

# Johannine Studies Handout / Not Left Behind

From “*In God’s Time: The Bible and the Future*”

By Craig C. Hill (*Not Left Behind*, Appendix pages 199 – 209)

p. 199 Twenty years ago, it was common knowledge that duodenal ulcers were caused by stress, smoking, diet, and other lifestyle factors. “You’ll give yourself an ulcer!” the anxious and overworked were warned. It seemed perfectly obvious. As it turns out, common knowledge was wrong. Spurred by the pioneering work of Dr. Barry J. Marshall of Perth, Australia, scientists now believe that as many as 90 percent of these ulcers are caused by the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori*, which also has been linked to some forms of stomach cancer. As is so often the case, the obstacle that stood between us and the truth was the very thing we thought we already knew.

Millions of Christians today are convinced that Jesus will return secretly to snatch (or “rapture,” from the Latin *raptus*) them from the earth. Those “left behind” will endure the horrors of a seven-year “tribulation,” after which Christ will return a second time to inaugurate his millennial kingdom. To such persons, it is perfectly obvious. The message is reinforced by most popular Bible teachers and “prophecy scholars,” including Tim LaHaye, Hal Lindsey, Kenneth Copeland, Rex Humbard, John Hagee, Jerry Falwell, and John Walvoord. Their message holds sway over vast tracts of the American Evangelical landscape, across which only an occasional dissenting wind blows.<sup>1</sup> For those living within the territory of this prospective, it is easy to assume that the Bible supports this belief and that Christians have always thought in this way. In fact, both assumptions are wrong.

## Background

The idea that Christ will return twice, initially in secret and later in glory, is a central tenet of the interpretive school called “premillennial dispensationalism,” which originated in the 1820s and 30s in Ireland and England.<sup>2</sup> Its principal author was the magnetic, autocratic Evangelical clergyman John Nelson Darby.<sup>3</sup> Darby argued that human history spans several ages or “dispensations.”<sup>4</sup> In each dispensation, God tests humanity in some new and distinct way. Darby’s dispensationalism is “premillennial” because it includes the belief that Christ will return on the clouds to gather believers to heaven several years prior to his millennial reign on earth (mentioned only in Rev. 20:1-10). It

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<sup>1</sup> That is not to say that all Evangelicals (or even all Christian fundamentalists) accept this view. The timing of the rapture (before or after the tribulation?) is an especially hot topic in conservative Christian circles. For a balanced presentation of the history of Christian eschatology written from an Evangelical perspective, see Robert G. Clouse, Robert N. Hosack, and Richard V. Pierard, *The New Millennium Manual: A Once and Future Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); and Richard Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again: A History of the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Like many such movements, dispensationalism has split and evolved into a number of different camps (see Kyle, *Last Days*, p. 117). This short essay focuses on the more traditional forms of premillennial dispensationalism represented in the work of LaHaye and most other popular End Times writers. A particularly interesting development in dispensationalist thinking is the mergence in the past decade of the “progressives,” led by, among others, Craig A. Blaising, Darrell L. Bock, and Robert Saucy. While still fundamentalist in orientation, “progressive dispensationalism” has taken greater account of biblical scholarship and has avoided many (although by no means all) of the pitfalls of traditional dispensationalism. Of particular importance is its rejection of the “parenthesis” theory of Darby and its acceptance of a much higher degree of continuity between Israel and the church. See Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Bridgepoint, 1993), and Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Some elements of or rough parallels to dispensationalism can be found in a handful of previous authors; nevertheless, the system as we know it is chiefly the product of John Nelson Darby’s fertile imagination.

<sup>4</sup> Dispensationalist authors disagree among themselves about the number and boundaries of these ages. The most widely recognized scenario is that suggested by C. I. Scofield (in the famous *Scofield Reference Bible of 1909/17*), which divides human history into seven dispensations: “innocency (Garden of Eden), conscience (Adam to Noah), human government (Noah to Abraham), promise (Abraham to Moses), Law (Moses to Christ), grace or the church age (from Christ’s first to second coming), and the kingdom age or millennium” (Clouse et al., *New Millennium Manual*, p. 59).

is this interpretation that is presupposed in the enormously popular *Left Behind* novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

The seedbed of dispensationalism was a series of conferences in the 1820s and 30s on the subject of “unfulfilled prophecy.”<sup>5</sup> Special attention was given to the unrealized expectations of Israel’s glory found in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>6</sup> Over the centuries, Christian interpreters had dealt with this issue in a variety of ways, for example, by asserting that God’s promises to Israel were fulfilled *spiritually* in the church.<sup>7</sup> Much of Darby’s appeal, both then and now, arises from his insistence upon biblical literalism. Darby believed that the prophetic oracles concerning Israel must be fulfilled to the letter. Because this fulfillment has not taken place, the dispensation to Israel cannot be complete.<sup>8</sup> But how can this be since, by Darby’s own reckoning, we are already living in the next dispensation, the age of the (Gentile) church? Darby’s solution is ingenious: the present age is really only a “parenthesis” interrupting the age of Israel.<sup>9</sup> Once the church is whisked off the scene at the time of the rapture, the dispensation to Israel will recommence and all remaining prophecies will be fulfilled.<sup>10</sup> Hence we discover the need for a two-part return of Christ: the first completes the dispensation to the church and the second the dispensation to Israel.

To their credit, the dispensationalists had put their finger on an important problem, namely, the relationship between Israel and the church in the plan of God. Their dissatisfaction with Christian supersessionism<sup>11</sup> is highly commendable, although their convoluted solution created as many difficulties as it solved. The presupposition of biblical inerrancy<sup>12</sup> has been the primary stumbling block to their effective resolution of this problem; nevertheless, dispensationalists are to be commended for recognizing and caring about this issue long before it appeared on the radar screen of most other Christian interpreters.

The problem of unfulfilled prophecy is not the only biblical difficulty addressed by dispensationalism. Another obstacle to a literal interpretation of the Bible is the conflict between heavenly and earthly visions of God’s future

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<sup>5</sup> The origins of dispensationalism are chronicled in Grayson Carter’s excellent *study Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions from the Via Media*, c. 1800-1850 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp. 152-248.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter Three for a discussion of this issue.

<sup>7</sup> A key element of traditional dispensationalist thinking is the segregation of Israel and the church which are thought to exist as discrete entities in separate dispensations. This view clashes with the NT idea that Gentile Christians have been incorporated into Israel; see, for example, Paul’s metaphor of the olive tree in Rom. 11:13-24 and his references to Christians as children of Abraham (e.g., Rom. 4:16-18 and 9:7).

<sup>8</sup> Hence the euphoria of many dispensationalists at the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948. The notion that Israel must become a nation for Christ to return is nowhere stated in the New Testament. Mark 13:14 par. Refers to the “desolating sacrilege” of Daniel (8:11; 9:27; 11:31; and 12:11), which has led many to think that the Jerusalem temple must be rebuilt and thus, by implication, Israel restored. (See Chapter Five.) The parable of the fig tree (Mark 13:28-31 par.) is widely cited in this connection, but it is only by a considerable leap of interpretation that it can be taken to refer to the reestablishment of Israel. Instead, the fig tree relates to “all these things” (v. 29), namely, to the “messianic woes” of vv. 5-25, and not to the rebirth of Israel. (These same interpreters seldom note that the gathering of the saints *follows* the period of tribulation in Mark 13). The symbol of the fig tree is apt since “the peculiarly bare appearance of the fig tree in winter, followed by its early blossom, makes it stand out in Palestine as a harbinger of spring” (I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, p. 778).

<sup>9</sup> According to Darby, the church was necessitated by the Jews’ rejection of Jesus. Had the Jews accepted Jesus as their messiah as they were meant to, the crucifixion and resurrection would not have occurred. Understandably, many Christians have looked unfavorably on the notion that the events of Holy Week represent God’s “Plan B.”

<sup>10</sup> Traditional dispensationalists believe that Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy weeks (Dan. 9:20-27) was suspended at week 69 due to the crucifixion of Jesus. After the rapture, the prophetic clock will be reactivated and the postponed events of Daniel’s vision will occur. It should go without saying that this is anything but a literal reading of the text.

<sup>11</sup> That is, the idea that the church has superseded, taken over the place of, historical Israel.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter Two for an extended discussion of inerrancy, the belief that the Bible is without error or contradiction.

reign. This tension was already present in pre-Christian Judaism, which favored an earthly expectation but which also accommodated a belief in heaven as the final destiny of the righteous (e.g., 1 Enoch 104:1-5; Daniel 12:3). Both views are also represented in the early church, which is unsurprising given its Jewish origins. For some New Testament writers, the return of Christ was associated with the establishment of a physical kingdom (Rev. 21); others regarded it as the occasion at which Christ would gather believers to heavenly glory (Matt 3:12; John 14:3).<sup>13</sup>

p. 203 Dispensationalists deal with this problem by positing two returns, the first heavenly and the second earthly. It is a resourceful move for which there is no biblical warrant. The simple truth is that no New Testament writer, including the author of Revelation, speaks of two returns of Christ (see below).

Viewed from one angle, dispensationalism is an elaborate harmonization strategy necessitated by its authors' insistence upon taking the Bible "literally." The assumption that all biblical authors agree is maintained only by means of enormous invention and dispensationalists are some of the most inventive interpreters ever to open a Bible. In such a system, conflicting biblical texts serve as invitations to theological creativity. (As the software programmer said, "It's not a bug; it's a feature!") Since all books are presumed to share the same outlook, the perspective of Revelation can be filled out with ideas taken from 1 Thessalonians, and so on and so on. The result is an eschatology that borrows from a wide range of biblical authors but which is actually foreign to all of them. Consider the following passage; found in the recent book *Are We Living in the End Times?* By Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins:

When the more than three hundred Bible references to the Second Coming are carefully examined, it becomes clear that there are two phases to His return. There are far too many conflicting activities connected with His return to be merged into a single coming... Since we know that there are no contradictions in the Word of God, our Lord must be telling us something here.<sup>14</sup>

To accept that the biblical authors had even somewhat differing views of the future would, of course, threaten the notion that "there are no contradictions in the Word of God." That is what is perceived to be at stake and what, in no small part, drives the phenomenon. Dispensationalism is necessitated by fundamentalism, and fundamentalism is defended and propagated by dispensationalism. Like bees and flowers, they are in perpetual symbiotic relationship.

## **Looking for the Rapture**

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Doubtless, the great majority of Christians who believe in a premillennial "rapture of the saints" are good people who want only to believe what the Bible teaches about the return of Christ. Unfortunately, what the Bible teaches is not the rapture. Let us briefly consider the most commonly cited biblical texts, the most prominent of which is 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17:

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

What ultimately stands behind these verses is the vision of the coming of the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13-14. According to Daniel, the Son of Man will come to earth to rule over an everlasting kingdom. It is entirely possible

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<sup>13</sup> See the discussion on pp. 176-77 above.

<sup>14</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1999), pp. 98, 100 (Page 99 contains a chart titled "Locating the Tribulation Period.")

that Paul had in mind that very expectation. It is interesting that the word he used for “meet(ing),” *apantēsis*, is a technical term “used of citizens, or a group of them, going out of the city to meet a visiting dignitary and then escorting him back into the city.”<sup>15</sup> Paul may well have employed the word in precisely that sense. If so, he wrote this passage to address the Thessalonians’ concern that deceased believers would not participate in Christ’s kingdom. On the contrary, Paul would console, the dead will be the first to meet Christ, after which they will be joined by all other believers, who together will accompany Christ to earth. Hence verse 14: “[T]hrough Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.”

One passage that might shed light on these verses is Romans 11:26-27, which paraphrases Isaiah 59:20-21a: “Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.”<sup>p. 205</sup> The expectation of God’s (or the Messiah’s) appearance at the reign from Mount Zion is a typical feature of apocalyptic thought (cf. Rev. 14:1; see pp. 89-92 above). It is reasonable to suppose that Paul shared this view.

In a sense, however, it is irrelevant whether Paul thought that believers would accompany Christ to earth or to heaven. The more important datum is that Paul nowhere mentions two returns of Christ. An instructive passage, if it indeed was written by Paul,<sup>16</sup> is 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, which envisages a single coming *following* the period of “messianic woes.”

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken... Let no one deceive you in any way, for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed... (vv. 1-3)

The same perspective is evident in some other NT writings, for example, in Mark 13:19-20, 24-27:

For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days... But in those days, after that suffering... they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

Clearly, it is the expectation of these passages that the gathering of the saints will occur only once – after the expected period of “tribulation.”

Premillennialists often argue for a pre-tribulation rapture by invoking Revelation 3:10:

<sup>p. 206</sup> Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

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<sup>15</sup> Abraham J. Malherve, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 277. Malherbe cites the example of Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11:26-28, where a priest awaits “the *parousia* [coming] of Alexander in order to go out and meet [*hypantēsis*] him.” The same word is used in Acts 28:15 for the meeting of Paul and his Christian escort outside of Rome.

<sup>16</sup> On the question of the authorship of 2 Thessalonians, see Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 590-98.

This verse is addressed to the church of Philadelphia, whose exemption (whatever the author might have imagined it to be)<sup>17</sup> was a reward for its “patient endurance.” It is only with Herculean exertion that “pre-trib” advocates are able to bend this verse to their will. Writes Tim LaHaye,

The message of Christ to the church at Philadelphia was not only for that little church but also to the “open door” church – that is, the evangelistic, missionary-minded church, which started about 1750 and will exist right up to the time Christ comes to rapture His church.<sup>18</sup>

It is astounding how far from the literal meaning of a text “biblical literalists” will stray for the sake of defending their interpretive system. Against their commitment to that system, no inconveniently incompatible passage stands a chance.

As is the case elsewhere in the New Testament, there is only one return of Christ in the book of Revelation.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the “first resurrection” (20:5) is said to occur at the inauguration of the millennial kingdom and includes only those “beheaded for their testimony to Jesus” (20:4). If the author had maintained the hope of an imminent resurrection and rescue of the saints, it is passing strange that he failed to mention it, especially given his unmistakable pastoral concern for his readers. Instead, he repeatedly called for the endurance of believers in the face of present and future hostility.<sup>20</sup>

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The other key texts cited in defense of the rapture are Matthew 24:30-41 and Luke 17:34-35, which speak of a sudden division of humanity (“Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left,” etc.). Only by tearing these verses from their context can one possibly think that they refer to an initial, secret return of Christ. In fact, both passages are attached to discussions concerning the very *public* coming of the Son of Man. In Luke we are told forthrightly that “as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day” (17:24). Similarly, according to Matthew (paralleling Mark 13:26-27, quoted above),

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matt. 24:30-31)

In both passages, the return of Christ is, like the flood at the time of Noah, also an occasion of judgment. It is crystal clear that neither author had in view a separate rapture of the church that precedes Christ’s “third coming” as ruler and judge.

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<sup>17</sup> The word “trial,” *peirasmos*, is the same word that is usually translated as “temptation” in the Lord’s Prayer (“Lead us not into temptation...”). Rev. 3:10 could mean either that the believers at Philadelphia will be given power to withstand the coming trial/temptation or that they will be spared facing it.

<sup>18</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* P. 108.

<sup>19</sup> LaHaye argues that the rapture is assumed by Revelation since the church is not mentioned from chapters 5 to 18 (*Are We Living in the End Times?* P. 112). If so, then why is the earthly church admonished to endurance in both Rev. 13:9-10 and 14:12-13?

One source of confusion is the fact that the author of Revelation imagines that the souls of the martyrs have already ascended to heaven (e.g., Rev. 6:9), where they are told to “rest” (v. 11); nevertheless, the “first resurrection” does not occur until chapter 20 (see above).

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Rev. 1:9; 2:2-3, 10, 19; 3:10-11; 13:9-10; and 14:12-13.

In sum, contemporary America's most popular Christian eschatology is unscriptural. Ironically, in their effort to interpret the Bible literally and consistently, proponents of the rapture have mangled the biblical witness almost beyond recognition. At the end of all their theorizing and systematizing, it is the Bible itself, this wonderfully diverse and complex witness to God and Christ, that has been left behind.

## Conclusion

Ideas have consequences. At best, belief in premillennial dispensationalism heightens devotion to God and increases awareness of the urgency and importance of one's spiritual commitments. It also motivates evangelism. One cannot deny the fact that its proponents have been successful at bringing others into the fold, however much one might question their methods.

At worst, such belief is a form of escapism. The hope of impending departure can lead believers to abandon interest in the world and its problems. The expectation of deteriorating conditions prior to the soon-approaching rapture is morally corrosive, encouraging pessimism, fatalism, and the forsaking of political responsibility.<sup>21</sup> Disengagement from the problems of the world is ethically indefensible, but it is all too common among today's prophecy elite. Their books tell us that nuclear war is inevitable, that the pursuit of peace is pointless, that the planet's environmental woes are unstoppable, and so on.<sup>22</sup> One of the quirkiest passages in the whole of the Tim LaHaye canon is the following, taken from a discussion of Ezekiel 38-39:<sup>23</sup>

It does not seem as if time is on Russia's side. If she is going to be the major power that Ezekiel forecasts her to be, she had better make her move soon, or she won't be able to do so. If Russia is to attack Israel, she had better do it soon!<sup>24</sup>

It is wrong to be morally complacent. Still worse is hoping for, even abetting, the advance of evil. Statements such as the above, whatever their intention, come dangerously close to doing just that. I trust that the Kremlin is not listening; nevertheless, millions of Christians are. We do not know how or when God's purposes for the world ultimately will be fulfilled. We can however say with absolute certainty that we have no right to be acquiescent in the face of injustice or to be gleeful in the face of suffering.

More than a century and a half ago, John Nelson Darby wrote, "I believe from Scripture that the ruin is without remedy." Believers should expect only "a progress of evil."<sup>25</sup> All of us are the beneficiaries of those Christian reformers who ignored Darby and got on with the business of fighting slavery, opposing child labor, and campaigning for the enfranchisement of women – in business, that is, of making this world a little more like the dominion of God. For the time being, there remains more than enough such work for all of us.

*Blessed are those servants whom the master will find at work when he arrives. (Matt. 24:46)*

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<sup>21</sup> On the very ancient origins of this idea, see Chapter Four.

<sup>22</sup> See the summary in Clouse et al., *New Millennium Manual*, ch. 6.

<sup>23</sup> On Ezek. 38-39, see pp. 66-68 above.

<sup>24</sup> LaHaye & Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* P. 92.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals*, pp. 220, 226.