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WHO'S BEEN LEFT BEHIND?

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In 1969, the first commercially released “Jesus-rock” album, Larry Norman’s *Upon This Rock*, featured the apocalyptic anthem, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready,” which described the bleak conditions of a world under God’s end-times judgment. The repeated refrain of this song was haunting and memorable: “There’s no time to change your mind. The Son has come, and you’ve been left behind.” These words clearly referenced the catching-up of the church, which, according to 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, is to accompany the resurrection at the second coming of Christ. In the popular dispensational scheme of interpretation, being “left behind” when the church is “raptured” means facing the terrors of the Great Tribulation on earth. Since 1969, popular Christian songs, novels, and films have multiplied, speculating about what it will be like for those who have been left behind after the rapture.

While the Bible does mention the rapture of the church, there is no actual scriptural reference to being left behind when that occurs. That the tribulation will follow the rapture is a distinctive of dispensationalism. Prior to 1830, the teaching of the church had always been that the resurrection and rapture will occur when Christ returns, on “the last day” (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54)—not seven years prior.

Lost? Or Merely Left? Dispensationalism advances a popular end-times viewpoint. It often reads the pretribulational rapture into Christ’s cryptic prediction, recorded by Matthew and Luke, that a time will come when two people in close proximity to each other (in the same bed, at the same millstone, in the same field) will suddenly experience opposite fates: “One will be taken and the other left” (Matt. 24:40, 41; Luke 17:34–36).¹ According to Matthew’s version, this sudden separation will occur at “the coming of the Son of Man” (Matt. 24:39). Many Christians, in reading these verses, have assumed that the ones “taken” are the Christians raptured to heaven, while those “left” are the lost, who miss the rapture. Is this the straightforward meaning of these texts, or would a proper hermeneutical approach yield a different interpretation?

Christ’s Clues. In Matthew 24, the context of the “one taken...other left” statements is what generally is called the Olivet Discourse, which many evangelicals understand to

be describing the last days prior to Christ's return. Though Luke 17 provides a different context, it contains the same information, taught by Christ—apparently on a different occasion.

There is strong contextual evidence that much of Matthew 24 is not actually about the end of the world or present system of things at all, but about the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century AD (consider vv. 1–3 and 34). Most evangelical scholars believe that the latter portion of the chapter (especially after verse 34) refers to events that will occur at the end of the present age. This is debated, as some wish to apply the whole chapter to the first-century scenario. Important as this debate may be to our interpretation of the verses under consideration, space will not here allow a detailed survey of the arguments for or against that specific point.

I am inclined toward the majority view, that the timeframe of the unanticipated taking of certain people in our verses is more likely the eschatological scenario than that of the destruction of Jerusalem. The latter was the climax of three years of war, and a siege of several months. Its fall was hardly sudden or surprising. Those who apply all of Matthew 24 to the AD 70 scenario will disagree with this thesis, but I will proceed on the assumption that the “one...taken and the other left” language refers to a future event. But do these words refer to the rapture of the church or to something else?

In the immediate context, Christ referred to the time of Noah's flood, which is to resemble that of “the coming of the Son of Man” (vv. 37–39). Jesus reminds us that the wicked of Noah's time were oblivious to the imminent disaster that threatened them, and continued in the affairs of ordinary life—eating, drinking, getting married—“until the flood came and took them all away” (Matt. 24:39). The next verse predicts the one similarly being “taken” and the other “left” at Christ's coming.

It was the wicked who were “taken away” in the flood. In fact, in Luke's parallel, the words “took them all away” are replaced with “destroyed them all” (Luke 17:27). Clearly, being “taken” is the fate of the lost, not the believers.

Scripture often uses the word “taken” to refer to someone's death (e.g., Job 24:24; 34:20; Ps. 10:2; 59:12; Prov. 11:6; Isa. 17:1; Jer. 6:11; Ezek. 21:24; Dan. 11:12; etc.). This is the case, also, of those “taken” in the flood in Matthew 24:39. This would seem to be the case, likewise, in the verses that follow, in which one person is “taken” (that is, he dies) in judgment, and the other is “left” (i.e., left unharmed and remains alive).

The Jewish eschatology of the Old Testament did not look for the removal of the righteous from the earth. Rather, God has “given [the earth] to the children of men” (Ps. 115:16). According to Romans 4:13, God's promise was that Abraham's seed (Christ) would inherit “the world” (not heaven). Psalm 2:8 declares that Christ is to receive “the nations for [His] inheritance, And the ends of the earth for [His] possession.”

According to the Old Testament, the righteous will reign with the Messiah over this planet, but only after the wicked are removed:

*For the upright will dwell in the land,
And the blameless will remain in it;
But the wicked will be cut off from the earth,*

And the unfaithful will be uprooted from it. (Prov. 2:21–22)

For evildoers shall be cut off;

But those who wait on the LORD,

They shall inherit the earth.

For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more; Indeed, you will look carefully for his place,

But it shall be no more.

But the meek shall inherit the earth. (Ps. 37:9–11)

The language of this latter Psalm is echoed in Jesus' third beatitude: "Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5).

The idea that God would ultimately take away the righteous to a different place, and leave the planet to the rebels to destroy and defile, was a concept foreign to the Jewish mind. The New Testament does not contradict the Jewish expectation. Christ's disciples will "reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:10).

Even Jesus' depiction of two people together, and one being taken in judgment while the other remains untouched, finds a parallel in the Old Testament:

A thousand may fall at your side,

And ten thousand at your right hand;

But it shall not come near you.

Only with your eyes shall you look,

And see the reward of the wicked. (Ps. 91:7–8)

Jesus' eschatology is thus the same as that revealed in the Old Testament. At the end of the world as we know it, there will be a moment in which "the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1:7–8).

Taken in Judgment. While few details are given in Scripture, this fiery judgment upon the wicked will destroy them (not *rapture* them!) from the earth's scene, leaving the righteous unscathed to inherit a purged and renewed earth, where "there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain...and there shall be no more curse" (Rev. 21:4; 22:3). It is the wicked who will be taken (in judgment) while the righteous are left to enjoy what God has intended for His people since the day He created the Garden of Eden.

Though many dispensationalists teach that those "taken" in these verses are the Christians, there are dispensational teachers who agree with the interpretation presented here. John MacArthur expounds on Matthew 24:40–41: "One will be taken, i.e., taken in judgment...This clause does not refer to the catching away of believers."²

Similarly, William MacDonald writes, “One will be swept away by the flood of judgment; the other left to enjoy the blessings of Christ’s reign.”³

Further confirmation of this thesis is found in Luke 17. In verses 34–36, Jesus repeats three times the ominous “one will be taken and the other left.” Unlike Matthew’s account, in this case we read of the response of the disciples to this prediction.

They naturally asked, “Where, Lord?” (v. 37). The concept of saints being removed from the earth and transported to heaven was not part of the Jewish frame of reference, so it did not occur to the disciples to interpret “taken” to mean “taken to heaven.” In fact, they had no idea what Jesus meant by this, so they inquired, “Taken *where?*”

As is so often the case, Jesus’ reply was cryptic: “Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.” This may have been a familiar proverb, based upon Job 39:30, where God is speaking about the habits of the eagle, and He tells Job, “Where the slain are, there it is.” If this had become an expression of proverbial wisdom, it may have been roughly equivalent to the modern proverb: “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.” What do these words mean in our present context?

If we assume, reasonably, that this was Christ’s answer to the disciples’ question, then it should tell us where some will be “taken.” Jesus’ proverb, that eagles (possibly intending vultures) can reliably be found where corpses are, would seem to imply the ominous answer: “They will be corpses. If you want to locate them, you should look for the gathered eagles.”

There is, therefore, no exegetical warrant for applying these statements to the rapture of the church. — *Steve Gregg*

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NOTES

- 1 All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.
- 2 John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1174.
- 3 William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989, 1995), 1297.