

## **A Thief in the Night**

*Tom's Perspectives*

by Thomas Ice

*"Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will."*

—Matthew 24:42–44

For many of us "baby-boomers" the early 70s were an exciting time! The Jesus Movement saw hundreds of thousands of young people come to Christ. It was a time within American Christianity when there was a great emphasis on Bible prophecy, especially the rapture of the Church. Even though I had grown up in the church, I was first introduced to Bible prophecy and the rapture during this time when I was in my late teens. There was an air of expectancy that Christ could really come for His church at any-moment, which I have not seen since that time. Back then many were waiting for the coming of the Lord while reaching out to the lost with gospel so they would not miss the rapture. I had many friends who accepted Christ during those days because of the urgency of the hour.

### **1970S OUTREACH**

First of all, I believe the Holy Spirit was extremely active, moving upon my rebellious generation like He has not done since in the United States. The Lord used books like Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*,<sup>1</sup> which saw perhaps millions come to Christ through its influence. Movies like Russell Doughten's *A Thief in the Night*,<sup>2</sup> taught the pre-trib rapture and was also a catalyst that saw many people come to Christ through its showing. Doughten depicts the rapture as Christ coming as a thief in the night.

Starting in 1969 America witnessed the rise of what was then called "Jesus Rock" music arriving on the scene. The focus of a great deal of their music included the belief that Jesus is coming back soon and you better trust Him as Saviour so you won't miss the rapture. Larry Norman was considered a founder and a leader of "Jesus Rock" with his well-known song about the rapture, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." Norman produced another song around 1970 entitled "Right Here in America," a seven and a half minute ballad about coming persecution of Christians destined for America. He has the following lines in the song:

Well, I pray that we Christians will get off our sofas  
And stand up for what we believe  
The time is too short, and Christ is returning  
We'd better get ready to leave.

We who are Christians should turn on the light,  
So the truth will shine bright as the day  
Jesus will come like a thief in the night,  
And he'll steal all who love him away.

The lyrics also view Christ's coming at the rapture as "a thief in the night." For me this raises the question of whether the rapture is ever directly associated with the "thief in the night" motif.

### BIBLICAL USAGE

The "thief" idea in relation to a coming of Christ is used seven times and only in the New Testament (Matt. 24:43; Lk. 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2, 4; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15). Christ uses "a thief coming in the middle of the night" in the faithful householder illustration presented in Matthew and Luke (Matt. 24:43; Lk. 12:39). Neither of these texts refer to the rapture of the church; instead, both contexts support the notion that Christ's coming speaks of the second coming. In these passages Jesus speaks to the nation of Israel during the time of the seven-year tribulation when the faithful Jewish believer of that time will be watching for the Lord's return, unlike those who were not looking for the coming of Messiah at His first coming.

As we move chronologically through the New Testament canon, we arrive at a major passage in Paul's writing that twice refers to a thief coming in the night (1 Thess. 5:2, 4). 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 is a section following the previous paragraph (1 Thess. 4:13–18) where Paul speaks of the rapture (1 Thess. 4:17). Paul uses the transitional Greek phrase *peri de* "now as to" in verse one as he shifts from the prophetic subject of the rapture to "the day of the Lord." John MacArthur explains the significance of this term as follows: "Paul used familiar Greek words here to indicate a change of topics within the same general subject of prophecy (cf. 4:9, 13; 1Co 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). The expression here points to the idea that within the broader context of the end time coming of the Lord Jesus, the subject is changing from a discussion of the blessings of the rapture of believers to the judgment of unbelievers."<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that Paul clearly identifies his topic as "the day of the Lord," which "will come just like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2b). The rapture is not spoken of as coming like a thief in the night. Verse three tells us it will be those who are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape." The unbelievers, who are said to be "of the darkness," are the ones who will be caught off-guard and unprepared by God's wrath during the tribulation. In fact, verse nine reminds believers that they will not experience the wrath of God during the tribulation when it says, "For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." The means of deliverance from God's wrath will be the rapture of the church spoken of by Paul at the end of chapter 4.

The thief imagery is also used in 2 Peter 3:10 where the day of the Lord is Peter's subject. This passage is clearly not a reference to the rapture, since it says, "the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up."

The final two references to the thief motif occur in Revelation 3:2 and 16:15. Jesus is speaking directly to the carnal church of Sardis whom He tells to wake-up from their spiritual slumber and repent. "If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you." This passage is certainly not related to the rapture but to a promise of judgment to those who do not repent within the church.

Revelation 16:15 is a parenthetical statement that occurs between the sixth and seventh bowl judgments. Thus, eighteen of the nineteen tribulation judgments have taken place. Since the final bowl judgment is associated with and preparation for

Christ's second coming, it is a warning for tribulation saints to be watching for signs leading up to Christ's return, which is described in the second-half of Revelation 19. This is certainly not a reference to the rapture.

### CONCLUSION

Even though there are other issues of greater importance than viewing the rapture event as a thief in the night, I believe it is important that we properly handle the Word of God (2 Tim. 2:15) and relate biblical phrases and descriptions in the same way the Bible does. It could be that when we misapply biblical imagery we not only create false associations but we could also miss the application of a motif the Bible actually teaches. This could be the case with the thief in the night language.

The thief in the night imagery never applies to the rapture. Such language usually is descriptive of unbelievers and God's wrath or judgment related to the tribulation or second coming. The picture painted by a thief in the night shows it is the unbeliever who is caught off guard since he never really believes God is actually going to judge in history. The unbeliever thinks he has gotten away with ignoring God all his life, therefore, the Lord is a non-factor, he thinks. The point of the Bible is: "Boy is he in for a big surprise one day," just like an individual who is robbed by a thief. When one is robbed, it is an event that disrupts the normal status of coming home every day in the past to a house that is as it should be. Like the slothful student who is never ready for the exam, and therefore, caught off guard when it actually comes, so the unbeliever will never be ready since he either does not believe in God at all or does not believe that God will ever hold him accountable.

Larry Norman's song says, "Jesus will come like a thief in the night, and he'll steal all who love him away." Christ will not steal anything away at the rapture. He is coming for His Bride—the Church, the Body of Christ. Believers are called "sons of light" in 1 Thessalonians 5:5 and instructed by Paul to stay awake during the present time before the rapture, which he labels as the night. "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief" (1 Thess. 5:4). In the context of 1 Thessalonians 5, the day refers to the day of the Lord, which is a time of God's wrath we often call the tribulation.

The events of the last days will catch the world off guard since in their wildest dreams they do not believe that those crazy Christians and their Bible could be right. However, we believers know better and will not be surprised when the events of Bible prophecy begins to unfold. Maranatha!

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Lindsey with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Russell S. Doughten, Jr., *A Thief in the Night* (1972).

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, ed., *The MacArthur study Bible: New American Standard Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), p. 1848.