

The Rapture

“Two men will be working in the field; One will be taken and the other left behind.”

By

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Most in our society have heard of “The Rapture.” Although it is part of modern Christian mythology, it has also entered into pop-culture through several successful films and books. In 1970, fundamentalist Christian Hal Lindsey published his bestselling book about the End Times, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. In it, Lindsey interprets the bewildering imagery in the New Testament’s *Book of Revelation* in light of current events to mean we are now in the end of days. *Late Great* sold over 35 million copies within its first two years and was translated into more than fifty languages. In 1978 the book was turned into what, at the time, became the most successful Hollywood documentary in history, narrated by Orson Wells.

Its success created a cultural genre leading to other successful films like *The Omen* in 1976, which was followed by two sequels and remade in 2006, along with *The Seventh Sign* in 1988, Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *End of Days* in 1999, and many other lesser-known productions about the end times or birth of the Antichrist. A 2006 PBS Frontline story claimed Lindsey had started “America’s Doom Industry.”¹ And what a lucrative industry it has become.

Between 1995 and 2007, Christian authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins publish sixteen bestselling novels in their *Left Behind* fiction series about the final years of the Biblical apocalypse after millions of Christians have suddenly vanished from the planet. Several of these books made it to number one on the New York Time bestsellers list. It was such a phenomenon that its small publishing company, Tyndale House Publishers, soon doubled its staff, added 25,000 square feet of office space to its main building, constructed an additional 60,000 square foot warehouse just to store its *Left Behind* books, and purchased 53 more acres for future expansion.²

The result, after fifty years of this mythos seeping into pop culture, is that we have all become familiar with terms like, *end times*, *second coming*, *Armageddon*, *the Antichrist*, *666*, *the mark of the Beast*, and *The Rapture*, whether we are Evangelical Christians or not. More pertinent, perhaps, is the influence it has had on many high-level officials and policy makers. As the now late history professor Paul Boyer once commented, “Hal Lindsey seems to have had considerable influence not just on the part of the public as a whole, but at some of the highest levels of government,” including, according to Lindsey, “giving seminars at the Pentagon” and “seminars at the National War College” to throngs of attendees.³ Likewise, Tim LaHaye had been the National Campaign Manager for conservative Republican Jack Kemp’s 1988 attempt to become the Party’s Presidential Nominee.

LaHaye had to resign from the campaign after he was accused of being anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish, which he called “scurrilous” and untrue. He was also on the original board of directors for the Moral Majority and a founder of the Council for National Policy, which ABC news has called, “the most powerful conservative organization in America you’ve never heard of.”⁴ This highly secretive eight-member council has included alumni such as President Reagan’s National Security Advisor, Oliver North, Tommy Thompson, who was a Cabinet member during the George W. Bush Administration, along with Bush’s Attorney General, John Ashcroft. While campaigning in 1999, Bush spoke to the council and has refused to release his comments to the public.

A year later, a 2000 Time/CNN poll found that “59 percent of Americans believe that prophecies in Revelation will come true.”⁴ It is by far the belief of most Evangelical Christians in the U.S. In a 2020 *Rolling Stone* article, Amy Frykholm, the senior editor of *The Christian Century* and author of the book, *Rapture Culture*, says, “When I first started researching, I had this idea that I would be studying a subculture. And then *Left Behind* happened, and I was like, ‘I don’t think this is a subculture. This may be the dominant American culture, and the rest of us are subcultures.’ I mean, this is mainstream.”⁵

Although the number may be decreasing along with Church membership in the U.S., which is now down below 50 percent for the first time in modern history, there are still a lot of people in the country and around the world who take the ideas of Hal Linsey and Tim LaHaye seriously, including the belief in the Rapture, that Jesus will return to Earth and snatch up all of his followers in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, leaving the rest of us to wish we had listened when warned of what was to happen.

This particular belief about the rapture doesn’t come from the *Book of Revelation*, but from the *Gospel of Matthew*, where Jesus is discussing the end of the world. “[This] is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man,” he says. “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left behind. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left behind.”⁶ *Matthew* contains another verse that is also included in the Gospels of *Mark* and *Luke*. “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”⁷ Even the Apostle Paul, whom many consider the true founder of Christianity, was so convinced of the impending return of Christ that he advised Christians not to bother even getting married because, he said, “the time is short⁸ ... For this world in its’ present form is passing away.”⁹

Yet both Jesus and Paul got it wrong. The Rapture, as it is now called, did not happen when they said it would and has not happened in 2,000 years because it’s not going to happen and can’t happen. Yet, to this day, many still believe it will and can, and there have been many times throughout history that religious leaders have convinced lots of others of its exact time only to find themselves disappointed. Since the 6th Century, there have been more than fifty precise predictions of the exact year, sometimes to the day, when the Second Coming would occur. Dozens of times since the Enlightenment period alone, and there are currently several predictions as to when Jesus will pop in again in the years ahead. Believing a biblical generation to be forty years, Hal Linsey himself calculated that it would happen in 1988. More recently, World Bible Society President F. Kenton “Doc” Beshore has argued Linsey got it wrong because a Biblical generation is between 70 and 80 years, putting the Apocalypse sometime between 2018 and 2028, and certain the Rapture itself would have occurred by 2021.¹⁰ The Lord is running late as usual.

All of this goes back to what I talked about in my sermon last week, about turning our ideas into idols. The secret to processing mythology, including religious mythology, along with its sometimes-wild imagery, is not to ask what it means, but what it means to you? What it means to you might be different than what it means to me, and what it means to me is probably a lot different than what it meant to whoever originally came up with it, or to those who first heard it and were meant to hear it ages ago. It is, by nature, symbolic, allowing us play freely with it in order to realize something

new about ourselves or the world. Turning it into a literal, historical, and hard truth is to kill the myth's potential to bring us meaningful insights.

Did you know, for example, the earliest surviving Gospel, *The Gospel of Mark*, written around 65 CE, about thirty years after Jesus' execution, does not have a resurrection account. There was such an account added two centuries later to make it jive with what had become orthodoxy, a doctrinal belief in the literal, physical resurrection. But the author of *Mark* simply ends the account, which culminates in the tragic execution of a man whose inspiring teachings about love, and acceptance, and forgiveness, and sharing, with the mysterious image of an empty tomb. There's a young man there who tells some of Jesus' followers, "He has risen," but no sightings of Jesus, and those who discover it simply run away, too frightened to tell anyone about it. That's how the story ends, leaving our imaginations open to wonder what it might mean.

In *Mark* the empty tomb is a literary device for capturing the imaginations of his readers, as well as ending on an up-note. What does the empty tomb mean for you? That Jesus can live on through his teachings? Through his followers? That Spring always follows Winter? That there is always reason for hope? That life goes on? It can mean a lot of different things to different people. But when we literalize it, or one interpretation becomes a cultural idol we cannot offend, a doctrine we cannot deny, then it becomes meaningless and empty.

Indeed, as later Gospels were written, the Resurrection motif becomes increasingly literal. In *Matthew*, written about twenty years after *Mark*, there are Jesus-sightings, kind of like Paul who experiences him as a blinding light on the road to Damascus, suggesting the resurrection wasn't merely a metaphor, but a spiritual resurrection. It is also in *Matthew* that Jesus is reported to have said, "An remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."¹¹ It seems obvious this statement wasn't to be taken literally, but to mean that Jesus' would always be spiritually present. "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."¹² Although he'd been executed, Jesus could still be with them in spirit. At least that's what I get from *Matthew's* version of the story.

As time passed, however, the story was taken more literally, requiring some explanation of why, if he is literally with us to the end of the Age, he is nowhere to be seen? So, the writer of *Luke*, written a few years after *Matthew*, adds an ascension story to the account, saying that he was seen by many and, "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven."¹³ So Jesus' resurrection was literal, although he has since left us and won't return, as the myth evolved, until the Second Coming.

Yet even then, there arose a debate over whether the Resurrection was spiritual or physical. You see how the idolatry of beliefs happens? Going from a metaphorical image full of meaning to a hard physical reality, turning the nameless, shapeless, shifting thing into a golden calf? So, by the time the *Gospel of John* is written, sometime in the early years of the 2nd century CE, the debate is settled. *John* adds an account in which Jesus eats with his followers and allows doubting Thomas to touch the scars left by his wounds. From metaphor, to spiritual, to literal, to a hard physical reality in less than a hundred years.

As those of you who regularly hear me speak know, I still like to play with the imagery from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures but, until recently, I've not had any interest in this peculiar story of the End of Days, Jesus's Second Coming, the Rapture, Antichrist, and so on. This is probably so for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I was a teenager and had just become a Born-Again Christian when the *The Late Great Planet Earth* was released in movie theatres. I instantly became a Hal Lindsey devotee, snatched up his follow-up book, *Countdown to Armageddon* in 1980, and read every other book he'd written. Lindsey shaped my earliest Christian beliefs more than anyone else.

A few years later, while studying religion in a liberal arts college, and being taught to think critically, albeit in a Southern Baptist University in the heart of the Bible Belt, I felt I had been bamboozled. I realized Hal Lindsey's claims were preposterous, along with a lot of other fundamentalist beliefs I once held. So, feeling a bit embarrassed, I think I lost complete interest in the modern myth of the End Times.

Another reason I've not had much interest in it is that it has become so literalized in our society that I'm simply turned off by the topic. It's so profoundly associated with Fundamentalism, which I consider a form of fixation—the psychological term for being stuck at an immature stage of development—that it seems as far from my interests as anything can be. But a few weeks ago, I was contemplating the times we are now living in and how fast they are changing, about how change is happening so fast some people must feel like they are standing still. That's when the verse I started with popped into my head, "Two men will be working in the field; One will be taken and the other left behind," and it suddenly became alive for me again.

Everyone alive today is in the midst of the Rapture, not the literal Rapture evangelical Christians believe in, but a real phenomenon I think this myth can help us reflect upon. When it happens, some of us are enraptured, caught up in it, if you will, and others are left standing still wondering what just happened. We feel like we're behind the times, as if social changes and technological advances are leaving us behind. Some of us are confused, while others are glad to be left behind because moving forward is too frightening a specter to face. Like the unbelievers who won't listen to the prophecies until it's too late, there are many today who cling firmly to ways and ideas that don't make much sense anymore. They are like those left standing alone in the field when everyone else has moved on. It's a powerful metaphor when considered in this light. Which person do we want to be? The one who is enraptured and transformed or the one left standing still in a world they no longer understand?

As such, the metaphor of Rapture can be useful for reflecting on a variety of real-life issues, but the one I'm reflecting on is the coming Singularity, that moment in time when exponential evolution is happening so quickly its happening all at once, instead of progressing through linear time. Exponential change means it starts off slowly, almost unnoticed, and continues to move slowly for a long time until suddenly it explodes and catches us off guard. Given my own understanding of what's happening, I will dare, like the prophets of old, to predict that *some of those who are standing here today who will not taste death until they see the Singularity,* that it will happen *in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye. The time is short. For this world in its present form is passing away.*

It is the exponential nature of evolution that causes us to get caught off guard. But because technology has the ability to evolve so much faster than biology, we are witnessing this exponential

reality pass before our eyes. Futurist Ray Kurzweil, author of the bestselling book, *The Singularity is Near*, based upon his discovery of “The Law of Accelerating Returns,” distinguishes between “intuitive linear” and the “historical exponential” views of technological evolution. He means that if we look at things from our own linear perspective, we can’t imagine the AI of today, for example, matching human intelligence for hundreds of years. But if we look at from the perspective of historical exponentials, which can be calculated to the decade, if not the year, AI will achieve human level intelligence in the early years of the next decade, and probably exceed it before 2040. “Exponential growth is a feature of an exponential process,” Kurzweil says, “of which technology is a primary example.”¹⁴

Another way to understand exponentials, is to consider the parable of the man who asks his kingdom to pay him by putting a grain of rice on the first square of a chess board, then doubling the number of grains each square thereafter. From our linear perspective this seems like a real bargain. Who would work for such little reward? But the law of Accelerating Returns recognizes that 2-to-the-64th-power adds up to 18-quintillion, 446-quadrillion, 744-trillion, 73-billion, 709 million, 551-thousand, 615 grains of rice. That’s more rice than there would be in stars in 180,000 Milky Ways. When change is happening that fast, you are either going to be enraptured by it, or left behind.

I’ve often spoken of how our world has been exponentially moving toward a single global community throughout human history. In truth, I believe it already has, but most of us don’t understand it because we’ve been left standing in the field. We’re behind the times. We’re still thinking about ourselves in old ways that don’t work anymore, which explains the rise of dictators and nationalists, Brexit, border walls, identity ethics, tribalism, and even Putin’s current attempt to make Russia great again, all pointless efforts to turn back the clock. But today, in reality, we are already one global community as evidenced by a global banking system, global communications, global corporations, a global economy, global education, global employment, global environmental issues, global laws, global pandemics, global science, a global space program, and a global supply chain, with increasing global democracy, global human rights, global prosperity, and global comradery still emerging. And just wait for those to burst onto the scene!

I imagine most everyone in the room today has a smartphone with them, just as most people in the world do, over 83 percent of the global population. That’s one more thing that makes us a global community, a new world, that most of us have the ability to communicate with each other no matter where we’re from. During this decade we will or will get close to colonizing Mars and becoming an interplanetary species, to adopting autonomous green vehicles as our primary source of transportation, moving to vertical farming instead of using 40 percent of our usable land for growing food, have AI technology we can actually converse with, and smart robots small enough to go into our bodies and remove cancer cells, reverse aging, green energy will become dominant, and we will bring digital technology into the real world through 3D printing and manufacturing of everything from clothes to houses, and from automobiles to the food we eat.

Some of this may sound frightening, but, again, most all of us have smartphones, which were unheard of not too long ago. In fact, two years ago a smartphone would have cost you twice as much and been half as powerful than today’s. Today a \$200 smartphone represents what was a trillion dollars’ worth of computational and communications technology in 1965, the year after I

was born. But it was only a billion dollars' worth in 1980, just 15 years later. And today the most powerful computational and communications tool in human history costs just a few dollars and is in the hands of almost everybody on the planet.

So, it may not be the Second Coming of Christ. And it isn't the Apocalypse, even if some might feel like it is. But it is a type of rapture, a flash, a twinkling of the eye moment in history, and it is happening right now. At least that's what this mythology means to me at this moment in my life. It can mean something else to you. You're free to play with the imagery so long as you don't take it literally. Maybe being left behind reminds you of a time you felt abandoned by others, or completely alone in the world, as if there was nobody to turn to. Maybe it reminds you of what it feels like to be afraid of major changes, the fear of letting go, of taking a chance on something better. There are many kinds of rapture moments, and it's always important to consider which character we are in the story, the one caught up or the one left behind.

However you look at it, it might be helpful to remember the *Book of Revelation*, upon which today's literal apocalyptic beliefs are based, isn't all doom and gloom, even if that is the industry it sparked. *Revelations* ends, rather, with its visionary writer saying, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had passed away."¹⁵ I think that's the best part of the message for me, that no matter the upheaval we sometimes experience in our lives and in the world, things may turn out better than we imagined in the end. We might end up in a better place with a better world. I sure hope so.

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/doomindustry.html>

² *Christianity Today* 11/13/2000, Vol. 44 Issue 13, p. 26.

³ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/doomindustry.html>

⁴ *Christian Century*, 9/25/2002, Vol. 119 Issue 20, p. 8.

⁵ Morris, Alex, "Donald Trump: The End Times President," *Rolling Stone*, October 30, 2020, 7:00 AM ET

⁶ Matthew 24:40-41

⁷ Matthew 16:28, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:27

⁸ I Corinthians 7:29

⁹ I Corinthians 7:31

¹⁰ <https://onlinebaptist.com/topic/22688-bible-scholar-the-new-date-for-christ39s-return/>

¹¹ Matthew 28:20.

¹² Matthew 18:19-20

¹³ Luke 24:51.

¹⁴ Kurzweil, Ray, *The Singularity is Near*, Viking Press, New York, NY, 2005, p. 389.

¹⁵ Revelations 21:1