

# Farewell to the Rapture

(N.T. Wright, Bible Review, August 2001. Reproduced by permission of the author)

*Little did Paul know how his colorful metaphors for Jesus' second coming would be misunderstood two millennia later.*

The American obsession with the second coming of Jesus — especially with distorted interpretations of it — continues unabated. Seen from my side of the Atlantic, the phenomenal success of the *Left Behind* books appears puzzling, even bizarre<sup>[1]</sup>. Few in the U.K. hold the belief on which the popular series of novels is based: that there will be a literal “rapture” in which believers will be snatched up to heaven, leaving empty cars crashing on freeways and kids coming home from school only to find that their parents have been taken to be with Jesus while they have been “left behind.” This pseudo-theological version of Home Alone has reportedly frightened many children into some kind of (distorted) faith.

This dramatic end-time scenario is based (wrongly, as we shall see) on Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, where he writes: “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of an archangel and the trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will rise first; then we, who are left alive, will be snatched up with them on clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

What on earth (or in heaven) did Paul mean?

It is Paul who should be credited with creating this scenario. Jesus himself, as I have argued in various books, never predicted such an event<sup>[2]</sup>. The gospel passages about “the Son of Man coming on the clouds” (Mark 13:26, 14:62, for example) are about Jesus' vindication, his “coming” to heaven from earth. The parables about a returning king or master (for example, Luke 19:11-27) were originally about God returning to Jerusalem, not about Jesus returning to earth. This, Jesus seemed to believe, was an event within space-time history, not one that would end it forever.

The Ascension of Jesus and the Second Coming are nevertheless vital Christian doctrines<sup>[3]</sup>, and I don't deny that I believe some future event will result in the personal presence of Jesus within God's new creation. This is taught throughout the New Testament outside the Gospels. But this event won't in any way resemble the *Left Behind* account. Understanding what will happen requires a far more sophisticated cosmology than the one in which "heaven" is somewhere up there in our universe, rather than in a different dimension, a different space-time, altogether.

The New Testament, building on ancient biblical prophecy, envisages that the creator God will remake heaven and earth entirely, affirming the goodness of the old Creation but overcoming its mortality and corruptibility (e.g., Romans 8:18-27; Revelation 21:1; Isaiah 65:17, 66:22). When that happens, Jesus will appear within the resulting new world (e.g., Colossians 3:4; 1 John 3:2).

Paul's description of Jesus' reappearance in 1 Thessalonians 4 is a brightly colored version of what he says in two other passages, 1 Corinthians 15:51-54 and Philippians 3:20-21: At Jesus' "coming" or "appearing," those who are still alive will be "changed" or "transformed" so that their mortal bodies will become incorruptible, deathless. This is all that Paul intends to say in Thessalonians, but here he borrows imagery—from biblical and political sources—to enhance his message. Little did he know how his rich metaphors would be misunderstood two millennia later.

First, Paul echoes the story of Moses coming down the mountain with the Torah. The trumpet sounds, a loud voice is heard, and after a long wait Moses comes to see what's been going on in his absence.

Second, he echoes Daniel 7, in which "the people of the saints of the Most High" (that is, the "one like a son of man") are vindicated over their pagan enemy by being raised up to sit with God in glory. This metaphor, applied to Jesus in the Gospels, is now applied to Christians who are suffering persecution.

Third, Paul conjures up images of an emperor visiting a colony or province. The citizens go out to meet him in open country and then escort him into the city. Paul's image of the people "meeting the Lord in the air"

should be read with the assumption that the people will immediately turn around and lead the Lord back to the newly remade world.

Paul's mixed metaphors of trumpets blowing and the living being snatched into heaven to meet the Lord are not to be understood as literal truth, as the *Left Behind* series suggests, but as a vivid and biblically allusive description of the great transformation of the present world of which he speaks elsewhere.

Paul's misunderstood metaphors present a challenge for us: How can we reuse biblical imagery, including Paul's, so as to clarify the truth, not distort it? And how can we do so, as he did, in such a way as to subvert the political imagery of the dominant and dehumanizing empires of our world? We might begin by asking, What view of the world is sustained, even legitimized, by the *Left Behind* ideology? How might it be confronted and subverted by genuinely biblical thinking? For a start, is not the *Left Behind* mentality in thrall to a dualistic view of reality that allows people to pollute God's world on the grounds that it's all going to be destroyed soon? Wouldn't this be overturned if we recaptured Paul's wholistic vision of God's whole creation?

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[1] Tim F. Lahaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Cambridge, UK: Tyndale House Publishing, 1996). Eight other titles have followed, all runaway bestsellers.

[2] See my *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996); the discussions in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N.T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999); and Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), chapters 13 and 14.

[3] Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).