

Living Forward

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Ephesians 1:15-23; Revelation 21:1-4

larry dipboye

You probably have already forgotten that evangelist Harold Camping predicted the end of the world on October 21, 2011. To the extent that you were aware of his warning, I doubt that you made any significant changes to your day. Like the rest of the world, you took the warning in stride as another religious kook trying to cash in on public gullibility. Actually Camping had done it before. He had called his followers to prepare for the end in on March 31, 1994, and again on March 31, 1995. Camping's prediction received enough public attention to cause *Time Magazine* to publish a summary article on the "Top 10 End-of-the-World Prophecies" reaching back to the Protestant Reformation.

Actually miscalculations of the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ have been going on for centuries. One of the most significant failed predictions came from William Miller in 1844. A soldier in the War of 1812, Miller had been a Baptist turned sceptic by reading deists like Voltaire and Hume. In an attempt to recover his faith, Miller devoured the Bible and became convinced that he had discovered a timetable for the approximate moment of the return of Christ. He published his findings that Jesus would return between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844, and gathered a following. After the big disappointment, he changed the date to April 18, 1844. Finally, Miller decided that he was wrong and gave up the chase. He died in 1849, broken and disillusioned. But that was not the end of the story. Some of his followers found explanation for his miscalculations and stayed the course. The Millerites later formed the Adventist Church centered on the Second Advent of Christ. Although most Adventists have avoided repeating the Miller fiasco, David Koresh and his infamous Branch Davidian commune in Waco emerged as an offshoot of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Koresh convinced his followers that he was the incarnation of Christ and that they should wait in the compound for the end of the world. The end did come in 1993 in the confrontation with the FBI and ATF, but not exactly as Koresh had predicted.

I could go on, but the mainstream of Christian history left that path long ago leaving the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation for the sectarian fringe, or did they? Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins began publishing a series of sixteen novels in 1995, projecting the controversial end-time teaching of a "Rapture," when God will snatch all true Christians out of the world before a time of horrible trial, the Tribulation. These novels have sold over 65 million copies world-wide. With some embarrassment, in 1998, the first four novels occupied the top four slots on the *New York Times* best-seller list in spite of the protest from biblical scholars that the whole idea of a "Rapture" is based on an erroneous reading of one Bible verse, 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

Sensationalism sells. The same kind of motivation that led folks to a hilltop in Low Hampton, New York, in 1844 to await the coming of the Lord continues to attract attention. One of my mentors Dale Moody invested much of the energy of his entire professional life as a Bible scholar and professor of theology battling Dispensationalism, the belief system behind the *Left Behind* novels. He lived at the center of controversy with his Southern Baptist denomination and was finally forced out of the classrooms at Southern Seminary. I have slowly come to the conclusion that people are not necessarily looking for the truth in general or for the best Bible scholarship in particular. Human nature seems to lean toward the best show in town regardless of the facts. Even in the age of science, the battle with Darwin goes on. The same people who will accept the biological products of evolutionary theory continue to deny the facts that led to evolutionary biology. We have to keep in sight that the New Atheists have also produced best-sellers on the *New York Times* list. Popular appeal proves nothing, not atheism, the Rapture, or the biblical literalism that produced Dispensational theology.

Apocalypse is one of the New Testament Greek words that has found its way into the English language. When a journalist speaks of a natural disaster of "biblical proportions," the word *apocalypse* tends to emerge. *Apocalypse Now* was the title of a 1979 movie sensationalizing the place of the Vietnam War in history. Melville's novel *Moby Dick* has been called an "apocalyptic novel" because it symbolizes the battle of good and evil which, for Melville, was being played out in

American history in the rising conflict over the institution of slavery.

Utopian dreams were prominent in eighteenth century America, mostly based on specific interpretations of biblical apocalyptic visions. Sir Thomas Moore formed the word *utopia* in 1516 with a play on the Greek *eutopia*, good place. More made the word u-topia, no place.

Apocalypse is the Greek word for revelation, the name given to the last book in your Bible. It means unveiling, like opening the curtain in a theater or removing the covering on a piece of art. English scholar N. T. Wright notes that apocalyptic is a style of biblical writing that is found in Daniel and Revelation and a way of thinking that was popular among Jews at the time of Jesus. Apocalyptic writing is associated with epochs of despair, when it seems that the world is about to come to an end and, for the faithful, when all hope for the successful achievement of dominance in the world has failed. Total despair of daily life led to the belief that only a cataclysmic intrusion of God into historical events could change the course. Apocalyptic writing employed visionary interpretation of events of the day to affirm that the God of Creation is still at work in the world and will ultimately achieve the ends of creation in a consummation of history and to call the faithful to stay the course.

Is there any hope? The crisis of world events, like the overwhelming military might of the Persians, Greeks, and Romans in Jewish history, led to an apocalyptic visionary hope looking beyond the chaos of daily life for God literally to come down out of the sky to rescue the righteous. In our time, world crises, like the Great Depression and two world wars, Vietnam, 9-11, two Asian Tsunamis in less than a decade (shall I go on?) continue to produce the conditions ripe for apocalyptic thought. Times of crisis produce human interest in visionary hope. We want final answers to ultimate questions. We tend to lay aside faith commitments for absolute guarantees about the future. Religion that claims to see the future or hold the key to success tends to rise to the top.

What I find to be shocking is the repetition of past failures to arrive at absolute answers in prediction of the end. Even when the memories of history can be recalled and recited, people continue to grasp for the birds in the apocalyptic bush. The word on the street is, "don't tell me to live by faith and hope for the best; I want certainty about the future that is as measurable and factual as 9-11 or the Japanese Tsunami." The tragic disappointments of history are bound to be repeated. Is there any hope?

Our hope is anchored in faith . While we are talking Bible, we ought to consider the champions of faith described in Hebrews 11: "All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them (v. 13)." Sounds familiar, doesn't it—something like the norm for today. Others have noted the response of the risen Christ to the disciples desire to know the future: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." Actually apocalyptic literature does not contradict the call to faith. Apocalyptic visions offered insight into the political and social crises of the time in which they were written. Except for trust in the God of creation and redemption, reading literally as if the coded messages contain exact information to see into the details of the future distorts the purpose for the early people of faith on the receiving end of Revelation as it does with for people in our time.

The Apostle Paul wrote to Christians struggling with the conflict between Gentile and Jew in the church. He anchored his message at the center of Christian hope on the foundation of the resurrection of Christ, raised to rule over all of creation: "he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for his church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

Some of the most beautiful imagery in the Bible is found in the liturgical passages of Revelation. The entire book is devoted to the God who is alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. John envisions angels, elders, and saints in worship singing, "worthy is the lamb that was slain." In the face of the Roman persecution of Christians, John envisioned a new heaven and a new earth. The sea, that had always represented the evil threat of chaos, had disappeared. Jerusalem could not be established on earth. The City destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE was no longer a center of hope, so John saw a New Jerusalem given by God, coming down out of heaven like a bride prepared for her husband. Then John anchors the hope: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from

their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away (21:3-4).”

Hope is anchored in the dwelling of God with the “peoples,” that is the nations on earth. As God came to us in Christ, God continues to come to dwell with this people. The bottom fact of life that hangs over all of us, death itself, will be swallowed into the eternal being of God. The atheist evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins views religion as the evolutionary product of wishful thinking against the fact of death, and he may be right. The atheist Marxist Ernst Bloch said, “Where there is hope, there is religion.” Feuerbach called religion “the sigh of the oppressed creature” and Marx identified religion as a “collective obsession.” They were right. We do not have facts to prove that the future holds anything more than the horrors of the past. As people of faith, however, we do not claim to know; we only claim a commitment to go forward into life with trust in the purpose of a loving God, like Abraham or Moses or old of a crucified Christ, knowing that we too may die in faith not having received the promise.