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The Dread of Endings

Who cannot see that the world is already in its decline, and no longer has the strength and vigor of former times? There is no need to invoke Scripture authority to prove it. The world tells its own tale and in its general decadence bears adequate witness that it is approaching the end. . . . There is less innocence in the courts, less justice in the judges, less concord between friends, less artistic sincerity, less moral strictness.

Cyprian, 250 CE

If you're ever bored and want to see what an alternative universe looks like, spend some time at www.rapture-ready.com. Go ahead, do it now; I'll wait. Back? Great. How was that for a WTF moment? Perhaps you spent the first five minutes thinking to yourself, "This is one of the most amazing pieces of performance art I've ever seen, rivaling Banksey's Bemusement Park, #Dismaland." But then as you scrolled through the site you realized, "Holy

Crap! These people really believe this, and we let them vote, drive cars, and procreate.” Perhaps you were stunned



THE BISHOP

As a Mainline Protestant
I'm pretty sure the
Rapture Ready website
is NSFW.

to find that on the “Rapture Index” we’re close to the all-time high of 188 points. Jesus is calling, but not so tenderly this time. Welcome to the amazing world of Raptureland, a glance through the looking glass of those who obsess about the end times.

Apocalypse. Armageddon. The Eschaton. Springing from our fascination with The End, a storehouse of images permeates our art, literature, and religion. The End is a belief so ingrained within us that the apocalypse is part of the air we breathe, the atmosphere that envelops us. Themes about the end of the world as we know it, to borrow from REM, saturate our consciousness because they’re so pervasive. The film industry would probably go broke if it didn’t have the idea of The End to mine for material. Of course, perhaps after the movie *This Is The End*, #thismoviesucks, Hollywood deserves to go bankrupt, or at the very least we should have an actor-shaming tumblr featuring James Franco, Seth Rogen, and the rest of those cynical money-grubbers who showed up in this hot mess. (Hermione, what were you thinking?) Apocalyptic themes run through every culture, every religion, from ancient times to our own.

Humankind's dirty little secret is that The End fascinates us.

The word *apocalypse* doesn't denote the end of all things, rather it means to uncover or unveil something that is hidden. In apocalyptic literature the curtain is pulled back from the façade of existence so that we can see the reality behind the scenes. It's like the moment in the *Wizard of Oz* when the curtain is pulled back to reveal the truth about the great and powerful Oz—he's just a guy who uses technology to create an illusion of power. Ancient apocalypses from Babylon to Israel worked to show that behind the scenes of everyday life, with its oppressions and violence, God's reality was far different. These writings revealed that the forces behind the scrim, evil or divine, were a reflection of another, heavenly, reality. This revelation was often ambiguous because when the apocalyptic truth was revealed, confusion entered the picture. An unveiling of evil spiritual forces for some was for others the very system that keeps the world orderly. Revelation of what God thought about society—and God was seldom pleased—called one's very existence into question.

Meeting the Apocalypse for the First Time

My first exposure to the contemporary world of Christian apocalyptic speculation came in 1972 when I was a sophomore in college. It was right after a profoundly compelling conversionary moment in my life. At the time I considered it a unique and singular event, but I have since come to understand life as a series of conversionary moments. A nineteen-year-old, however, doesn't often possess the means to adequately interpret experience,

which made me a perfect target for those who embraced my fledgling faith and proceeded to put a copy of Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* into my hands. Little did I know I was getting ready to take Mr. Hal's wild, apocalyptic ride. Giving me that book was like putting matches in a baby's crib—not good for the baby or the crib.



THE ACOLYTE

I think it would be hard
to take a preacher named
Hal seriously.

I absorbed Lindsey's pithy and clever interpretations of biblical prophecy with a morbid and naïve curiosity. I felt as if I were in possession of the secret code to understand a world that was falling apart. How had no one ever told me about this before? Lindsey even had maps of how the armies of the Earth would converge on Israel for the last battle, *maps* for God's sake! How much clearer could it all be? When I asked my new friends why this stuff wasn't taught in the churches, I was informed the church was part of the problem, but we in the know had information that most churches didn't possess; it was all part of their apostasy that they wouldn't believe us. For a teenager, having the roadmap to the end of the world was like taking acid, but without all the painful headaches and legal complications. The landmarks were the same, but totally skewed and colorfully messy, with a soupçon of fear and paranoia thrown in for good measure. I had fallen down the rabbit hole and I couldn't get back.

So many things make
more sense with a chart!
And Daniel 7 references!



Over the course of a few days I absorbed Lindsey's mesmerizing tale of worldwide calamity. It was a wondrous story. The countdown to Jesus' return and the end of the world began with the return of Jews to Israel in 1948. Since then the clock has been ticking, and at any moment millions of people will suddenly disappear from the face of the earth. A perplexed and sinful world will be stunned by this event, but, unfortunately for them, they have seven years of horrific tribulation left before the last great battle, Armageddon. During this seven-year period a charismatic charmer will emerge who will lead the world and help Israel rebuild its temple. But unlike all those other sociopaths, #politicians, who manipulate us with charm and personality, this one will be the Antichrist. Solidifying his power through a ten-nation confederation, probably the European Common Market (this was 1972 after all), the Antichrist will come to dominate most of the political orders of the earth. At the middle of the seven years the Antichrist puts his image in the rebuilt Temple of Jerusalem, at which point events accelerate to the final battle, Armageddon, in the valley of Megiddo in Israel. This is the moment Jesus returns with the saints to really kick some pagan ass. My adolescent brain was fascinated by the graphics in tracts and pop Christian culture back then—lurid images of ascending bodies leaving crashing cars, plummeting planes, and empty graves.

Zombies for Jesus. It was electrifying to think I was living in the last days.

I was so captivated by Hal Lindsey's interpretations of the world that I dropped out of the godless world of secular education (though, in fairness, bad lifestyle choices had been leading to this moment). When you can pin skipping class and dropping out of college on following Jesus it makes it all seem more holy somehow. Leaving behind my former life, I embarked on my East Coast Armageddon Hitchhiking tour, earnestly warning all those I met of the wrath to come. It was, of course, the early seventies, so I wasn't the only one taken with the story of impending apocalypse. *The Late Great Planet Earth* was the best-selling nonfiction book in the 1970s, a success that only continued, selling more than 28 million copies by 1990. This should give us pause: there are millions of decent, God-fearing folk who sincerely believe that Hal Lindsey actually knows what he's talking about.

In the course of my travels I encountered a group who would super-size my apocalyptic imagination—the Children of God. Hal Lindsey, I soon realized, was a timid poser who would only commit to an outer edge of 1988 for the return of Christ. The Children of God, a.k.a., Family of Love, a.k.a., the Family, were ready to commit to a more immediate time frame, and in order to flee God's judgment we were told that we had to leave the United States before the elections of 1972. Boy, was I lucky to have run into them! Just in the nick of time! They knew the Bible better than Hal Lindsey, and their story seemed even more compelling. We were the vanguard of new prophets warning a corrupt and decadent age that The End was near. It was all very dramatic, though that wooden yoke (Jeremiah

27:2) they made us wear around our necks when we went out to do street theater was a bit cumbersome.

These types of stories are scary. Funny. But scary.



THE ELDER

Four disillusioned months after entering the Children of God I found myself in a rowhouse in Toronto, Ontario looking at a roomful of my new best friends and wondering how I had been so deceived, so foolish, as to fall for this delusional tale of doom. Slipping away from them like a thief in the night, I headed to the Love Inn, a farm outside of Ithaca in upstate New York. One of the many alternative Christian communities that sprouted like mushrooms during the Jesus Movement of the sixties and seventies, this community took me in, put me to work, and eventually my apocalyptic fever dreams faded as I came to understand that I had fallen into the peculiar world of Rapture culture.¹

Rapture Culture

Who doesn't love a good disaster story (how else to explain the box office for the horribly titled movie, *Armageddon*?), and what could be more disastrous than the end of the world? It's hard to resist the seductive allure of thinking that our time is special, that we live in the most important period of history and it all ends with us. This belief has fueled a powerhouse industry of books, movies, speakers,

and churches that have influenced millions of people around the world by use of fiction, conferences, and media appearances. Call it The Left Behind Industrial Complex.



THE DEACON

You got out early. Just imagine a youth group trip to the theater to pay our friends to watch Kurt Cameron in *Left Behind*.
#EyesClosedHeadBowedDuringCredits

According to recent polls, ten to fifteen million Americans are doctrinal believers in the end times, and another ten to fifteen million are “narrative” believers, accepting the rough outlines of what we shall see is the dispensational interpretation. A Time/CNN poll taken in the aftermath of 9/11 found that 59 percent of Americans believed the events in Revelation are going to come true in their lifetimes.

The world of the apocalypse still exercises an enormous influence on a significant part of the Christian community in America and beyond. A teenager, caught in the liminal stages of life, can be excused many indiscretions, but we all know many people who sincerely believe that Jesus could come back any minute. In a recent poll, 41 percent of all U.S. adults, 54 percent of Protestants, and 77 percent of evangelicals believe that the world is living in the biblical end times.² It might be easy to dismiss this study because it

was commissioned for the release of a book on the end times, but a recent poll by the Public Religion Research Institute mirrored these numbers, showing that 77 percent of white evangelical Protestants believed climate change is happening because we're living in the last days.³

This sounds judgmental because it is. How do these people get to vote or hold office?



THE ELDER

It's hard to find a person, at least in American culture, who has not heard of the *Left Behind* books. The website www.LeftBehind.com claims over 69 million readers of at least one of the books in their series. Millions more saw the movie, *Left Behind*, where multitudes disappeared, along with Nicholas Cage's career, in the blink of an eye. Millions are convinced, as I once was, that the Rapture is a thing that could be upon us at any moment and we will then, in the words of the late Christian songwriter/singer

The third time I got saved was at a middle school youth camp to DC Talk's cover of Larry Norman.



THE DEACON

Larry Norman's most famous hit, "Wish We'd All Been Ready." The anticipated return of Christ is so clearly evident to those who live in this community, have internalized its narrative, and immersed themselves in books, movies, podcasts, and conferences, that to try and break through the interpretive world they've constructed is futile. When I question these beliefs in the Rapture and Jesus' return I'm met with the same shake of head I used to give those who tried to convince me that my convictions were misplaced.

The attraction of Christ's return is so strong because we're shaped by stories, and as stories go, this one has staying power. It's become a commonplace idea that narratives shape us, constructing the mental landscape we move through. Those narratives we choose to embrace and take into our daily lives become something more than mere stories; they are the living room furniture of the spaces we inhabit, and some days it's hard to get off the couch. This is especially true when we feel beaten down by life. If we feel besieged by a culture that doesn't respect our values and we're powerless to affect the decisions the elites make about our lives, we resonate with stories that offer us certainty that God is in control. Perhaps we harbor hope that we will be vindicated at The End, when all things are revealed for what they truly were behind the screen. This day of reversal is part of God's ultimate plan, and if we only hang on long enough everyone will know we were right.

To be part of a cosmic story is to be placed at the center of existence. There's a strong appeal to a life of meaning when life seems meaningless. The Rapture narrative

and all that accompanies it offers us a story we can participate in. When anything of significance happens in Israel, it's not just business as usual in the Mideast; it's the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. With every headline about ISIS beheading another Christian, or the possibility of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, we become susceptible to a story that explains that the world is not spinning out of control, but heading irrevocably toward The End and everything is happening just as God intends. Ours is not the only generation that has thought so; millions of people over thousands of years have interpreted world events in relation to the end times drama.⁴

The pull of The End is so strong that it affects secular pursuits as well. Themes that are prominent in Jewish and Christian apocalypses—alienation/salvation/eternal life/heaven/hell—even drive the world of modern technology and science fiction. The inventor Ray Kurzweil, for example, author of the influential book *The Singularity Is Near*, probes how far he can extend human life by downloading our consciousness into a computer, perhaps keeping us alive until we're able to merge with the energy of the universe. Not exactly the type of life everlasting that the Revelation of John addresses, but the idea is there. The apocalyptic imagination created by Jewish and Christian texts, with their dualist worldview, desire to overcome human suffering, and hope for resurrected human bodies finds expression in the world of Silicon Valley (#Robert Geraci, #ApocalypticAI). The world of virtual reality, of Second Life, is a counterpart to heaven, where lives are not lost, but continue on without end. As long as cyberspace exists we can live forever and create a world without the flaws of this one.

The desire to live forever is the only reason I can think of for the *Highlander* movies. There is even an entire movement, transhumanism, exploring ways in which we can transcend the human body to enhance ourselves for everlasting life.



THE BISHOP

I don't know which
is weirder to me—
raptured to heaven or a
second online life.

Hope for happy endings is a very powerful category for shaping our consciousness. Apocalyptic categories deeply influence those who are working in artificial intelligence and related fields, though they may not be aware of this fact. If, as religious traditions tell us, we're oppressed by the fragility of our humanity, then the downloading of our consciousness into machines constitutes a resurrection of sorts. Transcendence comes in our ability to overcome bodily limitations. These themes are growing increasingly common in science fiction, which explores through books, movies, and television the destruction and salvation that artificial intelligence promises (*#Transcendence*, *#JohnnyDepp*). In transhumanism we find concepts that are ancient and resistant to abolition. In the world of techno-salvation the heavenly city of Revelation has been replaced with cyberspace, a place of re-enchantment where lives can be created that will live forever.

Sensational Dispensationalism

The influence of apocalyptic imagination may be subtler outside of religious traditions, but within religious communities the idea that we know the future, that biblical prophecy foretells what is to come, attracts millions to embrace dispensationalist theology. The term *dispensationalism* refers to an innovative path of biblical interpretation that started in nineteenth-century England among the Plymouth Brethren and has shaped American Christianity in significant ways. Dispensational theology alludes to distinct periods of time, dispensations, in which God purportedly deals in different ways with the world. Adam and Eve lived in one dispensation, Noah in another, Moses in another, and so on. In each of these eras, the work of God to bring judgment and salvation was different. All those who have accepted the dispensationalist interpretation believe that it's probable we're living in the last dispensation or era of God's time and that the Rapture, the taking of believing Christians from this world, is an imminent event that could occur at any moment. For them, the Bible is a blueprint of the future, revealing God's plan for planet Earth. This feeds into our desire to know what the future holds. Given the abundance of examples of divination and astrology in antiquity, this fascination with the future has been present in humankind for a long time. Is it the case, however, that the Bible is a roadmap into our future? A closer look at how scriptural prophecy functions offers us other lenses with which to "read" our world.

When we contemplate our future we may find ourselves caught between optimism and pessimism. One of



THE BISHOP

I have never thought the Bible mapped out the end, but I am constantly struck with how many in our churches believe this.

the reasons that the *Left Behind* phenomenon exercises such cultural power is that a clear cold look at the world shows us that human behavior doesn't engender much confidence in our ability to manage our affairs. We may be more technologically adept and sophisticated, but we use this knowledge to create ingenious ways to destroy ourselves. Jesus' imminent return offers believers a reason for optimism in the face of our propensity for destruction. The *Left Behind* narrative feeds into a certain way of comprehending the world that matches up with the realities we see around us. If things are unsettled in the Middle East, the believer knows it's all according to God's plan, not the schemes of the political architects of the Project for the New American Century (Google it). The dispensational scenario knits the fragments of life into a meaningful whole and the Rapture becomes a social rhetoric that places us in the great cosmic drama. If we want to know where we fit in the plan, we can turn to the Rapture preachers or prophecy books to tell us.

If you live in America, dispensationalists will even show how America's role is also prophesied in the Bible (though the more honest ones will hedge their bets considerably about this). It's not just America they find in the

I went to a Youth For
Christ event once. Their
nationalism freaked
me out more than their



THE ACOLYTE

Jesus-is-my-boyfriend songs. Ohh the fog
machine was a bit much.

Bible, other nations not even in existence when the Bible was written play a role in their interpretation of ancient prophecies. Whether it's the common interpretation of communist Russia as Gog in the book of Ezekiel, Lindsey's offensive description of China as "The Yellow Peril," or the present fear of all things Islam in many contemporary interpreters like Tim LaHaye or John Hagee; all threats to the American way of life, democracy, and even the "free" market, according to the dispensationalists, are found in biblical writings recorded thousands of years ago.

This distinctive form of Christian faith understands itself in relation to its enemies in modernity as an embattled church seeking to stem the tide of unbelief in a faithless culture. Dispensationalsists have been quick to identify the forces of the Antichrist with anyone who threatened the American way of life. Sometimes this was the Bolshevik, other times the Feminist, but always it was anyone who called the status quo into question. One result of this thinking means that there have been many antichrists over the last 150 years. My grandmother told me she thought Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the Antichrist, but I was sure she was mistaken about this because the

Antichrist would never have given us the Blue Ridge Parkway. Of course, in the theological logic of those who believe we're in the last days, the devil will give us the desires of our hearts in order to ensnare us. If the Antichrist will give Israel the third Temple of Jerusalem at the end of time, the Blue Ridge Parkway is like an appetizer of temptation to worship the forces of socialism.



THE ELDER

I had to hide my Grandmother's posts on Facebook after she identified the Anti-Christ in the WHITE house in 2008.

In fairness, secularists also have their apocalyptic candidates for satanic control of the world: predatory capitalism and the ever-increasing panopticon of national security and absolute state power. The temptation to Manichaeism is no respecter of political positions, but this is what the apocalyptic mindset does: it populates the world with current actors who reflect a strong dualism of good and evil. Who stands on the various sides of that divide is usually determined by the social location of whoever is writing, creating, or interpreting apocalyptic literature. We have only to read through the prophecy genre unleashed by Hal Lindsey and others to find a projection of our current fears. While communist Russia was at the center of Lindsey's interpretation, secular humanists and Muslims show up as villains in contemporary prophecy fiction.

Ample work has been done on showing how ideas of Christ's return reflect the ideologies of our cultural fears and contemporary villains, but behind our views of the end times are also theological assumptions about God and God's interaction with the world. Those inclined to dispensationalist views see God as the omniscient, transcendent, omnipotent ruler who breaks into history at certain crucial moments to move the chess pieces around the board. In the apocalyptic version of this story found in the book of Revelation, God returns as a warrior ready to slaughter God's enemies for their persecution of the saints. A select few will escape planetary disaster, but for the rest, there will be enormous suffering. It is often unnerving to see how those who believe they will be raptured welcome this coming destruction of their enemies.

I find it odd that
 Christians can insist
 God desires destruction
 for the same enemies
 Jesus insists we love and prayer for.



THE BISHOP

Imagining the Apocalypse

If you're still reeling from your visit to www.raptureready.com take heart, this is only one small segment of Christianity's understanding of The End. Since Jesus' first appearance, the church has conceived of ways in which Christ returns that are more nuanced and hopeful. Yes,

we developed a number of strange terms about it—“Are you a dispensational premillennialist?” “No, I’m an amillennialist, realized eschatology kind of guy. How dare you call me a premillennialist!”—but the images, metaphors, and narratives we confront in the apocalypses of sacred texts offer fascinating diversity. Interpretation is like that, and as much as it pains me to say it, dispensationalists are part of the family. Sure, they may remind us of weird uncle Tommy sitting in the corner at family gatherings crookedly grinning at the rest of us as we try to figure out whether to be amused or terrified, but they’re still part of our story.

Many Christians understand the heart of this story as God immersing God’s very self within a world coming to be. The Incarnation is the center of Christian hope. In this profound image of embodiment, God doesn’t escape the pain and suffering of the world, but experiences it in the most intimate way in order to draw the world into the divine life. As people of the Incarnation, we should not welcome the Rapture loophole or desire to escape in order to gloat or revel in the suffering of others. As we shall see later, the return of Christ has also meant the hard work of being God’s body, bringing healing to the world so that the good creation of God might flourish. The Rapture as an escape hatch from suffering contradicts the very heart of Christian faith.



THE ACOLYTE

I hope so. I have to admit
I was a bit skittish up to
this point.

A variety of theological perspectives about The End have been present in Christianity from the beginning, most notably from its roots in Judaism. Inasmuch as these perspectives reflect the cultural worlds they come from, Christian tradition manifests certain ideas and theologies that shape all those who have been introduced to them. How we discern the will of God within these transitory, historical moments influences how we live, raise our children, and vote. Theologies, like ideas, have consequences and ideas about The End have had enormous influence on American society, often in ways we don't recognize. Take the poll mentioned earlier about climate change. If you believe that drought or flood caused by human exploitation of the earth is merely a part of the way things are going to be in the last days, you have no motivation whatsoever to do anything to change the situation; no need to pay attention to Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si*. If we degrade the resources of the planet it's all simply according to God's plan.

I see a two-fold challenge today. One, we help people move beyond the Rapture ready ideology. Two, we pass on a faith without such a twisted ideology at its center.



THE BISHOP

The apocalyptic imagination motivates millions, coding the world for them and narrating ways that God may

or may not be present. If you live in the mental world of Babylon needing to be destroyed and study the Rapture Index daily, you may be inclined to hunker down and wait for God's judgment on a filth-filled world. If you believe that this world is the good creation of God, and we have a responsibility to manifest the grace of God in it, to make known the new heaven in the new earth, your life looks quite different. At the risk of dualistic simplicity, how we internalize our understanding of God determines how we engage with the world.

Faith can lead us to withdraw from the world as a place so fallen, so hopelessly godless, that we should not be "yoked" with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14), and should "come out from among them" (6:17). Those of you reading this book probably don't think this way, but it's very possible you have friends who do. Withdrawal has always been one way that some Christians, mostly fundamentalists, have responded to the challenges of the world around them. A conviction of Christ's imminent return shapes how you view the institutions and ethos of surrounding culture.

I was reminded of this at a gathering I attended in Seoul, South Korea when the woman beside me started up a conversation. It was obvious that she was a fundamentalist, so trying to keep matters light, I talked about my children and the wonderful public school they were in. As I talked her face scrunched up, lips disappearing into her mouth, and her eyes took on a feral glow. "You should take your children out of that pagan, secular humanist school. They'll lose their faith." It never crossed my mind that I was glimpsing the future war against American public education in that encounter.