

Reprinted from The Christian Science Monitor, October 12, 2001.
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The Rapture Revisited

By Elise L. Moore, CSB

Apocalyptic themes in books and movies have accelerated rather than dwindled with the turn of the millennium. The popular "Left Behind" series, begun in 1996, releases its ninth book, "Desecration," on October 30. "Megiddo," produced by Trinity Broadcasting and released September 21, is a sequel to the world's end film, "The Omega Code." A trip to a bookstore or a surf of the Internet reveals scores of books and videos exploring prophetic topics of destruction and salvation.

A recurring theme is what some denominations refer to as the rapture - where believers in Christ are suddenly taken into heaven, leaving unbelievers behind. While the word "rapture" never actually appears in the King James Version of the Bible, the scripture referred to is Matthew 24:40-42. It's brief but graphic. "Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." The implication is that those taken are translated into the kingdom of heaven.

What happens to those left in the field or at the mill (or at the mall)? According to rapture theology, earth becomes a living hell. Prophecies from the last book of the Bible, Revelation, are applied to Jesus' words in Matthew. The result is suffering and chaos pictured graphically through film or fictional Christian books.

But the essence of Christian experience is omitted in these attempts to scare people into salvation. It's not fear that saves. It's love. Jesus spoke of a loving Father, a forgiving God, a perfect, good God. He spoke of God as not only his (Jesus') Father but "our Father." He encouraged his followers to pray, "Our Father which art in heaven." The Father that saved Jesus from hatred and lifted him out of the grave is a loving God. In fact, the Bible says that God is love (see I John 4:8). Those who awaken to this higher view of God as Love, and who love God and His creation, are saved from suffering

and sin through this very love. It is through love that we realize that Jesus is the Son of God, the Son of divine Love. It is through love that we accept that we are the sons and daughters of God, made in the image and likeness of divine Love. It's love that saves from doubt and fear, healing sickness and sin.

It's never too late to love. And it's never too late to be healed by God's love. "God ... will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:3, 4). No one is left out or excluded from health and harmony. Some may accept the love of Christ sooner than others. But the truth of God's love remains for every individual to discover.

Actually, the prophecies of Matthew 24 seem to refer to events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus is urging his disciples to hold onto their love of God, despite harsh trials. His parable of the one being taken and another left follows a reference to the story of Noah, in which the flood of sin destroyed all but Noah and his family. In this context, those who remain would be the remnant faithful to God. This is the opposite of the popularized interpretation.

If there is a warning in this chapter, it's for the disciples of Christ, not unbelievers. Christ's followers are warned to act wisely and faithfully, even when it appears that no one is watching. Sorrow will come to those followers who are disobedient and act cruelly (see Matt. 24:34-51). The message of these verses is not so much to frighten people into a profession of faith, but to warn Christians to remain faithful to divine Love.

The Founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, practiced the power of divine Love by healing people of sickness and sin. She didn't condemn those who opposed Christian healing. She simply rose higher in her understanding of Love. She once wrote: "Every trial of our faith in God makes us stronger. The more difficult seems the material condition to be overcome by Spirit, the stronger should be our faith and the purer our love. The Apostle John says: 'There is no fear in Love, but perfect Love casteth out fear He that feareth is not made perfect in Love'" ("Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," pg. 410).

When I hear of the rapture, I think about all being saved. I think of those faithful to God, loving when others hate, loving until Christ is proven to heal.