. So now, cut to Mark 13, when Jesus and his disciples there by the temple, and the disciples are saying, Wow, this is an amazing building, and Jesus says, Actually, guess what, it's all going to come tumbling down. And they say, When, how, what's that about, what's this all going to be? Because the great scenario at the end of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is a kind of Confrontation between Jesus and the temple, and particularly a confrontation between Jesus and the high priest who represents the current Temple regime. In the gospels Jesus himself is presented as the true Temple, so the place isn't big enough for them both, to put it crudely. So, this is all about - the temple is going to be destroyed, which will constitute Jesus' visible vindication. Jesus will be raised from the dead; Jesus will then be exalted, and the sign that he is exalted is that the temple which has opposed him will be destroyed. In order to get that you need to see how it's then applied in the next chapter. When Jesus stands before Caiaphas, the high priest, and Caiaphas says, What's this nonsense about destroying and rebuilding the temple? Jesus doesn't answer because there's no way he can explain that to Caiaphas. But then Caiaphas goes for the jugular: Are you the Messiah the son of the blessed? And Jesus - there's there's no easy English translation for "you've said it" or is it "yes" or is it "the words are yours" or whatever. But then comes the crucial thing, You will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the Clouds Of Heaven. That does not mean that Caiaphas will look out of the window and see Jesus coming downwards on a cloud. that is a crass, modern, literalistic misinterpretation. In Matthew, and in Luke, many people think they are just making Mark a bit more clear here, it says "from now on" you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. And then, at the end of Matthew's gospel, we're referring back to Daniel 7, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on Earth." In other words, Matthew and Luke, interpreting Mark, and I think it's so in Mark - but with Mark, it's very dense and can be

misinterpreted - are quite clear that the son of man passage in Daniel 7 refers to Jesus' vindication, that the destruction of the temple a generation later is the ultimate sign that God has vindicated and is vindicating Jesus. And people have said, Oh, this means NT Wright doesn't believe in the second coming." No! Watch my lips: Of course the second coming is real, that's there all over the New Testament, but these texts are not about the second coming. They are about the vindication of Jesus. Now, I'm sorry that's a long answer, but it's really important.

Q - But just to recapitulate on that, AD 70, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and so on, what is the significance of that in terms of what Jesus said.

A - The significance of it is that God in Jesus is starting a true Temple movement. When you look back from the gospel stories of Jesus, you see that actually the temple in Jerusalem was always intended as an advanced signpost of a coming reality, but if you mistake the signpost for the reality it becomes an idol. You see this in the speech of Steven in Acts very clearly. And actually all the way through Acts, all the clashes are about temples, whether it's in Athens or Ephesus or Jerusalem. The question is, Where are Heaven and Earth coming together now? The church is constituted on the belief, which is dangerous and scary, that this is where Heaven and Earth coming together.