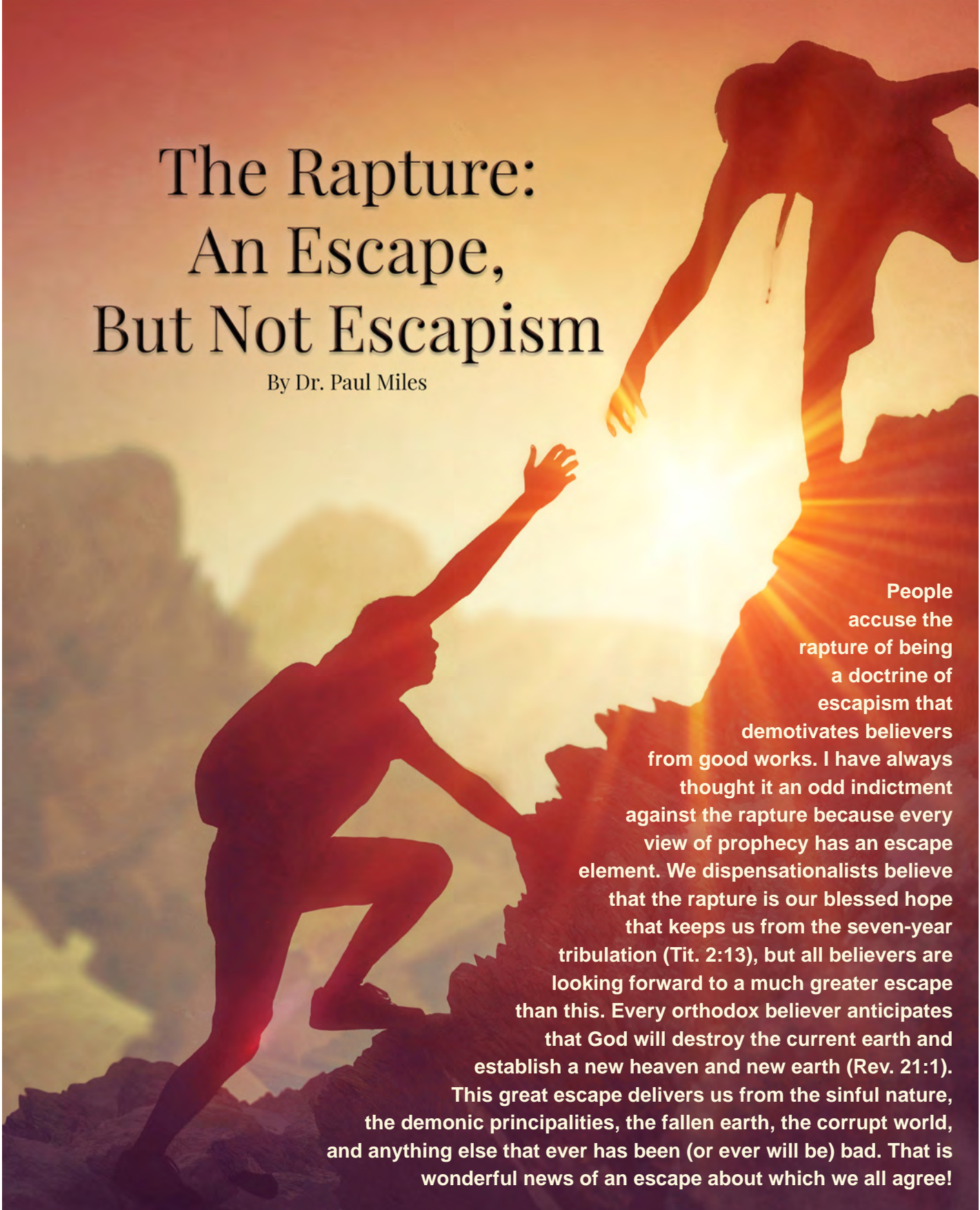




The Rapture: An Escape, But Not Escapism

By Dr. Paul Miles



People accuse the rapture of being a doctrine of escapism that demotivates believers from good works. I have always thought it an odd indictment against the rapture because every view of prophecy has an escape element. We dispensationalists believe that the rapture is our blessed hope that keeps us from the seven-year tribulation (Tit. 2:13), but all believers are looking forward to a much greater escape than this. Every orthodox believer anticipates that God will destroy the current earth and establish a new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1). This great escape delivers us from the sinful nature, the demonic principalities, the fallen earth, the corrupt world, and anything else that ever has been (or ever will be) bad. That is wonderful news of an escape about which we all agree!



Does this final escape hinder the believer—whether he acknowledges the biblical teaching about the rapture or not—from good works? Of course not! Rather, it gives him a sense of urgency. He has several unbelieving friends with whom he wants to share the gospel so that they can escape hell with him. So it is with the rapture. The rapture is an escape from a future hardship, not an escape from current responsibility. The rapture puts a degree of responsibility on our shoulders since we want as many people as possible to be raptured with us.

The escapism accusation is typically a big misunderstanding. It can be frustrating to hear people grumble about the rapture being escapism, but it could be an opportunity to share with other believers the joy that we have as we await our meeting with the Lord. To be prepared for the next “escapism” conversation, it helps to be familiar with the reasoning behind the rapture, the history and current state of the escapism misunderstanding, and what the Bible says about living in light of the rapture.

The Reasoning behind the Rapture

God has promised to establish a Jewish kingdom on earth. The promises of land, seed, and blessing are ingrained in the Abrahamic Covenant and were reaffirmed in several passages throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. When the Messiah came, He offered to establish this kingdom on earth contingent on Israel’s repen-

tance. Israel rejected her Messiah, so Yeshua has not set up His kingdom—yet. The promises are still there, and God will still do what He has promised.

Before Yeshua establishes the kingdom, Israel must repent. Israel will return to God and say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD” (Mt. 23:39; cf. Ps. 118). This is one of the purposes of the seven-year tribulation: to drive Israel to repentance. Since the purpose of the tribulation has Israel at its center, the church will first be removed from the earth. The tribulation will be a time of purification for Israel. By the end of the tribulation, everyone from the remnant of Israel on earth will be a believer in Yeshua. The rest will die.

It is likely that two-thirds of the total Jewish population in the tribulation will perish, as indicated in Zechariah 13:9, which says: “And I will bring the third part into the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried. They shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people; and they shall say, Jehovah is my God.” If three Jews enter the tribulation, then two will die and one will enter the kingdom. That means that if three Jews are raptured, then two lives will be saved from death in the tribulation (and much more importantly, they will be saved eternally). The tribulation will not be good for Gentiles either, as half of the world population will die (Rev. 6:7, 8; 9:15, 18).

This is not escapism. It is an exhortation to works, especially for evan-

gelism! So, where did the “escapism” misunderstanding come from?

The History and Current State of the “Escapism” Misunderstanding

While preparing for this article, I did a Google Books search for the term “rapture escapism” in books that were written before 1950. There were not many hits because people were not accusing dispensationalists of escapism in the mid-twentieth century. In fact, one of our greatest critics at the time, George Eldon Ladd, wrote about dispensationalists in 1949:

It is doubtful if there has been any other circle of men who have done more by their influence in preaching, teaching and writing to promote a love for Bible study, a hunger for the deeper Christian life, a passion for evangelism and zeal for missions in the history of American Christianity.¹

It was not until the 1980s that the escapism accusation became common in Christian literature. Before then, the terms “rapture” and “escape” occurred together when theologians described the rapture as an escape from a future time of wrath, not from current responsibilities.

I found some more recent criticisms of the rapture on Twitter. These are actual tweets that have circulated:

Escapism is an idea produced by rapture theology that we don’t have to actually DO anything as Christians, because God is in control and will just *snap* and

¹ George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 49.



make things better, and take YOU to a place where you don't have to actually WORK for justice.

The fundamental problem with rapture theology is escapism. Scripture doesn't teach escapism[;] it portrays a victorious church. Eph 5:26-27

Pre-trib rapture theology is rooted in this idea [of segregation]. During reconstruction the idea became popular because the assumption was the POC wouldn't be raptured (because [of] racism), so whites would be able to eventually escape integration if they persevered. It's really twisted stuff.

These tweets are not convincing. The first tweet has some questionable overtones, but that aside, the tweet could easily be used as a critique of any view that believes God will establish a new heaven and a new earth. The second tweet appeals to a passage that supports our point: "that he might present the church to himself a glorious *church*, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph. 5:27a). If Paul is referring to the church being presented after the rapture, then we want to grow in sanctification now. The third tweet is a complete misrepresentation of the rapture as being white supremacy. We live in a day when you can win an argument just by calling the other person a racist and then walking away, but that tactic in and of itself is an escape from handling the issues as they exist.

You may look at that last quote and think that I am scraping the bottom of the barrel for the worst Internet trolls. Perhaps we should expect that of Twitter, but the same sentiments have been published in academic journals as well. One scholar wrote the following in an article to promote the rapture as a racist doctrine: "Rapture portrays God's answer to the destruction of the sins wrought in the nineteenth century by war, greed, and white supremacy as a move to create a state of cosmic segregation."² There were several problems with that article, so a dispensationalist wrote a fine response that I would recommend reading.³ Both of these articles are available online at academia.edu.

What the Bible Says about Living in Light of the Rapture

So, what should we do with the escapism charge? Some common responses might be to turn the tables by accusing the accuser of racism or to ask how much the accuser has done, but I would suggest a different road. Since the rapture is a biblical doctrine, I would advise a biblical response. Let us consider a couple of rapture texts and see what the Bible says about how to behave as we wait for the rapture.

The first text is perhaps the most famous:

¹³ But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that fall asleep; that ye sorrow

not, even as the rest, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Yeshua died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Yeshua will God bring with him. ¹⁵ For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Messiah shall rise first; ¹⁷ then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Wherefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

The believers in Thessalonica were exemplary to believers in other areas for receiving the Word in affliction with joy (1 Thess. 1:6-7), but Paul warns them against immorality (4:1-8) and laziness (vv. 10-12). A warning against laziness is the context of this great rapture passage! Notice verse 18: "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." This is not a call to run away from trouble, but rather to confront it and to encourage others to keep working.

A second rapture passage is 2 Thessalonians 2:3. This verse is often overlooked, as the word that is translated "falling away" in Greek is *apostasia* (ἀποστασία), which is the root of the English word "apostasy" but literally

² Nathaniel P. Grimes, "The Racial Ideology of Rapture" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2016), 219.

³ Cory Marsh, "The Rapture: Cosmic Segregation or Antidote for Oppression? A Critical Response to 'The Racial Ideology of Rapture,'" *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 24:2 (Fall 2020), 60-79.



means “departure.” Contextually, this passage is not speaking of a spiritual departure (though spiritual apostasy is certainly to be expected). Rather, it refers to the church’s departure from the earth at the rapture.⁴ With the rapture in mind, let us consider how Paul used this doctrine in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, 15-17:

¹ Now we beseech you, brethren, touching the coming of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, and our gathering together unto him; ² to the end that ye be not quickly shaken from your mind, nor yet be troubled, either by spirit, or by word, or by epistle as from us, as that the day of the Lord is just at hand; ³ let no man beguile you in any wise: for *it will not be*, except the falling away come first, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition... ¹⁵ So then, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye were taught, whether by word, or by epistle of ours. ¹⁶ Now our Lord Yeshua

Messiah himself, and God our Father who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

Again, the rapture is a doctrine that urges believers to good works. Is it escapism to “stand fast,” “hold to the traditions,” and “comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word”? This is a clear call to action.

The rapture is good news for the believer, which is why we follow Paul in calling it our “blessed hope” (Tit. 2:13). But does our blessed hope mean we can be complacent before the rapture? Not surprisingly, the context of the “blessed hope” passage is actually a call to good works, not passivity:

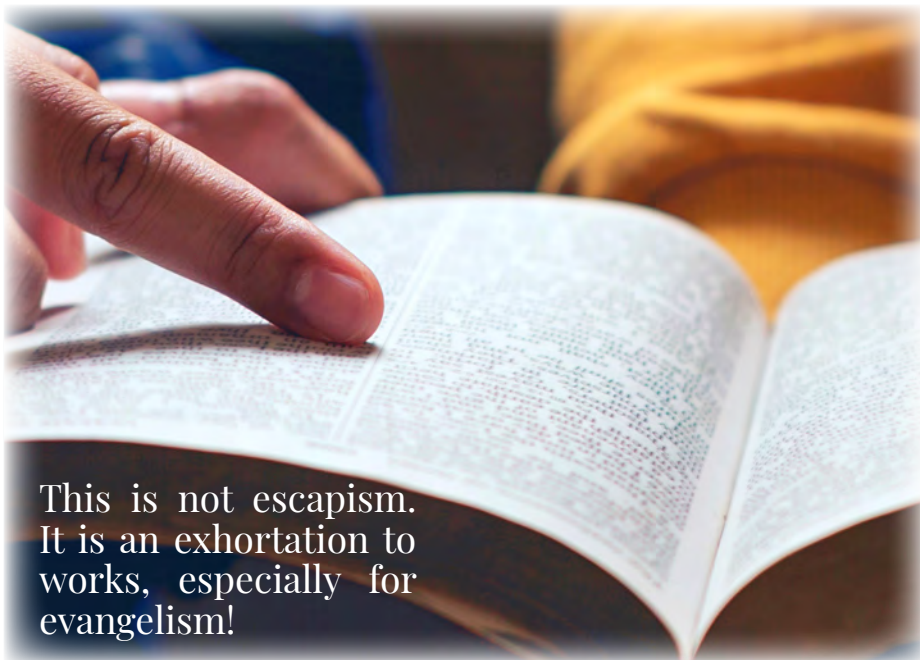
¹¹ For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, ¹² teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righ-

teously, and godly in the present age, ¹³ looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Yeshua Messiah, ¹⁴ who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself *His* own special people, zealous for good works. (Tit. 2:11-14 NKJV)

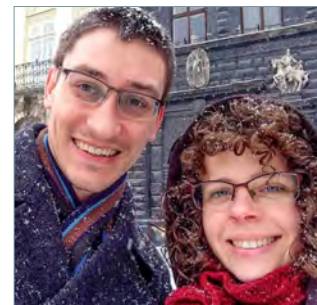
This passage contains the negative commands “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts” as well as the positive “we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age.” This looks nothing like the common portrayal of escapism. Yes, the rapture means an escape from a future tribulation, but the Bible uses this doctrine to motivate us to works, not escapism.

And if the Bible uses the rapture as a motivation to works, then so should we.

⁴ For an explanation of why 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is a rapture passage, I would recommend the book *The Falling Away: Spiritual Departure or Physical Rapture? A Second Look at 2 Thessalonians 2:3* by Andy Woods.



This is not escapism. It is an exhortation to works, especially for evangelism!



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