

What's So Secret About the Rapture?

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Published 2001 in large print by Christian Record Services, Inc., Lincoln, Nebraska

Foreword

The compiler of this book is indebted to several others whose careful research has made this project a joy. He has drawn heavily upon Maylan Schurch, *The Rapture: A Big Secret?* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1997). Of notable help have been timely updates gleaned from a special supplement to *Signs of the Times* entitled *The Rapture: A Second Look* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2000). Also consulted was Joe Crews, *What the Bible Says About the Secret Rapture* (Frederick, Md.: Amazing Facts, Inc., 1988).

What's So Secret About the Rapture?

Left Behind is a blockbuster best-selling Christian novel that has since been turned into a film. Both book and film have been making waves recently in conservative Christian circles.¹

From start to finish *Left Behind* mentions not a word about any loud command of God, voice of the Archangel, or trumpet call of God. Nothing is said about clouds in the sky. The lucky raptured people simply vanish, leaving those behind to ponder, worry, speculate, whatever.

In the Bible, Jesus clearly states that the wicked will be in despair at or during His coming, meaning that they must be aware of it as it is happening. But if we are to believe the scenario in *Left Behind*, people are totally unaware of Jesus' coming till it's all over.

The most disturbing suggestion in *Left Behind*, however, is the notion that there will be a second chance at salvation. Trouble is, the Bible knows nothing about anyone getting a second chance after Christ's Second Coming. Something's terribly wrong here.

Try putting yourself in the following scenario, and perhaps you'll see why I'm highly concerned about *Left Behind* and the teachings it promotes.

An ominous clock ticks down. *Thirty seconds.*

"Don't Walk" say the orange letters in the box on the lamppost. Christopher, Anne, and Joel, wearing dark-blue pinstripe suits, wait at the corner, glancing nervously at their watches. Their toes touch the edge of the curb and their briefcases swing gently at their sides.

All three are attorneys, working for the same law firm. They're due back in courts in 30 minutes, but now they're hurrying across the street to Sam's Sub Shop for a quick bite.

Christopher is a Christian.

Anne is an atheist.

Joel is a Jew.

Twenty seconds.

As they stand there, hungrily watching the "Don't Walk" sign and thinking of

Sam's succulent subs, you and I have a little time to speculate on an interesting question. If the rapture were to take place 20 seconds from now, what would happen to—

Christopher the Christian?

Anne the atheist?

Joel the Jew?

What do you think?

Since you're reading this book, the chances are that either you've already formed an opinion about the rapture or you're willing to develop one. I hope this book will help you fine-tune your thinking.

One of the most popular Christian beliefs about what will take place at Christ's Second Coming is the secret rapture theory. According to this concept, here's what will happen to Anne, Joel, and Christopher when Christ's return takes place:

Two seconds.

One second.

Christopher's briefcase bangs on the sidewalk, cracking open and spilling folders and pencils over the pavement. His suit, suddenly empty, billows down over his polished black shoes, still parked on the edge of the curb.

Christopher is gone. He's been raptured.

Is that the truth, or isn't it?

Is the rapture going to be secret, or not?

At first Anne and Joel don't realize that their friend has vanished. The "Don't Walk" signs turn to "Walk," and they step off the curb.

But suddenly the town goes mad.

An ancient yellow taxi roars close to Anne, its front bumper brushing her skirt. "Look out, you idiot!" she shouts. Whirling to lacerate the driver's eardrums with unprintable adjectives, she freezes with horror as the taxi slams straight into the front of a metro bus. People scream. Joel drops his briefcase and runs over to the taxi's window. He discovers to his amazement that the cab is totally empty. On the driver's seat lies a crumpled red shirt and a gray cloth cap. Blue jeans droop on the floorboard, and an empty black Nike is still propped ridiculously against the brake pedal.

And a whole frightened city is in pandemonium.

That, according to many Christians, is what the rapture will look like to Joel and Anne—and to anyone who isn't a born-again Christian—when it happens. Christians such as Christopher will vanish, caught up invisibly into the sky to be with Jesus, leaving the rest of the people to tow away the crashed cars with fish symbols glued to their trunk lids.

What do you think? Is that scenario true, or isn't it? Many devout Christians believe it is. And many other devout Christians believe it isn't.

But it can't be both ways. How can we find out what will really happen at the rapture?

Does it really make all that much difference? "Who cares what Christ's coming will be like?" I can hear someone ask. "Isn't the important thing to be ready for Jesus' return, no matter when it happens?"

You're right. Jesus told us to be ready at all times. But what you believe about the rapture definitely does make a difference.

Five Reasons It Does Make a Difference

1. *Jesus warned us there'd be deception about the manner of His return.* “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is Christ,’ or ‘There He is,’ do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:23, 24).²

The *elect* are, of course, the ones who've chosen to accept Jesus. And if false Second Coming ideas are so deceptive that they fool even God's people, then it's a good idea for you and me (assuming we want to be part of the elect) to find out the truth in advance so that we won't be tricked.

Jesus' great love for us caused Him to warn us about such deceptions so that we can prepare to meet them beforehand. Here's how we can avoid being deceived.

2. *Jesus urges us to study the Bible, especially prophecy.*

The book of Revelation has a special interest in Christ and His return—in fact, its first verse proclaims that it's a “Revelation of Jesus Christ.” And notice what Revelation 1:3 says: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.”

Revelation has quite a bit to say about Jesus' return, so you and I need to follow Jesus' advice and become experts on this topic—reading and heeding what He has to say.

Daniel is another book that speaks about the coming of the Son of Man. And Jesus also recommended the study of Daniel (Matt. 24:15).

3. *Jesus' return—whatever the method—will happen soon.*

The world is waking up and opening its eyes to the truth that time can't last much longer. We see prophecies such as those of Matthew 24 and 2 Timothy 3:1–5 being chillingly fulfilled hour by hour. We know too much about how to kill each other off—and kids with handguns are learning earlier and earlier. At the same time we know too little about how to live peacefully with our human family and our God. Many people from scores of both religious and nonreligious belief systems are saying with one voice, *The end is near*. Christians, of course, have long recognized that the struggle between Christ and Satan, good and evil, would conclude during a time such as we're living in now. One of these days God will reveal His true character in and through His faithful people and then the rest of the world will see Him for Who He is: a God Who loves us with a love we can understand, especially when we have a chance to see the whole picture.

4. *Jesus never taught that anyone would have a “second chance” for salvation after His return.* Nor does the rest of Scripture.

The secret rapture theory says that when Jesus returns invisibly and snatches Christopher away, He will leave Joel and Anne behind, alive, and they'll have a second chance to accept Christ. While they'll be required to go through a pretty severe tribulation, or time of struggle and persecution, if they sincerely repent they'll survive it. You might say that the rapture is their “get ready” call.

But what if the second chance theory is false? What if God offers only one chance, and it ends at the return of Christ? If that's the case, and if Joel and Anne have believed that they'll have a second opportunity, they'll be out of luck. That's why Joel and Anne—and Christopher—need to study carefully what the Bible says about Jesus' return.

5. *The secret rapture idea rests on a questionable method of Bible interpretation.*

We'll describe parts of this method later in this book. People apply this method of interpretation not only to the return of Christ but also to other topics and passages of Scripture.

Now, if this interpretive principle is correct, we have no problem. But if it's incorrect (either partly or totally), then many people might find themselves led astray. Don't you agree that you and I owe it to ourselves—and to our personal eternity—to check out the Bible facts for ourselves about the coming of Jesus?

That's what the rest of this book is about. But first we need to define our terms.

What Is the Rapture?

You won't find the word "rapture" in the English Bible. It does, however, show up in the Latin translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17: *Deinde nos, qui vivimus, qui relinquimur, simul rapiemur cum illis in nubibus . . .* *Rapiemur* is a form of *rapiō*, which means "to carry away," and is the source for the word "rapture." Here's a literal translation from the Latin: "Then we, who are alive, who remain, together will be carried away with them in clouds . . ."

So when many Christians speak of the rapture, they're talking about being "carried away" or "caught up" when Christ returns. Now, here's a vital point. "Rapture," as we just saw, simply means "carried away." Nothing in the Latin word *rapiō*, or in the Greek word *harpazō*, from which the Latin was translated, indicates secrecy. Both words simply mean "to carry off." In fact, if we open both eyes wide and read 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and 17—with all its shouting and trumpeting—we will wonder how secret the rapture can really be.

But that's for later. First we need to examine what many secret rapturists say will happen at Christ's return.

When we left the three young lawyers—now reduced to two by Christopher's rapture—Anne and Joel occupied themselves with trying to figure out what had happened. Let's rejoin them there.

The Secret Rapture Scenario

Joel turns from the cab and gazes into what little sky he can see between the tall buildings. "So that's what Christopher was talking about," he murmurs. "He's been taken to Heaven by . . . Messiah." Wonderment spreads across his face as a deepening conviction fills his mind. "Messiah!" He utters the word with mingled delight and dread. "Messiah has come, and I wasn't ready for Him!"

Suddenly Joel falls to his knees in prayer. Anne clutches at his shoulder, vexed at his strange behavior, but he's oblivious to her and to the frenzied shouting about him. And as he wrestles with God in an agony of entreaty, he senses a deep peace within him. He has found the Messiah. The Messiah has entered his heart. And one day the Messiah will return for His chosen people.

Meanwhile, 143,999 of Joel's fellow Jews have begun to feel the same sense of peace. Together they make up the 144,000 spoken of in Revelation, who during the next seven years will witness to the world that Jesus is the Messiah and Saviour.

Seven years pass, the last three and a half with terrible tribulation, in which Joel nearly loses his life. But just as it seems life can't go on much longer, the sky blasts apart, a lightning-like glare covers the world, and Jesus comes in the clouds (with Christopher and the rest of the raptured saints), rescues the 144,000 Jews, and sets up a thousand-year earthly kingdom.

What about Anne? She too has received a second chance at salvation. Although she'll be lost if she persists in her atheism, if she listens and responds as Joel tells her about Jesus, she'll be saved when the tribulation ends.

Anybody who's familiar with the writings of Tim LaHaye, Hal Lindsey, Salem Kirban, Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, and others will recognize that scenario. It has even become the plot for recent best-selling novels. Movies and videos as well as television present it. You will find variations, of course, depending on whose book you pick up, but that's basically it.

Almost all rapture believers say that Christ first removes the church to Heaven, then a great tribulation, or time of persecution and difficulty, happens sometime during the next seven years. Certain Jews convert and make it through that tribulation, and Jesus returns in glory at the end of the seven years.

It's an impressive theory—but is it fact?

The first thing we've got to remember is not to let book authors or Hollywood producers intimidate us. It's natural, of course, to feel author-awe. Neither you nor I have studied the rapture subject as many years as LaHaye, Lindsey, Kirban, Ryrie, Walvoord, and others have. Can it really be true that these God-fearing Christian scholars may be wrong?

Do you know what Tim LaHaye, Hal Lindsey, John Walvoord, and anyone else would tell you if you went directly to them? "Go to the Bible," they'd say. "Search the Scriptures." As deeply committed Christian scholars, that would be their earnest counsel.

So let's take these scholars' advice. First, let's examine three secrets about the secret rapture.

Three Secrets About the Secret Rapture

Don't get me wrong.

I'm pretty sure no one is conducting a conscious cover-up, but there are indeed three secrets most rapture-believing Christians aren't aware of. We can easily check out each one for factual accuracy.

The First Secret: The Bible Never Mentions a Secret Rapture.

Many times the Bible speaks of the coming of Jesus—but it *never* speaks of secret arrival in which saints disappear, leaving the wicked behind alive.

Maybe this shocks you. If so, let's look at two major texts that Hal Lindsey (one of the most famous secret rapturists alive) uses in his book *The Rapture*.³ I'm going to quote these two passages. Read them carefully and see if you think they really refer to a secret rapture. Let us look at the first one.

“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:51, 52).

If you read this text carefully, you noticed that it mentions three events that don't seem to be very secret: the trumpet, the raising of the dead, and the changing of our bodies.

Does God blow a noiseless trumpet? Consider another time in history when God sounded a trumpet—at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16, 19). Was that a secret trumpet? On the contrary, it was so loud that it frightened the Israelites into urging Moses to be their spokesperson to God (Ex. 20:18, 19). But secret rapturists believe that in the 1 Corinthians passage the divine trumpet is silent, heard only by the ears of the faithful—even though the text does not say that, or even imply it.

Does God conduct secret resurrections? Consider the other times in history when He raised the dead. Elisha brought a boy back to life, Jesus resurrected several people, Peter raised Dorcas, and Paul restored Eutychus. Each of those resurrections was obviously quite visible: human corpses began to live again. People were around to see it happen, either at the moment of resurrection or shortly afterward.

And when Christ Himself experienced resurrection, the Bible says that “the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the Holy City and appeared to many” (Matt. 27:52, 53).

Notice what happened at these resurrections: dead bodies received life and came out of their graves. It's curious, then, that when the secret rapturists quote 1 Corinthians 15, they ignore the sound of the Sinai trumpet and the physical resurrections of history, and they call this a secret resurrection, in which spiritual and not physical ears hear the trumpet, spiritual and not physical eyes see the Lord, and God raises spiritual and not physical bodies.

We simply find no Bible precedent for this idea of resurrection secrecy. Frankly, I worry about doctrinal ideas that lack a Biblical precedent.

Does God give people glorious bodies secretly? Consider another time in history when a body changed from a human one to a glorious heavenly one: at Jesus' resurrection. Was it a secret, invisible change? Hardly.

At His resurrection, when He physically passed through the opening of a physical tomb, the glory surrounding the scene was sufficiently visible to cause an entire group of Roman guards to go into sensory overload (Matthew 28:2–4).

These same objections to a secret rapture appear even more clearly in the other major passage Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, and other secret rapturists use: “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:15–17).

The Bible says the Lord descends with a shout—the secret rapturist says it’s inaudible except to the ears of the faithful. The Bible says the Archangel calls with His voice—the secret rapturist says it’s an inaudible cry. The Bible says the trumpet sounds—the secret rapturist says only selected ears will hear it. The righteous dead rise—but the secret rapturist says it is secret and invisible. The righteous living change into their glorious bodies and find themselves caught up in the air—but the secret rapturist assures us this is secret as well.

Yet all the rules of grammar and exegesis indicate that the passage is talking about a visible event. Believers in the secret rapture make a point of taking the Bible very literally in other places—why not interpret it literally here?

Before we go on to the two other secrets of the rapture theory, let’s deal with something we mentioned earlier:

Does God give sinners a second chance after His return?

Most people who believe in the secret rapture teach that when God raptures the church, people like Joel and Anne who remain behind will have a second opportunity at salvation. Even after the return of Christ, they say, there will still be hope for the lost.

I’d like you to read through the following passage carefully. Jesus is speaking about His return. See if He mentions a second chance for those who are left behind. I’ve emphasized a few phrases:

“For the coming of the Son of Man will be *just like the days of Noah*. For as in those days which were before the Flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until *the Flood came and took them all away; so shall the coming of the Son of Man shall be*. Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (Matt. 24:37–42).

Jesus said that His coming will be like the days of Noah. Two groups of people lived then: a large wicked group and a small righteous group. Notice that God didn’t leave the wicked group alive, to have a second chance at salvation. Instead, they died, and “so shall the coming of the Son of Man be” (verse 39).

In a similar passage in Luke 17:28–30, Jesus says that His coming will be as it was in the days of Lot. Lot and his daughters, you remember, lived in the

wicked town of Sodom. The angels hurried them from the city before its destruction. Did the citizens of that city remain alive to have another chance at salvation? No, they perished. “It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed” (verse 30).

The Second Secret: The Secret Rapture Theory Did Not Develop Until the Mid-1800s.

While this also might be a bit disconcerting to those who advocate the rapture theory, it’s true. The secret rapture theory arose out of a theological system called dispensationalism and was unknown prior to the nineteenth century. John F. Walvoord, a believer in the secret rapture and a well-known author of several books about the end-times, admits: “The preponderance of evidence seems to support the concept that the early church did not clearly hold to a rapture as preceding the endtime tribulation.”⁴ He further states that the early church’s view of the rapture seems to have been to combine it with the Second Advent.⁵

If the secret rapture is such a recent idea, why has it caught on so quickly? Because of several important reasons.

Back in the 1800s many liberal Bible scholars began to deny the inspiration of the Bible and referred to its stories as myths. Conservative Christians sensed the need to do something to stem this tide, and they began holding conferences for study and prayer.

Some of these groups, especially those that met from 1878 through the early 1900s, came under the influence of J. N. Darby and gradually adopted the secret rapture as the only way to explain Biblical problems raised by their intensely literal interpretations of end-time prophecies.

Then in 1909 C. I. Scofield published one of the most famous and influential study Bibles of all time, the *Scofield Reference Bible*. Its footnotes presented dispensationalist theories, and this Bible—or more correctly, its footnotes—has shaped American religious thinking perhaps more than any other recent book.

In 1970 Hal Lindsey published his dispensationalist best-seller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which almost immediately became a popular movie. Both the book and the movie did much to convince the public that the standard Christian belief about the Second Coming was the secret rapture theory. More recently, as I stated earlier, Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* book and film are stirring up the same pot. Which leads us directly to

The Third Secret: Not All of Today’s Sincere, Born-Again Christians Believe in the Secret Rapture.

Unfortunately, this is a pretty well-kept secret, because most of the people who operate the Christian TV networks, who write the sensational paperbacks, and who pastor the fast-growing charismatic churches are secret rapture believers.

But other serious, conservative, just-as-born-again scholars do not subscribe to the secret rapture view. I think one of the main reasons these men and women aren’t as well known is that it’s more interesting to read a

dramatically written paperback plotting future Middle East battle plans than it is to read a sober, thoughtful study that avoids making sweeping assertions but painstakingly establishes its truths point by point.

There are actually several theories about Jesus' Second Coming. We can divide most of the people who hold these theories into two groups:

The Secret Rapturists. These Christians believe that the rapture precedes the Second Coming and is different from it. The rapture, they say, is secret, or hidden, while the Second Coming is visible and glorious. The secret rapturists further subdivide into pre-tribulationists, mid-tribulationists, or post-tribulationists, depending on whether they believe the rapture happens before, during, or after the tribulation.

*The Open Rapturists.*⁶ As I mentioned, this group hasn't had the PR the secret rapturists have had, but they're just as earnest and just as in love with Jesus.

The open rapturists choose to take the Second Coming texts literally. They say that the rapture *is* the Second Coming—the two are one and the same event. A tribulation will take place, they explain, but the church, instead of being removed from it, will go through it under the protection of God. Open rapturists tend to reject firmly the seven-year tribulation theory, as well as the idea that literal, national Israel will play any divinely directed part in last-day events.

What's confusing to the layperson, of course, is that both of the above groups contain many well-educated scholars who know their Greek and Hebrew. On my desk right now is a book in which three scholars (who teach in the same seminary and who are friends, but who hold quite different views on the rapture) cheerfully but firmly argue their end-time beliefs with one another!⁷

"Who am I," the average person asks, "to think that I can understand the rapture if these three scholars can't agree on it?"

Again I urge you: Do not be intimidated. You and I can really, truly go to the Bible and find out the truth. But first we need to deal with this question: Why do secret rapture believers think that way?

Why Do Secret Rapture Believers Think That Way?

As I said, you cannot prove the secret rapture from direct Scriptural evidence. The Bible has absolutely no texts that say God will invisibly catch up the saints into the sky. Yet hundreds of thousands of secret rapturists believe firmly that this is what will happen. There must be some reason they think that way.

First, nobody—secret rapturist or open rapturist—approaches the Bible with a totally open mind. When Marvello the Magician told the old-time carnival audience that he was going to hypnotize his wife and make her levitate, many adults gasped in amazement as the woman rose. But the children, who'd never heard of hypnotism, looked for the black metal bar that supported her—and often spotted it! The adults were fooled. Their minds contained a lot of old wives' tales about hypnotism, and many in those days

believed that a hypnotized person could float in the air. So they applauded madly, collected their kids, and wandered away, amazed. And they stopped searching for further causes. But the kids' uncluttered minds learned the truth.

We all approach the Bible with presuppositions—in other words, preconceived ideas. But if we firmly remind ourselves that we do have such presuppositions, it helps us to unclutter our minds and do some really honest Bible study. And we must unclutter our minds not only intellectually but emotionally, because our emotions are deeply tied to our religious beliefs.

Buried within our minds is a mix of feelings for the religious teachings of our parents, our youth pastor, or the evangelist who converted us. A certain amount of our personal Christianity is little more than sanctified nostalgia.

And woe to the luckless people who try to question our beliefs! Toying with dynamite, they don't just challenge our minds—they challenge our emotional “insides.” So let's try to park our emotions on a shelf when we're studying Bible truth—because once we have discovered what's true, we can allow our feelings full expression again as we marvel at what those truths teach us about our Saviour's redeeming love.

Thus dispensationalists, like anybody else, approach Bible study with a mix of presuppositions and emotions. Unfortunately, dispensationalism and the secret rapture theory rest on a questionable method of Bible interpretation. Let's examine two presuppositions making up this method:

Presupposition One: Most Dispensationalists Say That God Fulfills His Promises and Prophecies No Matter What.

“But there's nothing wrong with that idea,” I can hear someone say. “Don't we have a dependable God?”

Notice that phrase “no matter what.” That's the key. You see, most dispensationalists assume that God has a plan for Israel in the last days. Why do they say this? Because back in the Old Testament God made a lot of predictions about how Israel would return to Palestine and enjoy earthly prosperity there. And dispensationalists argue, “Since God is dependable, He will keep His promises to Israel no matter what.”

Let's study this presupposition. Is God really locked into fulfilling His prophecies no matter what? Or putting it another way, are God's prophecies *conditional* or *unconditional*?

To find out, let's go back to the Old Testament. Remember the story of Jonah and the big fish? Once the fish had spewed the reluctant prophet back onto the shore, Jonah headed for the wicked city of Nineveh. His assignment was to deliver a sobering message: “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4).

Now, here's a prophecy from God—a time prophecy, even. It's a very specific statement about a future event: Nineveh will be overthrown in 40 days. But notice what happened as the crowds listened to Jonah preach. “Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him,

covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes” (verses 5, 6).

The pagan monarch apparently recognized that not only did God have the power to fulfill His word, but also He was Someone Who would respond to pleas for mercy. So the king said to the people, “Let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?” (verses 8, 9).

Events showed that his perception of God was right. “When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it” (verse 10).

Did God fulfill His prophecy no matter what? He certainly did not. *The people repented, and so did God.* In other words, God doesn’t always have to fulfill His prophecies. He’s free to modify them if the people change their behavior.

“But wait a minute,” I can hear someone say. “Nineveh was a pagan nation. Israel was God’s chosen people, and He had a covenant with them. He won’t go back on His covenant no matter what the people themselves might do.”

Is that true?

It’s certainly a major key to dispensationalist thinking. That’s why during the past couple decades you’ve probably seen a lot of Christian paperbacks written about the modern political state of Israel, the oil crisis, Saddam Hussein, and so on. People who write such books assume that the modern nation of Israel and its neighbors are working out God’s plan—or at least getting into position so that God can bring about His plan. The Middle East, to many dispensationalists, is a kind of time clock by which we can see how close the end is.

But were God’s promises of prosperity to ancient Israel unconditional? Interestingly, they weren’t. Moses and Jeremiah will help us confirm that. First, let’s look at Deuteronomy 28. Israel’s great leader Moses is about to die, and he is giving Israel his final words from God. Notice the phrases I’ve emphasized:

“The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, as He swore to you, *if you will keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and walk in His ways.* So all the peoples of the Earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord; and they shall be afraid of you. And the Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your beast and in the produce of your ground, in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you” (verses 9–11).

Notice the big *if*. “If you will keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and walk in His ways.” The above verses are part of Moses’ famous “blessings and cursings” passage. What he’s saying is that *if Israel follows the Lord’s will, they will prosper.* But listen to what he also says a little later in the chapter:

“But it shall come about, *if you will not obey the Lord your God, to*

observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses shall come upon you” (verse 15). Then he lists the cursings. They fill the rest of the chapter, reminding Israel of the bad things that will happen if they don’t follow God’s will.

Are God’s promises conditional? *They certainly are.* If Israel stays within His will, they’ll get their land. If not, they won’t.

Moses addressed the nation at the beginning of their national existence. Jeremiah spoke to them 900 years later, when the Jews faced captivity. And his message is the same as Moses’ message. He quotes God as declaring:

“‘Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?’ declares the Lord. ‘Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. *Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.* So now then, speak to the men of Judah and against the inhabitants of Jerusalem saying. “Thus says the Lord, ‘Behold I am fashioning calamity against you and devising a plan against you. *Oh turn back, each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds*’”” (Jer. 18:6–11).

Notice that God’s terms haven’t changed: *Obey Me and you will prosper; disobey Me and you’ll be destroyed.*

Dispensationalists, then, are wrong—at least in this area. When they say that God must fulfill His prophecies to Israel no matter what, they’re not reading the Bible correctly. Yet, because of this first presupposition—that God’s promises to Israel are unconditional—they go right ahead and believe their second presupposition:

Presupposition Two: Most Dispensationalists Say That Israel as a Nation Has a Major Role in God’s Last-Day Plans.

May 14, 1948, is a red-letter day to most Jews because on that date the modern nation of Israel was officially proclaimed. After nearly 2,000 years of dispersion the Jews could now return to their “Promised Land.” And they did, in great numbers. As they poured into Palestine, Christians all over the world looked on with great interest. Could this return of the Jews have prophetic meaning?

“See?” cried the dispensationalists. “God does have last-day plans for Israel, just as we said. And now these plans are taking shape. The rapture is just around the corner.” But are they right? What’s the truth?

We’ve already read God’s conditions for Israel’s national prosperity in the Old Testament. He made it very clear that a nation must obey Him—must conform to His will—in order to receive His blessing. But what about the New Testament? Did Jesus teach that Israel as a nation would be part of God’s plan in the last days? One day Jesus was speaking to a group of important Jews—the chief priests and elders. During His conversation He told a parable

about a vineyard. It's not a very pleasant story.

The Owner of the vineyard had rented it out to some vine-growers, and the time came to collect the rent. First He sent some slaves to collect it, but the vine-growers beat them up and killed some of them. Then He sent a bigger group of slaves. But the vine-growers treated them the same way.

Finally “He sent His Son to them, saying, ‘They will respect My Son.’ But when the vine-growers saw the Son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the Heir; come, let us kill Him, and throw Him out of the vineyard, and killed Him” (Matt. 21:37–39).

Perhaps Jesus paused at this point in His story, and maybe His eyes met those of the priests and rulers. He drew them into the discussion. “‘Therefore when the Owner of the vineyard comes, what will He do to those vine-growers?’ They [the priests and elders] said to Him, ‘He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers, who will pay Him the proceeds at the proper seasons.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Did you never read in the Scriptures, “The Stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief Corner Stone; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes”?’ Therefore I say to you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it. . . .’ And when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them” (verses 40–45).

The Pharisees recognized that He was speaking about them. They didn't need anyone to tell them the meaning of His parable. Part of verse 33, about the Landowner Who planted a vineyard, was a direct quote from Isaiah 5:1, 2. In that passage God had spoken of the vineyard as Judah—the Jewish nation.

Sadly, the Jewish nation had a history of rejecting God. First they abused and killed His prophets, and shortly some of its leaders would reject His Own Son. Jesus' parable shows that God's principle of conditionality hadn't changed a bit: *Obey and you will prosper; disobey and you will be rejected.*

Too many of the Jews fulfilled their part of the parable by killing the Son of God, and in the book of Acts we hear Paul and Barnabas telling them of their doom. “But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, ‘*It was necessary that the Word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles*’” (Acts 13:45, 46).

Does today's nation of Israel—as a political unit—have a significant part to play in God's plan? Not according to Jesus and Paul. They very clearly stated that the Jews no longer owned the vineyard. Israel as a nation was no longer to dominate God's plans, since under the principle of conditionality many of its people had rejected Christ and His message.

Of course, Jews—just like anyone else—can still be saved as individuals. On the Day of Pentecost 3,000 accepted Christ and were baptized (Acts 2:41). Later the Hebrew converts had swelled to 5,000 (Acts 4:4), including a large number of priests (Acts 6:7). And throughout the rest of Acts many Jews as

well as Gentiles received the message of salvation through faith in Jesus.

You see, that's the way it has always been: God has always had a faithful remnant who were truly His people. Not all of ancient Israel were faithful to Him—but a small remnant were. God told Elijah (1 Kings 19:18) that He still had 7,000 faithful believers who hadn't bowed the knee to Baal. And later, when the northern kingdom of Israel went into Assyrian captivity, and many even in the southern kingdom of Judah found themselves taken to Babylon, Judah remained faithful, while those in Israel became tainted with idolatry and became the Samaritans. Yet the latter produced the good Samaritan and the woman at the well—both examples of God's small faithful remnant who hear and respond to the Holy Spirit.

The book of Acts shows how certain Jews accepted Jesus and His message, but others did not. Some Gentiles accepted too—and they joined the Jewish Christians in becoming God's new chosen people.

Paul sums it up very neatly in two passages. In Romans 11 he tells a parable about an olive tree. Some of the tree's natural branches—the Jews—had been broken off, and some wild olive branches—the Gentiles—had been grafted in. The key question is this: Whom did the tree represent?

If you read carefully, you'll see that Paul is saying that the tree is not Israel as a whole—*the tree is God's chosen people, His faithful believers in every age who are so grateful God chose them that they in turn choose Him*. The Jews who didn't believe were broken off the tree—again you can see God's conditionality principle at work—and the Gentiles who believed were grafted in. Paul hopes that the Jews who rejected Christ will eventually believe and be grafted back in too. The tree is not a literal Israelite nation, but a spiritual nation, a spiritual Israel.

Paul continues this idea in Galatians: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:28, 29).

Heirs according to *promise*.

Dispensationalists say that anybody with Jewish blood in his or her veins is an heir according to the promise—God's promise of a homeland and prosperity for Old Testament Israel. But Paul believes differently. He says that no longer does any distinction between Jew and Greek exist as to whether one is chosen or not. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

All one. And all heirs.

But Israel is now in Palestine! Doesn't that mean anything? Was it God's plan for the Jews to come home to Palestine after all these years? “Well, they're here, aren't they?” someone asks. “It must be His plan, if He let them come back!”

Be careful here. That's stepping into a fallacy.

What were God's criteria for Israel's national restoration in the Old Testament? In Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and in several other passages, God clearly states His conditions: *Obey Me and you will prosper; disobey and you'll be destroyed*.

Consider. How did modern Jews get back to the Promised Land? Did they turn to the Lord and obey Him from the heart? If they had, that would have meant accepting God's Son, Jesus, as the Messiah. But this they have not done. In fact, though modern Israel appreciates Christian tourists, it does not encourage the religion of Christ there.

Israeli belief runs the gamut from frank atheism to extreme orthodoxy. Therefore, since they haven't fulfilled God's conditions, the Jews' return to Palestine offers no proof that they are in God's favor as a nation. And anyway, God is not dealing with Israel on a national basis anymore, as Paul reminds us: "There is neither Jew nor Greek." It was simply a fortunate political decision on the part of the United Nations, not a turning to God as a nation and repenting, that gave them back their land.

If you still are wondering about this, consider: Is modern Israel enjoying the blessing of God right now? Remember, God's promises to ancient Israel were always of tranquillity and prosperity. God wanted to fight their foes for them, and offer them peace. He desired to send rain upon their crops and give them plenty. But modern Israel has not enjoyed peace and prosperity.

They've scarcely had a peaceful moment since they became a nation. Since 1948 they've been in an almost permanent state of war, sometimes cold and sometimes hot. And their God is not fighting for them the way He said He would in the Old Testament—they're having to use expensive military equipment (such as Patriot missiles) and muscular allies (including the U.S.A.) to keep their enemies at bay. Military service is now also compulsory, a tacit acceptance of perpetual armed outbreaks.

As I write this, Israel is still reeling from the assassination of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin—by someone of his own race. But although Rabin was a great man, he never seemed to exalt the God of Heaven in his plans and policies in the way that David or Solomon or Hezekiah did.

And just after Rabin's death, *Newsweek* interviewed Shimon Peres, Rabin's successor, about his country's future. The word "God" or "Lord" doesn't appear in the article, nor does Peres even mention his own faith and how it relates to his country's future. Here's the bit of dialogue that expresses his only comment about Israel's religious situation:

"You have opened a dialogue with religious elements. How essential is it to bridge the schism among Jews?"

"It's essential for peace. . . . Look, the majority [of religious Israelis] don't support our policies. But there is a minority that supports us. And why should we lose this minority? If we have 30 percent of the religious vote, we have a majority. If we mobilize the whole 100 percent of the religious vote against us, we don't have a majority."⁸

And while recent truces and peace talks have gained great ground, anyone who's even vaguely familiar with the Old Testament's glorious (and conditional) promises of abundant wealth and joyous peace must recognize a night-and-day difference between God's ideal and modern Israel.

The only conclusion we can come to is that modern Israel's return is not according to God's plan. And therefore, Christians who look to the Middle

East for evidence of a coming secret rapture are watching in the wrong direction.

Because the Bible clearly tells us what will really happen at the rapture.

What Will Really Happen at the Rapture

Let's go right to the Bible again. Here's what will happen, backed up with clear Bible data.

1. Jesus will come back in the same manner in which He left. In Acts 1 Jesus has just ascended into the sky, and His disciples stand dejectedly, watching Him go. "And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white stood beside them; and they also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? *This Jesus, Who has been taken up from you into Heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into Heaven*'" (verses 9–11).

Notice that at His departure He was visible to His disciples. He ascended; then a cloud hid Him. When He returns, it will also be like that. He'll arrive in the clouds, He'll descend, and He'll be visible.

2. *Jesus' coming will be visible—He will arrive in the sky with clouds.* "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21:27).

3. *Jesus' coming will be seen over a wide area.* "For just as lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matt. 24:27).

4. *Both the righteous and the wicked will witness His return.* "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the Earth will mourn over Him" (Rev. 1:7). So according to the Bible, Jesus' Second Advent will not be secret or invisible. "Every eye will see Him."

5. *Jesus' coming will be audible and will include a shout, the Archangel's voice, and a trumpet's sound.* "For the Lord Himself will descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:16, 17).

And we will hear Jesus' Own voice as well. John 5:25 says that "the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live."

Back to Christopher, Anne, and Joel. Let's rewind the videotape to where Christopher, Anne, and Joel will stand on the curb, watching the "Don't Walk" light, their teeth tingling to bite into Sam's submarine sandwiches. And let's watch what will really happen at the return of Christ.

Two seconds.

One second.

Everything goes white—silvery white, brighter than white. It bathes the buildings, the taxis, the people in brilliance. Down along the walls of the

skyscrapers clatters the sound of a silver-sweet trumpet, aching with longing, trembling with love. The street buckles, the buses lurch, the buildings sway.

And who can say what will happen to Joel and Anne and Christopher? Who can read the heart? If Anne and Joel have indeed resisted the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, if they've refused to come to know their Creator, if they've indeed chosen to be separate from Him forever, then Anne will bury her eyes in her hands and scream, "Hide me from His face." She won't be able to bear being in His lovely presence, because she's still a rebel at heart.

Joel, his face set hard and his ears stopped against the Saviour's thrilling voice, will claw his way to the belly of a building and yearn to die.

And Anne and Joel will have their wish, because God honors free will. If they want to be apart from God forever, they will be. And apart from God one cannot exist.

But if Christopher has indeed fallen so in love with Jesus that he'd really be happy in eternity, he will levitate through the rubble and smoke of the dying city and join other believers as they are carried to safety into the presence of their Friend seated on the cloud.

And I want to be ascending with them. Don't you?

There's one way we both can make sure we'll rise to meet Jesus: "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (1 John 5:11, 12).

How do you "have the Son"?

By getting acquainted with Him through Bible reading and prayer. By recognizing how delightful it will be to spend eternity with Him. And by allowing His Holy Spirit to change your attitudes and erase your selfish nature so you can step right into Heaven.

Right now, as I conclude this book, I'm recommitting my life to Jesus. Won't you join me?

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² Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

³ Hal Lindsey, *The Rapture* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985), pp. 39–51.

⁴ John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶ I must give credit for this term to Sakae Kubo, author of *A Reader's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, who has also written a book called *The Open Rapture*.

⁷ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Paul D. Feinberg, Douglas J. Moo, and Richard R. Reiter, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). After an interesting history of the rapture theory by Reiter, Archer, Feinberg, and Moo present in turn their theories, and the other two men in turn rebut each paper. It's stimulating to

read, and not as confusing as you might think. Also, it's an instructive study in presupposition.

⁸ "You Can't Live in Fear," *Newsweek*, Dec. 4, 1995.