



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Mythbusters 2, Pt 1
It's not the end of the world!

Biblical Apocalypses

By Pastor Greg Davidson Laszakovits

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777 South Mount Joy Street
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022
717-367-1000
www.ETOWNCOB.ORG

MYTHBUSTERS 2

1

As pastors—and those who study the Bible in some depth—we have come to understand that the Bible is a long and complex living document that has evolved over millennia. *And*, over the many thousands of years, humanity's understanding of the sacred texts has shaped the traditions and practices of the Jewish and Christian people. Many beyond-the-Biblical myths have sprung up as ways of telling the deep truths that lie within the Bible, or trying to explain the mysteries of life and faith. Some of these myths have been helpful to a particular time and place; some must be put to rest—that's what this series is all about.

In order to better understand the Bible as the text which grounds our tradition, we want to take a few weeks to at least understand some of the myths that in the history of our tradition were once helpful, but now serve as stumbling blocks to a healthy life of faith.

These three weeks, we are going to unpack three myths or misconceptions that have been layered on our faith tradition.

- This is a series that is based on the Bible. We are doing this because we take the Bible seriously.
- Why are we busting these myths?
 - Not to be smug smartie-pantses
 - There is harm done by these myths. Misunderstandings about these things are used to manipulate people and make Christianity look like a joke. People are making rapture jokes like there's no tomorrow!
 - Give people language, tools
 - Construct, not deconstruct.
- How do we give people a way to think about this that is faith-based, though not literal.

2

TODAY'S MYTH: END TIMES

Books and books have been written on the end times, not to mention website after website posted. Some of these books and websites are grounded and helpful and Biblical, and some of them less than grounded, less-than-Biblical, and really quite odd. Definitely do not google end times So, what does the Bible really have in it?

MYTH #1—THE END OF THE WORLD IS GOING TO HAPPEN SOMETHING LIKE THIS...

The good people are going to get raptured up into the clouds. Or, just suddenly disappear. The faithful. Those who have lived life right and are being rewarded with their heavenly bliss.

The rest of us are going to suffer “trials and tribulations.” Most of us have heard some of the thousands of theories out there about the anti-Christ. The four horseman, the seals opened, the beast and the mark of the beast, the trumpets, Jesus coming on the clouds, Armageddon, and so on.

Which leads us to Myth #2...

MYTH #2: THE BOOK OF REVELATION IS THE ONLY AND DEFINITIVE ACCOUNT OF HOW THE END OF THE WORLD IS GOING TO HAPPEN.

Did you know that in the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament—there are apocalyptic scenarios in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Zechariah and probably most famously Daniel? And in the New Testament they are in Matthew, Mark, Luke, 1 John, among others. This is important because...it shows that at many times and places, people of faith have imagined what it would be like if the world were right again. Revelation is not the only time in the history of God's people when this hope-filled imaginative writing took place.

[And that Apocalyptic literature was a very popular genre in ancient times, just like it is now. Professor of Christian Origins, L. Michael White, notes that there were 30–40 apocalypses written in that era by a number of people; dozens that didn't make our Bible that are directly related to Judaism and

early Christianity! Again the Book of Revelation is not the only one.]

Most of what we see in pop culture about Jesus' Second Coming are imaginative depictions, and most are wildly non-Biblical. Those that attempt to be Biblical, try to patch together scriptures from Old Testament prophets, Jesus' sayings, New Testament letters and John's Revelation. Trying to connect the dots across centuries, languages, cultures and political situations is impossible. This timeline tried to do just that. Incidentally, it predicted the beginning of World War 3 was to start with nuclear Holocaust this past Wednesday.

In fact, Christianity can't quite agree on exactly what may or may not happen. There are Pre-millennial, Post-millennial, and Amillennial viewpoints. There are Idealists, Futurists, Historicists, and Preterists. Then there's Dispensationalism, Pre-, Mid- and Post-Tribulation Rapture. We are not going to talk about any of this today. As I said, the internet is awash if you are interested.

MYTH #3: THE SO-CALLED RAPTURE IS PART OF END TIMES

This seems really important because it's often at the heart of end times theories. Rapture is often thought of as one of the first and vital steps in "end times". This is where the concept of being "left behind" originates. We've talked about this before—the word *rapture* appears nowhere in the Bible.

In fact, the common understanding of rapture, where people are swept into the sky as a sign of Jesus' second coming did not exist for the first of 1800 years of Christianity. It's an amalgamation of a few scriptures that were cobbled together by a British evangelist John Nelson Darby in the 1800s. Darby and others connected this passage from 1 Thessalonians with the Book of Revelation and other scriptures. They thought first the Rapture, then seven years of "tribulation," followed by the great showdown between Jesus and the anti-Christ.

This all may sound familiar, but it is not directly linked in the Bible. There is nothing in 1 Thessalonians that would indicate

4 that this “caught up in the clouds together” event has anything to do with notions of the four horsemen, the seven seals and the beast, or any other Book of Revelation prophecy.¹

Even if one reads the Bible literally—in this case, *especially* if one reads the Bible literally—this popular rapture imagery isn’t even in there.

So even though concepts like the rapture are sometimes depicted as a core, biblical belief in Christianity, and even a nonnegotiable belief in some denominations and congregations, the fact is that the vast majority of Christians throughout history, never have linked the two.

MYTH #4: THE END IS NEAR!

Of course everyone who has predicted the end times thus far has got it wrong! Charles Wesley, founder of the Methodist church, and great hymn writer, predicted the beginning of the end in 1836. But he wasn’t the only one. Turns out that pretty much since the beginning of Christianity there have been inaccurate predictions.

I know that Wikipedia is not always the most accurate source for information, but in this case it was a helpful tool for seeing the sheer number of end of world theories that have been out there for centuries...²

One that caught my eye was from this woman...Anyone know her? Jeanne Dixon is the famous psychic who sort of predicted JFK’s assassination, visited President Nixon in the White House, and gave Nancy Reagan advice. She predicted the end of the world in 2020.

¹1 Thessalonians 4.16–18: *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. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dates_predicted_for_apocalyptic_events

INCLUDING RIGHT IN THE BIBLE ITSELF.

Mark 13.8 *Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.*

¹²“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child....

but in those days, following that distress,

*“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
²⁵the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’[c]*

²⁶“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

Similar verses also appear in Matthew and Luke, and there are others as well in the New Testament. What gives?

This is a reminder that if we really want to take the Bible seriously, we cannot read it literally. We know that makes it harder. But because we do believe that the Bible has life giving meaning for our lives today we are going to work at it!

It’s no wonder all of these predictions have been made through the eons. Crazy things are happening everywhere! Why wouldn’t we see connections to end times when our amygdalas (that reptilian part of our brain that reacts to threat) are constantly being poked and prodded. Apocalyptic literature is so full of symbols and often so dream-like and ethereal, that if you look hard enough it’s not all that hard to find correlations to the here and now, whenever the hear and now was or is.

But is the world really much different than a few years ago when SARS was the disease that would eventually kill us all, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were dominating the

6 headlines? Or in 1918 when World War One ravaged Europe only to be followed by 20–40 million killed by Spanish Flu. Or, like in the first century when John wrote his apocalypse while under Roman occupation, after his mother religion’s most holy place—the Temple—had been destroyed. Or when the writer of the Book of Daniel wrote out of the horror of slavery, genocide and exile in Babylon. Our age is no different with perpetual war in the Holy Land, earthquakes and climate change, the coronavirus, and you can name your anti-Christ depending on your political persuasion.

It’s understandable why these theories gain traction. The images are powerful, and when the world looks like it is crumbling around us, it is easy to get drawn in. Every generation experiences events that make us wonder whether the end is near.

MYTH #6: NONE OF THIS MATTERS

So, should we get out our scissors and cut all of this apocalyptic literature out of our Bibles because it seems out-of-date, based on prescientific understandings of the world, wrongly predicted, or just flat out weird? I think not. And here’s why...

The timeless element of end-of-the-world thinking makes me even more curious to know what Bible has to say. These apocalyptic writings have a place for us as a people of faith, a people of the Bible.

Moreover, they all have their own merits, and they all point towards something important. Now, I know I talked about winners and losers last week, but here’s what all of the apocalyptic writing in the bible points to: **In the end God wins.**

The good news is that God will have the last word. While it may not be all right now, it will be. Things will be made right again. Whatever evil is winning the world today, we believe that God wins in the end. We believe this about our individual lives and we believe this for the world.

REVELATION 21:1–6

I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea.

²I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven....I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: "Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women!"

Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone." The Enthroned continued, "Look! I'm making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and accurate." Then he said, "It's happened. I'm A to Z. I'm the Beginning, I'm the Conclusion. From Water-of-Life Well I give freely to the thirsty.

QUOTE NEW EARTH HEAVENS NEW

New Earth, heavens new, Spirit of God moving;
 New seed creatures new
 Spirit of life loving
 New man, woman new; image of God moving
 Sing a new song to the one who has said behold
 I make all things new

BENEDICTION

You won't want to miss next week when Pastor Pam tells us that "No, Jesus did not die for your sins."

