CAN WE STILL BELIEVE IN THE RAPTURE?

ED HINDSON & MARK HITCHCOCK



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To "all who love his appearing" and for whom "there will be a crown of righteousness."

2 TIMOTHY 4:8

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CHAPTER 1

Rapture Under Attack

The rapture is a racket. Whether prescribing a violent script for Israel or survivalism in the United States, this theology distorts God's vision for the world.¹ BARBARA R. ROSSING, THE RAPTURE EXPOSED

S o begins one of the more popular attacks on the pretribulation view in recent years. Rossing, like others holding this perspective, claims a pretribulational view of the rapture fosters escapism, replaces peacemaking with a glorification of war, and celebrates the wrath of God. She goes on to claim:

This theology is not biblical. We are not Raptured off the earth, nor is God. No, God has come to live in the world through Jesus. God created the world, God loves the world, and God will never leave the world behind!²

Such an opinion can hardly be reconciled with the biblical statement that "earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them" (Revelation 20:11) because "the first heaven and the first earth passed away" (Revelation 21:1).

Others accuse those who hold a pretribulation view as showing racial discrimination. Hank Hanegraaff claims:

The good news for Jews is that LaHaye believes that on the basis of their race they have a divine right to the land of Palestine. The bad news is that, as a direct result of the crucifixion of Christ, twenty-first-century Jews will soon die in an Armageddon that will make the Nazi Holocaust pale by comparison.³

Hanegraaff later adds:

[The] theory of two peoples of God has had chilling consequences not only for Jews, but for Palestinian Arabs as well...Such unbiblical notions put Christian Zionists in the untenable position of condoning the displacement of Palestinian Christians from their homeland in order to facilitate an occupation based on unbelief and racial affiliation.⁴

If a person were to believe such criticisms, Christians who interpret the Bible as including a pretribulation rapture are unbiblical, anti-Semitic, survivalists, have a distorted view of God, are against caring for God's creation, and are racist! All this from simply believing what the Bible clearly states—that "we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:17 NIV).

Why the Divide?

Unfortunately, these accusations come primarily from Christians rather than those who claim no religious affiliation. Why has there been such animosity among some believers regarding Christ's coming?

Some of the most vocal objections to the idea of the rapture have come from those who lack a clear, exegetically based understanding of it in the first place. They become easily confused by statements like "The word *rapture* is not in the Bible"; "Christians have always suffered tribulation"; "No one believed in a pretrib rapture before 1830"; "The Bible doesn't teach two second comings or two last trumpets."⁵

1. Naïve Acceptance

Christians of all types initially tend to uncritically accept whatever theological ideas happen to be taught in the church fellowship where they first came to the faith. This includes a wide variety of doctrinal beliefs, including those relating to eschatology. Some people believe in the rapture simply because that is what they were taught early in their spiritual experience. Naïve acceptance of any doctrine leaves sincere believers vulnerable to critical objections to their faith that they are unprepared to answer.

2. Theological Ignorance

Biblical truth is anchored in a theological context drawn from Scripture. Without a proper understanding of that context, some Christians are inconsistent in certain elements of their faith. Specific details of eschatology are accepted or dismissed with little or no understanding of a biblical, theological context. As a result, many Christians become easily confused by the basic elements of any serious discussion of biblical prophecies about the future.

3. Popular Influence

Unfortunately, many evangelicals in general are influenced by the views of popular speakers, teachers, and writers. Attracted to the general ideas of a popular teacher, they tend to embrace the teacher's eschatology as well. This happens with various prophetic views of all kinds, whether the teacher is David Jeremiah, John MacArthur, John Hagee, R.C. Sproul, John Piper, or Tim Keller.⁶

4. Unexpected Questions

Many people struggle with questions about Bible prophecy that are raised by others around them. These questions can range across a wide spectrum: Why isn't the word *rapture* in the Bible? Isn't the concept of a pretribulation rapture a relatively new idea? If all believers are raptured *after* the tribulation, who will populate Jesus's millennial kingdom? If it's true that the church replaces Israel, then what happens to God's promise never to forsake Israel? These questions can be unsettling for those who aren't familiar with the prophetic portions of Scripture and Bible prophecy in general.

5. Difficult Challenges

Some believers abandon any attempt to resolve the challenges that are raised when they study eschatology. They simply decide it will all "pan out" in the end, and they may even halfheartedly claim to be "pan-millennial." Because some interpretive details of eschatology are indeed challenging, even some pastors are unwilling to do the hard work of sorting them all out.

6. Paradigm Shift

Some overreact to the questions they are unprepared to answer and make a complete paradigm shift in their thinking. Instead of formulating a clear exceptical understanding of the biblical text, they simply adopt an opposite view. Challenged by a few questions they are not prepared to answer, they uncritically assume an opposite view must be correct. Too many times people do this without considering the ramifications of the new idea they have adopted.

7. Adversarial Responses

Whenever people drastically change their theological views, it becomes very tempting for them to demonize the view they previously held by denouncing it with a harsh, adversarial response. Thus, former Catholics, Charismatics, Baptists, and Presbyterians often become the harshest critics of a given group or teaching. The same is true with regard to eschatology. Those who once held a pretrib view of the rapture often become virtually hateful in their rejection of that view—even to the point of bitter sarcasm when referring to the rapture itself despite the fact it is clearly taught in the Bible. All views of eschatology (except full preterism) believe there will be a rapture of living believers and a simultaneous resurrection of dead believers. The only real difference between the views is the matter of the *timing* of the rapture.

All too often, discussions about eschatology shed more heat than light. Angry expressions, pejorative reactions, and hateful remarks prevent any serious interaction with those who hold opposing views. Mocking skewers and condemns, and fails to redeem. The intent of some is to vilify rather than inform. They make hideous and outrageous remarks about other believers' views and thus fail the test of loving one another as Christ loved the church (see Ephesians 5:25).

In reality, all true Christians believe God will win in the end! Pretribulationalists believe He will win by rapturing the church, converting Israel, condemning the world, fulfilling the millennial promises, and ushering in the eternal state. The other eschatological views more or less see the same end results, but they take different routes to get there. For example, mid- and posttribulationalists believe God will preserve the church through part or all of the tribulation, and then the rapture and other eschatological events will follow. Postmillennialists believe the church is converted "Israel" and that they are bringing in the millennium now. Amillennialists believe all these things will happen, mostly in a spiritual sense, at the end of the church era preceding eternity.

Each view of eschatology contains elements of truth but applies them in a different manner. Pretribulationalists urge believers to be prepared because Jesus could return at any time. Mid- and posttribulationalists urge believers to be prepared, if necessary, to suffer for their faith until Jesus comes. Postmillennialists insist we have a responsibility to transform the world as long as we are still here. Amillennialists remind us that heaven is our ultimate destiny. Each of these concerns is biblical, practical, and a vital part of evangelical Christianity.

In our growing information age, it is often the loudest voices that demand the most attention. From political debates to viral videos, communication shouts messages more than in past generations. When it comes to views concerning the end times, several "new" voices have popularized loud—and sometimes bold—attacks against the pretribulation view as part of promoting their own "brand" or end-times teachings. A brief Internet search on the "pretrib rapture," for example, will lead to many results proclaiming, "How the Pre-Trib Rapture Is a Deception," or, "The False Doctrine of the Pre-Trib Rapture."

Attacks on the Pretrib Rapture View

Finding information on the topic is not a problem; the problem is discovering which information is helpful in the discussion. In both academic and popular writings, four areas of attack on the pretribulational rapture view have emerged as the most common:

- 1. There is no rapture (Jesus will restore all things someday, but not in a specific rapture).
- 2. The preterist view (the "rapture" occurred during the first century).
- 3. The minimalist view (the rapture is coming, but we don't know when).
- 4. The posttribulation/New Reformation view (one rapture at the end of the tribulation).

Let's take a look at each of these four arguments to discuss their strengths and weaknesses.

The "No Rapture" View

I (Ed) was listening to an amillennial pastor friend preach a message on the second coming. He concluded with the words, "And so we see that there never will be a rapture. All we have to look forward to is trouble, trouble, and more trouble!" At which point his congregation let out a loud moan. I was tempted to jump up and shout, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (see 1 Thessalonians 4:18). Afterward I reminded him that there has to be a time when the dead are raised and the living are "caught up" (the rapture). We simply disagree on the *timing* of the event, not the *fact* that it will happen.

Despite the Bible's clear teaching—in which Jesus said, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3)—many who do not believe in a pretribulational rapture assume there will be no rapture at all. This view, held by many in the United Kingdom, is well represented by British New Testament scholar N.T. Wright. Known for writing both academic and popular books about Jesus, he noted in an article entitled "Farewell to the Rapture":

The American obsession with the second coming of Jesus—especially with distorted interpretations of it continues unabated. Seen from my side of the Atlantic, the phenomenal success of the Left Behind books appears puzzling, even bizarre. Few in the U.K. hold the belief on which the popular series of novels is based: that there will be a literal "rapture" in which believers will be snatched up to heaven, leaving empty cars crashing on freeways and kids coming home from school only to find that their parents have been taken to be with Jesus while they have been "left behind." This pseudotheological version of Home Alone has reportedly frightened many children into some kind of (distorted) faith.⁷ He continues with a brief commentary that provides an alternative view of the end of times, suggesting, "The New Testament, building on ancient biblical prophecy, envisages that the creator God will remake heaven and earth entirely, affirming the goodness of the old Creation but overcoming its mortality and corruptibility."⁸

Rapture passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 are limited to borrowing metaphors from Old Testament passages to speak of the transformation that believers will experience at the end of time. Wright further emphasizes Jesus did not speak of His return in such vivid ways, but suggests only Paul did.⁹ However, Paul clearly affirmed, "This we say to you by the word of the Lord" (verse 15)!

The return of Jesus serves as a foundation of Christian belief. Early Christian statements such as the Nicene Creed offered a very limited focus on the end times, such as belief in "the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."¹⁰ However, the church has long held to an understanding of Jesus one day returning to this world as He promised in John 14:1-3. Believers often argue regarding the timing of this coming to rapture or take His people to be with Him, but they still agree the Scriptures teach that He *will* come.

One of the earliest Christian writings outside of the New Testament is the *Didache*, a Greek word that means "teachings." The *Didache* includes a compilation of early church doctrines and was most likely written between 70–180. It says this regarding the future: "Be vigilant over your life; let your lamps not be extinguished, or your loins ungirded, but be prepared, for you know not the hour in which our Lord will come" (16:1). Though not explicitly pretribulational in nature, the passage clearly affirms a view in which the Lord will return at any moment.

Also, how else are readers to understand Paul's words regarding this future "mystery" that "we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)? The end of time includes more than restoring all things—it includes a transformation of believers living on the earth at the time of Christ's coming.

The Preterist View

The preterist view holds that most, or all, of the main New Testament prophetic passages were fulfilled in the first century. Within this view are full preterists and partial preterists. Full preterists contend *all* the prophecies of the New Testament have already been fulfilled, including the second coming and resurrection of believers. Few hold this particular view of preterism.¹¹

Usually when someone says he or she holds a preterist view, they are referring to *partial* preterism. R.C. Sproul, a well-known adherent of this view, says it "places many or all eschatological events in the past, especially during the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70."¹² This includes the belief that prophecies regarding Jesus coming in a cloud referred to the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century, that Nero was the beast in Revelation, and that the evil "Babylon" of eschatology was actually Jerusalem.¹³

Most who hold this view also argue the book of Revelation was written in the AD 60s rather than the traditional date of AD 95. If true, this would more easily allow the prophecies of Revelation to fit first-century events that took place a few years later. However, the best scholarship continues to support the traditional view of the later date of Revelation, a fact that holds strong negative consequences for those seeking to justify a preterist view.

Hanegraaff also holds to a preterist view, which influences his popular book *The Apocalypse Code* as well as his *Last Disciple* novel series. However, many of the concepts taught in this theory fail if Revelation was written after AD 70. Norman Geisler's review of Hanegraaff's work observes:

...as even partial preterist Kenneth Gentry admits, there is "strong external witness" that John wrote after AD

70 during Domitian's reign (260). Indeed, the earliest witness (Irenaeus) knew Polycarp (1st cent), the disciple of the apostle John. With him there is an unbroken series of early Fathers who held that John wrote after AD 70 including Irenaeus (2nd cent), Victorinus (3rd cent), and Eusebius (4th cent.). The significance of this cannot be overstated. For the early view of John does not destroy the futurist view (that the Tribulation is after AD 70). However, the late view totally destroys the preterist since it is referring to the Tribulation as yet future after AD 70.¹⁴

Both the popular and academic arguments that suggest the rapture and associated events occurred during the first century AD struggle when evaluated by the facts of history. Though Jesus did speak of prophetic events that occurred near His time, He also spoke of yet-unfilled prophecies that still require investigation by readers today: the gospel "preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations," a time of great tribulation worse than anything the world will ever see; the sign of the Son of Man coming in the clouds with power and glory; the gathering of all nations for the judgment (Matthew 24:14 NIV, 21, 30; 25:31-32).

The Minimalist View

The minimalist view refers to the growing idea among many evangelical Christians that Jesus will return one day, but we don't know when. Some further contend we *cannot* know when, arguing that even Jesus does not know the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36). Some holding this view jokingly suggest they are pan-tribulationists or pan-millennialists, saying, "It will all pan out in the end." Often people retreat to this approach as a reaction against failed attempts to date the rapture or identify the antichrist.

The weakness with this view is not its inaccuracy, but its lack of

concern for the Bible's clear teachings about the end times. Consider how much of Scripture is prophetic in nature. Of the Bible's 31,124 verses, 8,352 of them include predictions. This is 27 percent of the entire Bible! In the New Testament, one out of every 30 verses has to do with future events. If more than one-fourth of the Bible touches on the future, Christians should have a high level of concern for better understanding what those passages say and how they apply to today.

There are three primary reasons people adopt this minimalist approach. First, some have grown tired of the fear-based content that appears in many prophetic books, films, and other forms of media. The desire to "feel good" and focus on the positive has led many in today's churches to neglect the study of biblical prophecy. Because they want to emphasize only the positive aspects of the gospel, they avoid what they wrongly perceive as the negative message of Bible prophecy.

Second, minimalists want to avoid controversy. Because the study of prophecy has often included debates regarding various views of the end times, a growing number of evangelicals simply avoid the discussion altogether so they can avoid the debates.

Third, for some people, the concerns of this world (Matthew 13:22) have taken priority over the pursuit of spiritual maturity. This includes those who fulfill the words of 2 Timothy 4:3-4: "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths." Spiritual growth is often difficult, as is the study of prophecy. However, Scripture encourages us to study to show ourselves approved (2 Timothy 2:15). Romans 12:2 challenges believers to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Bible prophecy is not written to *scare* us but rather to *prepare* us for the Lord's return.

A Pew Research study regarding US Christians' views on the

return of Jesus offered some interesting insights. First, 47 percent agreed they believe Jesus will "definitely" or "probably" return to earth in the next 40 years. However, another surprising insight is that 14 percent said they did not know if Jesus would return during this time, while 38 percent agreed Jesus will "definitely" or "probably" not return in the next 40 years.¹⁵ Over half of American Christians (self-identified Christians, not all Americans) either don't know or don't think Jesus is coming back any time soon. The actions of these American views are often reflected in views of the end times, with more people simply unconcerned about Jesus's return or its timing.

The Repopularized Posttribulation View

The posttribulation view generally holds that the second coming of Jesus takes place at the end of the seven-year tribulation period. However, a growing number of scholars who do not hold to a literal seven-year tribulation are now preferring to call the position "historic premillennialism."¹⁶ This view often emphasizes the fact that believers in Christ will remain on earth during periods of great upheaval and judgment. While this view has often had supporters, two factors have contributed to the increased popularity of the posttribulation view in recent years.

First, a growing number of believers feel persecuted. There are organizations that keep track of the countries in which Christians are persecuted. In 2016, for the first time ever, the United States appeared on the list.¹⁷ In the past decade, the number of lawsuits, legal cases, and headlines involving religious liberty issues has grown exponentially. Combined with the increased persecution of Christians in other regions, such as North Africa and the Middle East, many Christians feel as if we could already be experiencing the persecution that will come in the last days.

The second factor is the growing resurgence of Reformed theology in evangelical circles. Both traditional Reformed institutions and Reformed beliefs within other denominational groups have increased in recent years, perhaps reaching a high point in 2017 with the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. While many of the beliefs affirmed by the Protestant Reformation and its theologians have been beneficial to the church, some accept the entire system of Reformed theology without a careful analysis of its parts. In other words, some who accept Reformed beliefs regarding soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) often accept Reformed eschatology without question.

This view has become more popular due to the influence of some well-known evangelical teachers. For example, Al Mohler and John Piper have shaped the thinking of many conservative Christians. Wayne Grudem's popular *Systematic Theology* textbook, which is used in many Christian colleges and seminaries, has introduced many to this view, while Mike Bickle has influenced many charismatic Christians.¹⁸

Popular Misconceptions

Even careful scholars have participated in spreading misconceptions in their criticisms of certain rapture views. This is true of all eschatological views. Pretribulationalists are accused of an escapist mentality that appeals to those who are unwilling to suffer for their faith.¹⁹ Posttribulationalists are castigated as "preppers" hiding out and awaiting the tribulation. Postmillennialists are viewed as naïve dreamers who are detached from reality. Amillennialists are seen as so heavenly minded they are no earthly good.

Each of these misconceptions is based on popular myths that circulate among Christians in general. They spring from glaring misconceptions of biblical teaching. For example, some people actually thought that if Hillary Clinton won the presidential election in 2016, she would persecute Christians and usher in the tribulation. Others speculated that if she won, the rapture would have to take place immediately. Still others asked if there was any possibility that Donald Trump might be the "last trump"! Often eschatological "urban myths" (*eschatomania* or *eschatophobia*) arise from attempts to identify current events with biblical prophecies. Some serious scholars have admitted they were turned off to biblical prophecy because of unsubstantiated speculations that did not come true. For example, during World War II, Japan was often viewed as the "army from the east" (see Revelation 9:14-19). Later, popularists suggested it was China. During the Cold War era, Russia was often viewed as the perpetrator of war in the Middle East—an idea that is now being revived. With the rise of Islamic extremism, some have suggested the antichrist will be a Muslim. And frequently, candidates who run for president of the United States are believed to be the prospective antichrist.

Is the Rapture a Scare Tactic?

There are some who say that promoting the belief that Jesus will return at any moment is a scare tactic. Some would even label such an approach as spiritual abuse, associating every high-pressure evangelistic appeal as the direct result of the pretribulation rapture view. Speculations about cars and airplanes crashing due to the rapture of their drivers and pilots are used to criticize the pretrib view when, in reality, the same problems would be present no matter what one's view of the timing of the rapture. Even if the rapture were to occur at the end of time, one cannot assume everyone will be a pedestrian at that moment.

Yet the question is not whether someone is scared by any particular view of the end times, but ultimately whether it is true. Norman Geisler suggests, "*First*, there is nothing wrong with fear as a motive if it is based in truth...*Second*, most arguments for pretribulationalism are not based on fear. *Third*, misuse does not bar use. That is, even some arguments being incorrectly cast...does not invalidate the proper use of the argument in particular nor pretribulationalism in general."²⁰

All too often people object to a specific view of eschatology by raising a series of what are known as straw man arguments. The straw man fallacy is the creation of an intentionally weakened, distorted, exaggerated, or false version of an opponent's arguments and attacking them accordingly. As a result, the critic fails to "see" what they don't want to see—even if it is clearly there.

In this book, we will look at the abundance of evidence in support of the pretribulation view of the rapture. And while it's true that Bible prophecy reveals information that gives us reason to be concerned about what lies ahead for our world, it can also have a tremendously positive effect.

The Positive Effects of Pretrib Rapture Teaching

The late Tim LaHaye was fond of pointing out that "historically, belief in the any-moment-coming of Christ has three vital effects on Christians and their churches."²¹ He notes the following three positive and beneficial results of the pretribulation rapture view.

1. It Produces Holy Living in an Unholy Society

Believing Jesus can return at any time can certainly inspire a higher level of accountability in a person's life. And isn't this precisely what Scripture teaches? When Peter wrote to some church elders in his first letter, he said, "When the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4). He adds in verses 6-7, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you." Believers are called to humble themselves and to anticipate the rewards they will one day receive when Jesus, our "Chief Shepherd," appears.

In 1 John 3:3 we also find mention of the appearance of Jesus: "Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." The believer's anticipation of being with Christ, whether at the rapture or in death, rightly causes a desire to live a pure and holy life.

What should concern us most is a lackadaisical, lukewarm Christianity that doesn't take seriously the possibility Christ may come soon (2 Peter 3:3-4). We are to be holy as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15). Further, 2 Peter 3:10-11 adds a fitting rhetorical question concerning the believer's holiness in light of Christ's possible-at-any-moment return: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives" (NIV).

2. It Produces an Evangelistic Church

The early church was an evangelistic church. On the day the church began, 3,000 people were added to their number (Acts 2:41). The first written summary about the church in Jerusalem notes the Lord added to their number *daily* those who were being saved (Acts 2:47).

Those who believe Jesus will rapture believers to be with Him and that He could do so at any moment—are strongly motivated to share their faith with family members, friends, and anyone else they can. Some say this is a weakness of the pretribulation view, but the fact is, Scripture commands all Christians to evangelize. Regardless of whether or not we hold to the pretribulation view, we are called to share Christ with all. We are to share Paul's attitude, made evident in his declaration, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

3. It Encourages Believers to Develop a Vision for World Missions

In addition to producing an evangelistic church, the belief that Jesus could return at any moment encourages a vision for world missionary outreach. Note the final earthly words of Jesus Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). There may be a strong correlation between the missionary activity of the first century and the global missionary movement of the past century. In both contexts, a growing awareness that Jesus could return at any moment has led to many individuals to travel so they can share the good news of Christ. And if they cannot travel, they support those who can.

Norman Geisler notes:

If one believes his time is limited and Christ may come at any moment, then he will have more of a sense of urgency about evangelism. This, of course, is not to say that there is no sense of urgency in the other views for everyone is going to die and some will die at any moment. But there is a far greater sense of urgency if one believes it could be our last opportunity to reach anyone at any moment. It is no coincidence that many of the modern missionary movements (William Carey, David Livingston, and Adoniram Judson) and evangelistic efforts (Billy Sunday, D.L. Moody, and Billy Graham) were headed by premillennialists.²²

One could add to this list such leading pretribulational pastors as David Jeremiah, John MacArthur, Charles Stanley, Tony Evans, Jack Graham, Robert Jeffress, Chuck Swindoll, Philip De Courcy, Johnny Hunt, Ronnie Floyd, Donald Perkins, Chuck Smith, Jack Hibbs, Skip Heitzig, Mike Fabarez, and Greg Laurie.

Attacks on the rapture have grown in intensity and number. In *Can We Still Believe in the Rapture?* we'll help you understand the fallacies inherent in these attacks, present helpful information from today's best research, and explain what God's Word teaches on this topic. You'll also discover the benefits of living with the biblical perspective that Christ could return any day—even today!