



Reclaiming

REVELATION

Study Guide

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This Study Guide is meant to be used as a companion with the
“Reclaiming Revelation” 6-session DVD series.

Other recommended readings for study:

“Revelation and the End of All Things”

by Craig R. Koester

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001

“The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation”

by Barbara R. Rossing

Basic Books Publishing, 2004

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INTRODUCTION

Revelation & The End Times

For thousands of years, people have speculated about how the world will end. That it will end at some point has not been a matter of much debate—what has a beginning typically has an ending. How that end comes, however, has been debated for millennia. Christians look to their scriptures to try and find what clues God has left for us to determine when and how that end might come about. In particular, people look to the book of Revelation, which many interpret as giving a disturbing account of things to come, that it describes images of modern technology that John simply didn't have words to describe.

By contrast, some view it as being rooted in its historical context, outlining events that pertained only to first century Christians, with the exception of the final few chapters. Still others believe that Revelation reveals to us timeless truths that were true in John's day, and continue to be relevant and true today as well, looking ultimately toward a future where God in Christ reigns triumphant over the forces of evil and destruction in our world.

Modern American culture has grabbed hold primarily of the interpretation that views Revelation as a road map of the future describing a time of great upheaval and chaos following the "rapture" or disappearance of Christians from the world. This rapture then ushers in the events of Revelation 6 and following. This idea has gained widespread popularity through books and movies such as "Left Behind."

However, upon closer examination, the "Left Behind" road map doesn't exactly read Revelation. It instead pulls together random bits of scripture and tries to frame them around the events of Revelation. It creates a "system" or "script" that pieces together these bits of scripture to form a chronological series of end-times events.

As Dr. Craig R. Koester points out in his book, *"Revelation and the End of All Things,"*¹ what happens if one of the pieces is out of place? How does that change our understanding?

For many, what we think about this doesn't really matter. God will do what God will do, and that is very true. However, what we believe about the end-times also tends to dictate our actions and how we treat one another and our planet in the meantime. Central to the "Left Behind" story is the restoration of Israel and the need for it to reclaim all the land promised to Abraham in Genesis 15.

This is where what we believe about the end-times begins to have real-life repercussions and devastating consequences in our world. People throughout the Middle East are affected in tragic ways which leads to terrorism and violence as a result. In particular, Arab Christians find themselves caught in the battle between Israelis and Muslims, viewed by Americans merely as necessary sacrifices in order for this script to play out. Their American brothers and sisters in Christ thus ignore their plight and watch with voyeuristic anticipation as Middle East nations pull apart at the seams. Rather than push for peace between Israelis and Arabs, followers of this script block anything short of the modern nation state of Israel reclaiming the entire portion of its ancestral land.

But what if this interpretation is flawed? What if our understanding of "Israel's" role is skewed? What if our escapist desires to be raptured away from a time of trouble leaves us woefully unprepared to deal with a world plunged into trial and tribulation? Worse yet—what if Revelation's warnings are meant to steer us in another direction and by embracing the destructive elements as inevitable we have unwittingly brought judgment upon ourselves? What if this prophecy is meant, like the prophets of old, to draw attention to our destructive behavior so that we change our ways, rather than plunging us forward into an abyss of unavoidable destruction?

1. Craig R. Koester, *"Revelation and the End of All Things,"* (Minneapolis, Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2001), 38

What if Revelation's words of warning, mingled with hope and promise, are meant to disturb us enough that we resist evil and violence rather than embracing it with eager gladness and fatalistic furor?

What if...in our zeal to hasten Christ's coming (as if we had that power) we have become the very beast Revelation warns about, that oppresses and sheds the blood of the saints? That brings destruction and war rather than freedom and peace? A disturbing thought, no doubt. But a point of Christian reflection nonetheless.

This study invites you to enter into a journey that not only explores the problems and nuances of the "rapture" system, but takes you through the visionary images that have sparked so much controversy and speculation over the centuries.

Discover for yourself what God's vision is for our future, and what role we are called to play in that vision.

Sample

LEAVING THE RAPTURE BEHIND

The Rapture Script & Israel

1



OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we know your ways are mysterious but your promises are clear. Help us to discern your will and word to us as we study your word this day. Amen.



OPENING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear "Revelation?"
2. What images do you most associate with the book of Revelation?
3. What problems do you experience when you read Revelation?
4. Have you heard of "the rapture" and do you know what it is? Where did you first hear about it?
5. If the rapture is true, why do you think God would remove all of his witnesses from the earth during a time when they're needed the most?

SESSION OVERVIEW/MAIN POINTS

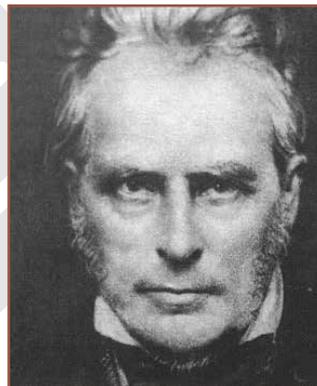
- "Pre-tribulation Rapture" system developed in 1800's by John Nelson Darby.
- Timeline of events pieces together different pieces of scripture from different parts of the Bible in order to develop a "script."
- Pre-tribulation rapture lacks scriptural support.
- God's promises are bigger than we expect and are for the world, not just a group of specific people.

The Rapture System's Beginnings

Christians have always believed Jesus will one day return to establish the fullness of his Kingdom on earth. It has been a central and primary teaching for two thousand years. However, for nearly 1800 years of that Christian history, no one utilized the term "rapture" as a part of Christian understanding regarding the end-times.

Not only does the term appear nowhere in scripture, but the concept of a "secret rapture" where millions of Christians all over the world suddenly disappear, leaving the earth in turmoil and despair had only scarcely been imagined before the 1800's. It was a former Anglican Priest named John Nelson Darby who developed the early end-times script that has become what is known today as "pre-millennial dispensationalism." Disillusioned with the Anglican Church and convinced they had devolved into apostasy, Darby helped form the "Plymouth Brethren" and became known as the father of modern fundamentalism. Darby spent much of his time obsessed with end-times prophecies, convinced that some clue regarding the timing of the end of days was present within scripture.

Darby determined that Christ would not just appear once to establish His Kingdom, but would in fact return twice. The first return would be secret and would not be part of the "every eye shall see him and every knee shall bow," described in the opening verses of Revelation. It would involve rapturing the church into heaven, while leaving non-believers behind to suffer through a seven year period of tribulation.



Unlike many end-times predictors, Darby refrained from giving specific dates and times. Rather, he invented “dispensations,” or intervals of time that all of the Bible and history were divided into—hence the term “dispensationalism.”

According to Darby, God divided history into seven different dispensations where he dealt with humanity according to different rules in each time period and lays out the master plan for all of human history:

1. Innocence (Genesis 1:28-3:6)
2. Conscience or Moral Responsibility (Genesis 4:1-8:14)
3. Human Government (Genesis 8:15 – 11:32)
4. Promise (Genesis 12:1 – Exodus 18:27)
5. The Law (Exodus 19:3 – Acts 1:26)
6. The Church (Acts 2:1 – Revelation 19)
7. The Millennial Kingdom (Revelation 20)

Such an idea makes a certain amount of rational sense and helps explain inconsistencies and contradictions in the Bible. The problem is it does not recognize the centrality of Christ throughout the scriptures, but relegates him only to a particular dispensation or time-period. Yet, scriptural witness testifies to the fact that Christ’s presence, whether manifest in human form or not, has been central to the

story of God’s people, like the center of a wheel that reaches outward through time, space and history.

Darby’s ideas didn’t garner wide-spread attention or interest in America until after the end of the Civil War. America was a nation that was grieving the bloodiest war it had ever witnessed on its front lawns. This set the stage for Darby’s escapist theology to take root. Desiring to never experience the hell of those days again, his ideas spread like wild-fire throughout the United States, made most popular by the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909.

Cyrus Scofield had no theological education or training whatsoever, but took Darby’s ideas and went through the Bible, adding dispensationalist headings and notes in the margin, commenting on each prophetic passage through the lens of Darby’s system. It soon became the version of the Bible Americans began to read their scriptures through during much of the twentieth century.

Since Scofield’s Reference Bible, a variety of fundamentalist leaders have centered their ministries around these teachings, and made millions on theories and fictionalized accounts of how this end-times script plays out.

Pre-Millennial Dispensationalism Timeline



Pre-millennial dispensationalism follows a timeline of specific events, pieced together from various parts of the Bible - Ezekiel, Isaiah, Daniel, Joel, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Romans, Matthew, Zechariah, and Revelation. The question Dr. Craig Koester asks in his book “Revelation and the End of All Things” is what happens if one of these pieces is out of place? Contrary to popular understanding and opinion, this timeline does not begin with Revelation, but rather, starts with a passage from Daniel 9:20-27.

Rebuilding the Temple

Dispensationalists believe that Daniel 9:20-26 describes the 490 year time frame between the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem and the crucifixion of Jesus.

God’s Time Out

After Jesus’ crucifixion - there is a 2000 year time frame that exists between verses 26 and 27.

The formation of the nation-state of Israel is believed to be the signal that God is about to start the clock ticking again, as fulfillment of God’s promise to restore the nation of Israel.

The Rapture

(Matt. 24:38-42; 1 Thess. 4:15-17)

The rapture, which is believed by pre-millennial dispensationalists to be the disappearance of Christians all over the world, will be the sign that God’s clock has started back up again, and that the events in Daniel 27 will now occur, along with chapters 6-22 of Revelation and various other parts of scripture.

Beginning of the Great Tribulation & Rise of the Anti-Christ

(Daniel 9:27; Matt. 24; Daniel 2 & 7; Rev. 6-7)

Once the Christians have been raptured, the time of

PRE-MILLENNIAL DISPENSATIONALIST TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Exile to Crucifixion	God's "Time Out"	Rapture	1st Half of Great Tribulation	
490 Years from time of Jews return from exile to Christ's Crucifixion Daniel 9:20-26	After Christ's death & resurrection, God stops the prophetic clock until the Gentiles are brought in. (No scriptural references... possibly Romans 11)	Christians are raptured from the earth & God's prophetic clock starts ticking again. I Thess. 4:15-17 Matt. 24:38-42	Anti-Christ covenant w/Israel I World Government Temple Rebuilt 144,000 Jewish Evangelists commissioned Daniel 9:27 Matt 24 Daniel 2 & 7 Rev. 7	
2nd Half of Great Tribulation	Armageddon & Christ's Return	Millennial Reign	Final Judgment	Eternity
2nd half of Great Tribulation Harlot's one world religion (Papacy) Temple defiled Anti-Christ controls world economy Rev. 4:1-19:10 1 John 2:18 2 Thess. 2	Return of Christ & Saints/Armageddon Gog & Magog Kings of East Rev. 19:11-21 Isaiah 63:1-3 Joel 3 Zechariah 12 Ezekiel 39, Dan 11 Rev. 16:11	Millennial Reign Christ and Saints rule on earth for 1000 years Rev. 20:1-6 Isaiah 65:20-25 Micah 4:3	Satan loosed and defeated Resurrection and Final Judgment Rev. 20:7-15	New heaven/ New earth Rev. 21 & 22

Great Tribulation (Revelation 2) will begin. Verse 27 in Daniel 9 claims this time frame is one "week" or seven years, at which time the anti-Christ will make a covenant with Israel only to break it 3 1/2 years later. Matthew 24, Daniel 2 and 7 and Revelation 6-7 describe a time of great turmoil and upheaval in the world. Terror and chaos reign as the seven seals (Rev. 6) are unleashed upon the world as a one-world government (Daniel 2) headed up by the beast (Daniel 7, 2 Thessalonians) takes over and 144,000 Jews are commissioned as Christian Evangelists (Rev. 7).

Desecration of the Temple & The Anti-Christ's Rule

(Rev. 6-19; 2 Thess. 2:4; 1 John 2:18)

Once the anti-Christ breaks his pact with Israel after 3 1/2 years, the anti-Christ will go into the temple and set himself up as God. (Daniel 9:27, 2 Thessalonians 2:4) Heavy persecution of converts to Christianity begins, and anyone who doesn't take the mark of the beast is arrested and beheaded. (Rev. 13) The "harlot," or a one-world false religion, arises, presumably led by the papacy in Rome.

Fall of Babylon & Armageddon

(Rev. 19:11-21; Isaiah 63:1-3; Joel 3; Zech. 12; Ezekiel 39, Daniel 11; Rev. 16:11)

Babylon/the Harlot/the false religion is destroyed by the beast and as the end of the 7 years draws near, he prepares for Armageddon—the final show-down between Christ and the saints, and the anti-Christ and his followers. Invading armies from Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 39; Rev. 16:11) attack—though who Gog and Magog are exactly changes from decade to decade. Sometimes it's Russia and China, sometimes other Arab countries. This is an ever-changing prediction based on current world events. At the height of the battle, Jesus and the saints enter and slaughter everyone involved.

The Millennial Reign, Satan's Doom & Resurrection

(Rev. 20:1-6; Isaiah 65:20-25; Micah 4:3)

After Jesus conquers the anti-Christ, he establishes a thousand year reign on earth (Rev. 20) with the people who survived the tribulation. It is a time of peace and

tranquility for the world. (Isaiah 65:20-25; Micah 4:3) At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released for a short time so that he can once again wreak havoc and deceive the nations, but then is summarily defeated, this time for good, and thrown into the lake of fire along with all of his followers. The resurrection of the dead occurs and people are judged.

Eternity

(Revelation 21 & 22)

Once the resurrection occurs, a new heaven and new earth are established, completely wiping away the world that existed before. Everyone lives in eternity with God and Christ in this new creation.

The Scriptural Problems with the Rapture



If you're wondering where exactly Revelation, or the Bible for that matter, mentions "the rapture," the only reference that is even remotely related is found in 1 Thessalonians 4.

"For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever."

– 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17

Paul is offering up a word of edification to those who are concerned that Christ has not yet returned, and many of them are beginning to die. Paul's reassurance is they need not worry—that their loved ones will be resurrected and see Christ at his second coming even before those of

us who are alive will. Nowhere in Paul's writings is there ever the sense that Christ would return twice or that there would be some form of a delay between Christ's return and the coming Kingdom, and certainly no delay between his return and the resurrection of the dead.

The other text that gets widely used as "evidence" of the rapture in scripture is from Matthew 24:

"For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

– Matthew 24:38-42

The assumption made by rapture proponents in this passage is that the ones being "taken" are the lucky ones. However, both the context of the passage and the cultural understanding in Jesus' day points us in a different direction. Those who were "swept away" by the waters of the flood were taken away in judgment. Those who were "taken" while working in the fields during the first century were usually "taken" by the Romans to be interrogated, imprisoned, and most likely killed, much like how the Gestapo of Nazi Germany operated.

Furthermore, the script outlined by pre-millennial dispensationalists assumes they have all the different parts of scripture placed in the right spots on the timeline. Yet many interpret events like 9/11 as "the fall of Babylon," which doesn't happen until Revelation 19. Did the rapture happen and no one knew about it?

Hal Lindsey and other advocates of the rapture argue that since the word "church" is not mentioned after Revelation 4, it must no longer have a place in the rest of the letter. However, saints are mentioned as being present—in fact, it is the blood of the saints the Harlot drinks. The saints—the people who make up the church—are most definitely present.

Israel's Divine Role

Central to this entire system is the role of the nation-state of modern day Israel. Pre-millennial dispensationalists believe that in order for Christ to return, modern Israel must reclaim all the land promised to Abraham in Genesis 15. Christians who therefore support all



Mount Moriah is a sacred site to Muslims, Jews, and Christians. "The Dome of the Rock" sits enshrined upon what many believe is the place where Abraham almost sacrificed his son, where the original temple of Solomon was built, and where Muhammad is claimed to have ascended to heaven to speak and pray with Moses and Jesus.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PALESTINE & MODERN ISRAEL

Since its establishment in 1948, the modern nation-state of Israel has been a point of contention and controversy within the Middle East. After World War I and the fall of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, the land in the region of the Middle East and Palestine came under the control of the British and French governments, the entire area divided up into individual nation-states with little regard for ancestral lands and tribal loyalties. Jews, looking for a homeland, had been migrating to the land of Palestine, purchasing land and setting up homes since the late 1800's.

While the United States supported what was known as the "Balfour Declaration" that promised the formation of a homeland for Jews in Palestine, the British were opposed to

unlimited migration of Jews to the region and were afraid of alienating the other Arab states due to their political and economic interests.

Complicating matters, there was the issue of they had promised the Arab nations control over Palestine if they helped fight with the Allies during World War I. Before his death in 1945, President Roosevelt assured Arabs that the United States would not intervene in affairs in the region without consulting both the Arabs and the Jews.

In light of the Holocaust that annihilated nearly 6 million European Jews, however, President Truman began negotiating with Britain regarding the future of Palestine, and in May of 1946 announced his approval of a recommendation to admit 100,000 displaced persons into Palestine and in October publicly declared his support for the creation of a Jewish state. The United Nations immediately began to debate the proposition of creating both Palestinian and Jewish states in an effort to find a solution before Britain's mandate over the region expired, declaring the area of religious significance surrounding Jerusalem would remain under international control administered by the United Nations.

The Palestinian Arabs refused to recognize this arrangement, which they regarded as favorable to the Jews and unfair to the Arab population that would remain in Jewish territory under the partition. The United States sought a middle way by supporting the United Nations resolution, but also encouraging negotiations between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East.

Small skirmishes broke out as Palestinian groups began attacking Jewish settlements in hopes of preventing the Jewish nation-state from forming. Jews on the other hand were determined to claim the land outlined in the U.N. Resolution. On May 14, 1948, Israel declared themselves an independent state—which prompted the invasion by other Arab states: Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and the Saudi Arabian army under the command of the Egyptians. Britain eventually intervened, giving Israel the upper hand and an uneasy armistice was eventually agreed upon, though it gave additional land to Israel that had previously been outlined in the U.N. Resolution as Palestinian Territory. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Arab Palestinians were displaced and left homeless. The armistice held until 1967 when Israel, convinced there was an impending attack coming from Egypt and other Arab nations launched a preemptive strike in what would become known as the 6-day war. The swift and rapid defeat of Israel's enemies has been lauded by Christian Zionists as evidence of God's divine hand protecting the nation. Israel seized territories in the Gaza Strip and West Bank as a result and despite mandates put forth in the 4th Geneva convention that prohibit such action, have bulldozed homes of the indigenous Palestinians and settled the disputed lands.

expansionist efforts by modern Israel are referred to as “Christian Zionists.” Zionism is the movement among the Jews that seeks to reclaim their ancestral lands in Palestine and rebuild their temple on Mt. Moriah, which is currently occupied by the Muslim Dome of the Rock. “Christian Zionism” is a Christian movement which shares in the Zionist belief. They point to passages such as Ezekiel 36 to prove their point:

“But you, mountains of Israel, will produce branches and fruit for my people Israel, for they will soon come home. I am concerned for you and will look on you with favor; you will be plowed and sown, and I will cause many people to live on you—yes, all of Israel. The towns will be inhabited and the ruins rebuilt. I will increase the number of people and animals living on you, and they will be fruitful and become numerous. I will settle people on you as in the past and will make you prosper more than before. Then you will know that I am the Lord. I will cause people, my people Israel, to live on you. They will possess you, and you will be their inheritance; you

will never again deprive them of their children.”

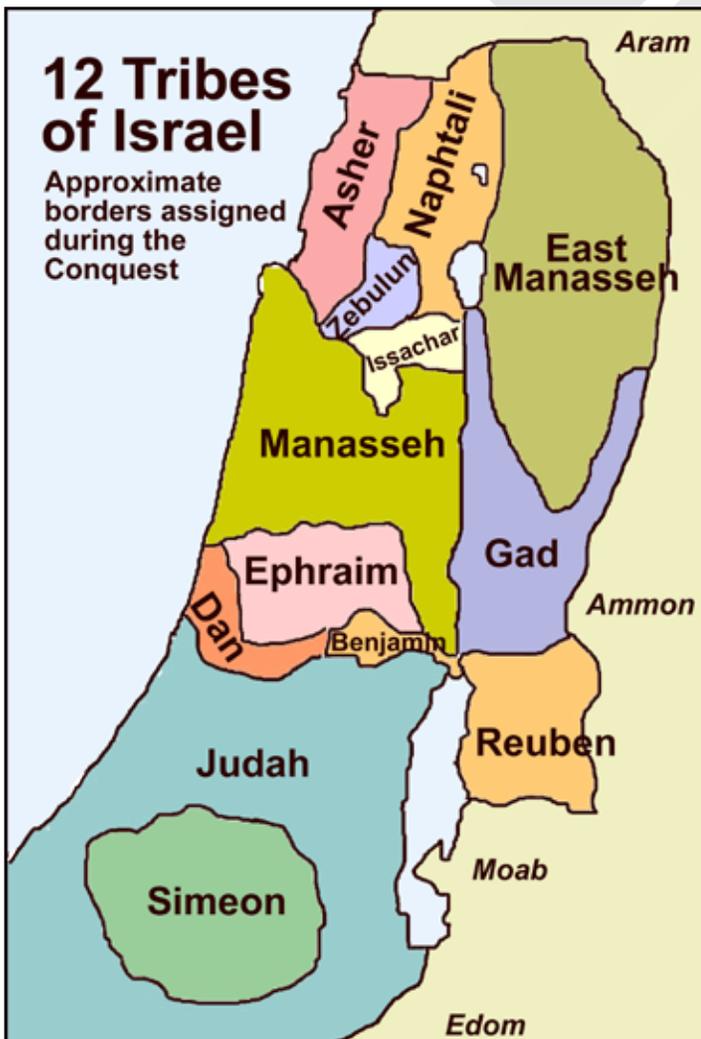
Another passage utilized to outline the “special” role modern Israel plays in this scenario is Romans 9-11. In these chapters, Paul makes the following statement:

“So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved...”

-Romans 11:25-26

The question Christians must ask upon reading such passages, is to whom is God referring? Who exactly is “Israel”? How do we, as Christians, followers of God’s promised Messiah, understand the promises made to “Israel”? What are these promises and who are they being made to ultimately?

The statement “all of Israel” itself is confusing because elsewhere in scripture, God declares only a remnant will be saved (Isaiah 10). So which is it? A remnant, or all of Israel? Many current end-times theologies interpret



(Left) Distribution of the land to the 12 tribes from Joshua 13-19. (Below) The division of Israel into two kingdoms after King Solomon’s death. Israel/Ephraim in the North; Judah in the South.



this statement to mean God has a separate and special plan for the Jews, citing Paul's discourse regarding why so many Jews have "stumbled" and not accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

The problems inherent in interpreting this passage in this way is that it totally negates the previous eight chapters of Romans, where Paul has been arguing that it is through "faith alone" that one is saved, not by heritage.

Paul spends a lot of time telling the Jews not to boast about being Jews, because they can be cut off just like the Gentiles had been cut off for so long. Then he admonishes the Gentiles, telling them not to think that just because many Jews have rejected Jesus that they are somehow "superior" to the Jews—because it was through the Jews that God's Messiah and plan for salvation came about to begin with. The Messiah is not the Messiah for only Gentiles, but for Jews first, then Gentiles.

Neither should boast, because they are all included by the same thing: faith. Paul clarifies that Jews are only true Jews if they are Jews inwardly (2:28-29) and points out to be a descendant of Abraham is far more encompassing than just "the Jews"—as Abraham was the father of many nations, including many "Gentile" nations through Hagar and his second wife, Keturah (4:16-18).

Additionally, Paul makes it clear in other letters (notably Galatians 3) that one is a descendant of Abraham's through faith, not heritage. To clarify further what is meant by "Israel," Paul states in Romans 9 that not all Israelites belong to Israel and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants.

Lest it be forgotten, the despised Samaritans were Israelites as well, a remnant of the Northern Kingdom that was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. Jesus' outreach to the Samaritans, a hated enemy of the nation of Judah, serves as a reminder that Christ came to reclaim all his people—not just the "Jews" of the Southern Kingdom of Judah which represented only a small portion of the original twelve tribes. While Samaritans were despised for having mingled with Gentiles, they were hated as a bitter enemy and rival nation long before the Assyrians destroyed the North or the Babylonians destroyed the South. Yet both, whether pure or not, were descendants of Jacob/Israel.

It is also important to understand the statement "so all Israel" will be saved. The word "so" (καὶ οὕτως) is usually translated and understood as a temporal "when" all Israel will be saved. Yet, this term also means "in this way," denoting the manner through which God is saving "all Israel"—through a hardening on a part of the



Paul's letter to the Romans emphasizes salvation from God comes through faith, and faith alone. While he struggles with why some of his own people have rejected their Messiah, he holds out hope that they might one day turn to Christ in faith.

unbelieving Jews so that Gentiles may be brought in, and it is in this way that "all Israel"—both Jew and Gentile—will be saved, because both are heirs through faith. While some have indeed stumbled, Paul reminds us that Jews were still the cornerstone upon which Christianity was built, that the first disciples and earliest converts were all Jewish. After all, Paul himself was an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin.

As he quotes in Romans 10:12, "Everyone who calls on the Lord shall be saved." Thus the comment regarding "on account of the patriarchs" is highlighting for the Gentiles that God has not abandoned or written his people off. He loves them and desires them to come to faith as much as he desires anyone to come to faith.

It is through this profound mystery (also mentioned in Ephesians 3 and Colossians 2) that Gentiles have become "fellow heirs" through Christ. God therefore is saving Jew and Gentile not by two different methods of salvation, but in the way that he promised throughout all of the Old Testament. The Messiah of the Gentiles was first, and foremost, the Messiah promised to "Israel." Any Jew can still be grafted back in as though they had never been cut off if they do. Yet, Paul also points out "God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy." Therefore, ultimately, issues of salvation lie not in our hands or our understandings, but in God's.

To be clear, none of this is an argument against the right of the Jewish people to form their own nation state, especially given the events of the Holocaust following World War II. However, such a nation should be subject to the same

governing rules of international law and humanitarian treatment of those who live within their borders. Giving any nation a blank check to commit atrocities, act oppressively or unjustly without reprimand simply because one believes they play a “divine role” is unconscionable.

The Promised Land and Israel

One thing that we know about God: His promises are always fulfilled—but—they are many times fulfilled differently than expected, and in most cases above and beyond that expectation. Ezekiel makes promises about Israel’s restoration. But this restoration speaks of a day that claims when they return, it will be with a new heart and they will be cleansed, sprinkled clean and *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”* He makes this promise in both Ezekiel 36 & 37.

And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

-Ezekiel 36:26-27

They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

-Ezekiel 37:23

This is not the only place God makes such a promise. Jeremiah 31:33 states, *“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.”* Jeremiah finishes that verse by stating, *“I will be your God, and you will be my people.”* Revelation picks up that same promise in Revelation 21. *“Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.”*

One of the foundations of Christian teaching is the understanding that this “new heart” and this “cleansing” comes through the cleansing blood of Christ. The “Promised Land” of God’s New Heaven and New Earth aligns with a multitude of Old Testament promises of gathering His people back to Himself.

Clearly, John envisioned the promises of Ezekiel and Jeremiah as promises made to the entire breadth of God’s people and was not descriptive of only a singular tribe. Furthermore, the founding of modern Israel has neither “cleansed” them nor created some event that has restored their good fortune. The land has not returned to becoming like “the garden of Eden” as promised in Ezekiel 36:35. Nor has the resurrection occurred in Ezekiel 37. Whatever

restoration has occurred, it is obviously incomplete.

When comparing the founding of modern Israel with the passages of Ezekiel 36 and 37, the parallel falls short. No cleansing, no King, no long lives, no healing. Ezekiel 37 also claims that the Northern Tribes of Ephraim will be joined back together with the Southern Tribes of Judah to form one nation. The Northern Tribes have long disappeared—scattered and assimilated into their surrounding cultures after being conquered by the Assyrians. A few migrated to the Southern Kingdom for refuge and became part of the nation of Judah (the prophet Anna from Luke 2 is said to be from the tribe of Asher), and the Samaritans continue to live in the West Bank. Overall, however, their lineage and history as distinct tribes has virtually disappeared as they have been scattered among the nations. The Samaritans (of which less than a thousand remain) are what remains of the nation of “Ephraim,” and that rift is still readily apparent even today. The modern nation state of Israel continues to define itself as “Jewish,” the descendants of



Gustave Doré (1832-1883) “New Jerusalem,” Wood Engraving

Judah, the southern kingdom which was dispersed by the Babylonians, brought back, then dispersed again by the Romans. These Jews, an incomplete representation of “all Israel” has formed its own state, but Israel has hardly been restored to its fullness via the nation state.

Oddly enough, there is mention in the Bible where Samaritans, Jews and Gentiles are all brought together. It’s in the book of Acts when the disciples are sent to proclaim the good news of Christ to the nations, and communities of Samaritans (Acts 8:4-16), Jews (Acts 17:11-15), and Gentiles (Acts 10:44-48) all believe. They are united not through re-acquiring ancestral lands, but through the power of the Holy Spirit and faith in Christ.

Christian Zionists will argue, however, that these land promises are why modern Israel has to reclaim the entire area that was outlined in Genesis 15—yet, Ezekiel’s vision of Israel’s restoration also claims, *“Then the nations that are*

left all around you shall know that I, the Lord, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate.” If this is the promised restoration, the surrounding nations apparently did not get the memo that they were supposed to recognize this as a divine act of God.

Yet, when Ezekiel’s vision is compared and contrasted with John’s view of the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven, *after* Christ’s return and the resurrection, we see all these promises being brought to fruition, not before. Ezekiel 37 confirms that the re-establishment of Israel is post-resurrection:

Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.

-Ezekiel 37:11-14

Therefore, a violent, militaristic vision of Jerusalem triumphing over its enemies stands in stark contrast to the ultimate vision God has for Jerusalem throughout the Old Testament and at the end of Revelation. Jerusalem is a city that the prophets state all nations will one day stream to. Rather than destruction of the nations, all nations will turn to Jerusalem, and revere God. Revelation claims that its open gates welcome the nations so that they may be healed by the leaves of the Tree of Life. This picks up on Isaiah 2’s promises of the Mountain of God:

In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”

-Isaiah 2:3-4

As it stands now, rather than nations streaming to Israel

and God’s Holy Mountain for instruction, modern Israel builds walls and checkpoints, limiting people access and denying the nations the ability to freely worship and praise God in His Holy City. They threaten nuclear destruction upon each other, lobbing bombs at each other on a daily basis. The restoration of Israel has had some serious setbacks if this was how it was supposed to come about.

For thousands of years, Christians have understood the Old Testament promises of “Israel’s restoration” not to be the founding of a nation state, but rather the ushering in of God’s kingdom where Gentiles and Jews were enfolded, together, into the promises of God. The restoration of Israel meant the establishment of God’s Kingdom on Earth.

Have two thousand years worth of Christians simply misunderstood God’s promises—that they weren’t really for them, but were for a nation-state that would be established in 1948? If so, this misunderstanding extends to many of the authors of the New Testament, who wrote after the fall of Jerusalem, and spoke of their expectation that Jesus would return at any time with no stipulation that a Jewish nation-state must first be re-established. In fact, most Christians saw the destruction of Jerusalem as God moving beyond the confines of Judaism and Jerusalem, spreading across the world—just as Jesus told the Samaritan woman it would and just as he told his disciples it would before his ascension. While he was here, Jesus warned of Jerusalem’s destruction with no hint that it would need to be rebuilt before his return. In fact, when he spoke of the Temple destruction, he pointed to Himself as the rebuilding of the Temple—He was the Temple (John 2). His spirit would now reside inside people, not a structure. *“For do you not know your body is a temple of the holy spirit?”*

Imminent Destruction of Our World?



Revelation 21 states that we will get a “new” heaven and a “new” earth. Because of that, pre-millennial dispensationalists utilize that promise as reason to lose hope that planet earth might have some redeeming quality or value. Since they believe they won’t be

here to watch its ultimate demise anyway - there’s no reason to worry about or care for it in the here and now. The end, they are convinced, is imminent, and therefore have aban-

done any responsibility towards its preservation.

Hal Lindsey writes: “Although I grieve over the lost world that is headed toward catastrophe, the hope of the rapture keeps me from despair.”¹

Lindsey, and other rapture proponents, are banking our planet on their rapture. They are placing their hope in being able to escape the problems of our world, rather than delving into and engaging them.

And when we are told we will get a “new heaven and new earth,” exactly what is meant by “new”? Barbara Rossing argues in her book *“The Rapture Exposed,”*² that “new” does not necessarily mean “different.”

“... the earth becomes new in the sense of resurrection of renewal - just as our bodies will be resurrected, brought to new life, but they are still our bodies. The whole creation is longing for redemption, the apostle Paul writes—this is the sense in which there will be a new creation. It, too, will be redeemed, made new. The Greek word used for the “new” earth in Revelation 21:1 can mean either “renewed or “new”—but it certainly does not mean a “different” earth. There is no justification for using up the earth on the grounds that we get to trade this one in for a new and bigger one in seven years.”

Additionally, in the world of rapture proponents, there is no room on this “new earth” for anything that isn’t going to be utilized and inhabited by humans. Tim LaHaye, author of *“Left Behind,”* muses that there will no longer be mountains or oceans or deserts, because humans can’t live there.

It would be interesting to hear what the four living creatures of Revelation 4 have to think about that, as representatives of wild and domestic animals and the birds of the air.

1. Hal Lindsey, *“The Rapture: Truth or Consequences,”* (New York, Bantam Books 1983), 210

2. Barbara R. Rossing, *“The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation,”* (New York, Basic Books Publishing, 2004), 7

The trump card of course seems to be 2 Peter 3:7, stating that the earth will be consumed by fire.

“But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless...But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.”

Something to note, however, is 2 Peter’s description of the earth’s consumption by fire never says the world itself will be utterly destroyed. Rather, the heaven and earth have been “reserved for fire being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless.” The godless are destroyed—but what about the earth itself? *“The elements will be dissolved with fire and the earth and what is done on it will be disclosed.”*

This doesn’t sound like an earth that explodes in fire. This sounds like the refining, cleansing spirit of God (frequently referred to as a “refining fire”) taking out the garbage, as it “discloses” or reveals everything that has been done on it. The earth seems more like a tattle-tale on humanity rather than a giant fire ball that is beyond use. If the earth is going to disclose to God everything we’ve done to it...perhaps we might want not to let it give a bad report.

Ultimately—the problem of putting one’s hope in the imminent rapture is if we’re stuck with this planet for another few thousand years—perhaps we need to make sure it is able to sustain us. As Martin Luther is oft attributed to having said: “Even if I knew tomorrow the world would fall to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.”

Closing Discussion Questions

- After watching the video and/or reading the Study Guide articles, has your viewpoint shifted any? What new things, if any, did you learn?
- In John 17:15-16, Jesus prays on behalf of his disciples: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.” What do you think it means to be in the world, not of the world? Why would Jesus want his followers to remain in the world?
- Why do you think American Christians cling so fiercely to the idea of being whisked away from the troubles of the world when the Christian calling is to be in the world doing God’s work and witnessing to what He has done through Christ?

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, as your people, we are called to be your witnesses in the world. Help us to persevere through the trials and tribulations of the world you so deeply love. Amen.