

Blessed Hope or Blessed Hoax?

By Alfred B. Davis
12 September 2024

In 1830 a young Scottish woman, Margaret MacDonald, had a series of charismatic dreams and visions. During one of those episodes, at a prayer meeting

in Port Glasgow, Scotland, John Darby was visiting and heard MacDonald declare that there would be a Rapture, or catching away of Believers to heaven, prior to the Tribulation period. Some accounts say that he actually visited the MacDonald home and met with Mary to learn more about her visions.



Supposedly, Darby seized on her ecstatic utterances, modified them, and then popularized the idea of a Pre-Tribulation Rapture. This new doctrine of Darby's was, according to critics, never known or heard of before. It departed from the traditional Amillennial view that held that all of the future events regarding the Rapture and the Tribulation, and Daniel's 70th week were fulfilled during the time from the resurrection of Jesus Christ to the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus. The Millennium, or Kingdom, period then began and will continue until the return of Christ sometime in the future. Instead, Darby taught that the Rapture and the Tribulation were both future events and that they would occur prior to the future millennial reign of Christ where Jesus will rule over a thousand-year long kingdom here on earth with Jerusalem as its capital. This became known as Premillennialism and, since Darby taught that the Rapture would occur before the Tribulation, his doctrine became known specifically as the Pre-Tribulation Rapture, as opposed to Post- and Mid-Tribulation Rapture positions.

The strange, new doctrine swept across Britain and Europe and soon spread to America. In 1848, William E Blackstone published a very popular book incorporating the Pre-Tribulation Rapture called, *Jesus Is Coming*. Later, in 1909, C.I. Scofield published the first edition of his famous *Scofield Reference Bible*, in which he developed Scriptural arguments promoting the idea. Clarence Larkin further promoted it through detailed charts and diagrams in his 1920 book, *Dispensational Truth*. The idea of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture was further promoted and popularized in the 1930's and '40's through the books and preaching of Dr. Harry Ironside, pastor of the influential Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. Later promotion came with Hal Lindsey's best-selling book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, in 1970 and the popular *Left Behind* book series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in the 1990's. Thus, the brand new, never before heard of doctrine of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture was born.

Now, critics of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture might have a valid argument if the origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture was what they claim it to be. However, it is not.

A closer look at the story of Darby and MacDonald reveals a different story. First, Darby actually put together his concept of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture in the winter of 1826-1827, which is obviously prior to MacDonald's ecstatic utterances in 1830. Not only that, MacDonald's own handwritten account of her 1830 rapture revelation, included in Robert Norton's *Memoirs of James & George*

Macdonald of Port Glasgow, published in 1840, reveals that she did not hold to a Pre-Tribulation Rapture. Instead, she held to a Post-Tribulation Rapture, believing that the Believers will go through the Tribulation and then be caught up at the end of the Tribulation:

Tis only those that are alive in him that will be caught up to meet him in the air ... I saw the people of God in an awfully dangerous situation ... many about to be deceived and fall. Now will THE WICKED be revealed, with all power and signs and lying wonders, so that if it were possible the very elect will be deceived—This is the fiery trial which is to try us. It will be for the purging and purifying of the real members of the body of Jesus ... the love of many will wax cold ...

Now shall the awful sight of a false Christ be seen ... for it is with all deceivableness of unrighteousness he will work ... This is particularly the nature of the trial through which those are to pass who will be counted worthy to stand before the Son of man ... The trial of the Church is from Antichrist. It is by being filled with the Spirit that we shall be kept ... This will fit us to enter into the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Further investigation into the origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture shows that Darby was by no means the first to expound upon and teach it. In fact, in 2015 William Watson published *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth-century and Eighteenth-century English Apocalypticism*. In his book, Watson cites numerous instances of pre-Darby references to the Pre-Tribulation Rapture. Following are three instances from the 1600-1700's.

In the 1700's, a Baptist preacher in America, Morgan Edwards, promoted the Pre-Tribulation Rapture. Edwards, who helped found Rhode Island College, which later became Brown College, set forth a clear Pre-Tribulation Rapture position while a student at Bristol Baptist Seminary in 1743. He included that statement in his 1788 book, *Two Accidental Exercises on Subjects Bearing the Following Titles: Millennium, Last Novelties*, on page 7:

The dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ's 'appearing in the air' (1Thes.iv,17); and this will be about three years and a half before the millennium ... but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many 'mansions in the father's house' (John xiv.2), and so disappear during the foresaid period of time. The design of this retreat and disappearing will be to judge the risen and changed saints.

Please note, Edwards' reference to "three years and a half" does not mean he taught a Mid-Tribulation Rapture. Edwards believed in a Pre-Tribulation Rapture but he believed that the Tribulation would be only three and a half years long, not seven.

Prior to Edwards, the notable Puritan minister Increase Mather published a book, *The Blessed Hope, the Glorious Appearing of the Great God and Our Saviour, Jesus Christ*, in 1701. In it, Mather writes on pages 22,33,122,131:

When Christ comes, Believers shall see the King ... in all his Glory, and shall go with him to the Land that is very far off. Heaven is the Land that is very far off. Christ has assured believers it shall be thus, John 14.2 He will not go back to Heaven and leave them behind him. No,

they shall sit with him in Heavenly places ... [later] they shall come down from Heaven They shall be with him when he comes to Judge the World.

Watson also cites William Sherwin who wrote *Eirenikon: or a Peaceful Consideration of Christ's Peaceful Kingdom on Earth*, in 1665. On pages 40-43 Sherwin writes:

The Saints ... at the sounding of that last Trumpet at the end of the world shall be changed in a moment, at the twinkling of an eye ... rapt up to meet Christ in the air. ... This Doctrine many of the ancient Fathers acknowledged ... Justine Martyr ... Irenaeus ... Tertullian ... even Augustine sometime held it, though by the subtlety of Satan, forgeing lyes to asperse the Millenary opinion, and stirring men up to foist in offensive errors ... in these latter times hath again discovered it, after so many hundred years of its lying hid for the most part in the Church, to be a doctrine really embraced by his faithful people [who] will doubtless certainly know, that upon their rapture to meet Christ, they shall be perfected in glory evermore in heaven.

Now, Sherwin brings up a few interesting points here. The first is his statement, "This Doctrine many of the ancient Fathers acknowledged ... Justine Martyr ... Irenaeus ... Tertullian ... even Augustine sometime held it". The second is found in his statement, "though by the subtlety of Satan, forgeing lyes to asperse the Millenary opinion, and stirring men up to foist in offensive errors". The third is his assertion that, "in these latter times [the faithful] hath again discovered it, after so many hundred years of its lying hid for the most part in the Church, to be a doctrine really embraced by his faithful people.

In his statement, Sherwin reveals that many of the early Church Fathers held pre-millennial views rather than amillennial. They believed in a distinct Tribulation period and catching away of the Believers prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ who will then establish a literal kingdom here on earth that will last a thousand years. Many, if not most, appeared to hold post-Tribulation views, believing that the Rapture would occur after or at the end of the Tribulation. This was probably because they viewed the Roman persecution as evidence that they were then living in the Tribulation.

However, a number of the early Church Fathers realized that the Roman persecutions did not constitute the wrath of God that is to be poured out on an unbelieving world during the Tribulation. Consequently, they held to the pre-Tribulation view that God would catch away Believers prior to the Tribulation because *God hath not appointed us to wrath*, as Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:9.

This view certainly helps makes sense of the term, *blessed hope*, that Paul uses in Titus 2:11-14:

¹¹For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, ¹²Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; ¹³Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; ¹⁴Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.

One example of an early Church Father who held the pre-Tribulation Rapture view is Irenaeus of Lyon (120-202). Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John. In his treatise, *Against Heresies, Book 5*, he writes:

For Enoch, when he pleased God, was translated in the same body in which he did please Him, thus pointing out by anticipation the translation of the just. Elijah, too, was caught up [when he was yet] in the substance of the [natural] form; thus exhibiting in prophecy the assumption of those who are spiritual, and that nothing stood in the way of their body being translated and caught up. ... And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, 'There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be' (Mat 24:21). For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome they are crowned with incorruption."

Another example is Victorinus of Petrovium. Victorinus was martyred during Diocletian's reign in 304 AD. In his *Commentary on the Blessed John*, Victorinus writes:

And the heaven withdrew as a scroll that is rolled up. For the heaven to be rolled away, that is, that the Church shall be taken away. ... And I saw another great and wonderful sign, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is completed the indignation of God. For the wrath of God always strikes the obstinate people with seven plagues, that is, perfectly, as it is said in Leviticus; and these shall be in the last time, when the Church shall have gone out of the midst.

Yet another example is the Shepherd of Hermas in the early 2nd Century:

[T]he great tribulation that is coming. ... If then ye prepare yourselves, and repent with all your heart and turn to the Lord, it will be possible for you to escape it, if your heart be pure and spotless, and ye spend the rest of the days of your life in serving the Lord blamelessly.

A later example is Pseudo-Ephraem who, sometime between the years of 374-627 AD, wrote in a sermon entitled *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World*:

Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that He may draw us from the confusion, which overwhelms the world? ... For all the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins.

Clearly, the early Church Fathers were not amillennialists. Though they varied between pre- and post-Tribulation positions regarding the timing of the Rapture, they were millennialists. So, what caused Christians to switch from the millennial to the amillennial position?

Well, the answer to that question is indicated in Sherwin's statement, "Augustine sometime held it [the premillennial position], though by the subtlety of Satan, forging lyes to asperse the Millenary opinion, and stirring men up to foist in offensive errors". This statement refers to Augustine's rejection of the literal interpretation of the Bible for the allegorical, symbolic, spiritualized interpretation.

Augustine wrote *The City of God* about 413–426 AD. Consisting of 22 books, it is considered one of the most significant and influential works in the Western world, helping formulate and articulate the founding principles and organization of the nascent Roman Catholic Church. In *The City of God*, Augustine spiritualized Bible prophecy and argued that the Millennium began at the Cross and would

continue until the Second Coming. As the Roman Catholic Church grew in power and influence, Augustine's amillennial views became dominant and the pre-millennial views of the Rapture were suppressed, disallowed, and even decried as heresy, as was the literal interpretation of Scripture. Consequently, when the Eastern Orthodox Church split off from the Roman Catholic Church in 1054, they carried Augustine's amillennial doctrine with them. Likewise, when the Protestant Revolution began in 1517, the resulting Protestant churches carried Augustine's amillennial doctrine with them as well.

Fortunately, as Sherwin observed, "*in these latter times hath again discovered [the Pre-Tribulation Rapture], after so many hundred years of its lying hid for the most part in the Church, to be a doctrine really embraced by his faithful people*". Despite the persecution of those who embraced and enforced Augustine's amillennial views, premillennial views survived among dissident groups.

One example is the Apostolic Brethren in northern Italy. In 1316, an anonymous treatise entitled *The History of Brother Dolcino* indicates that their leader, Brother Dolcino, believed they would be taken to heaven and protected from the actions of the Antichrist before later descending back to earth, thus holding to a belief in a Pre-Tribulation Rapture. Regarding this document, Francis Gumerlock wrote:

This paragraph from The History of Brother Dolcino indicates that in northern Italy in the early fourteenth century a teaching very similar to pretribulationism was being preached. . . . While not suggesting that pretribulationism was the dominant view of the rapture in the Middle Ages, it is likely that such teaching did not occur in a vacuum and that others besides Dolcino were aware of it. It can reasonably be assumed that the Apostolic Brethren (who numbered in the thousands) believed, as did their leader, that when the Antichrist would arrive, they would be transferred to paradise and be preserved there from his persecution in the tribulation. [A Rapture Citation in the Fourteenth Century, in Bibliotheca Sacra, vol. 159, no. 635; Jul-Sep 2002, p 349-362.]

Consequently, we can safely assert that belief in the Pre-Millennial Rapture is not a new idea. It was widely held in the early centuries of Christianity until being driven underground by Augustine and the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. There it waited patiently until after the Protestant Reformation when it was rediscovered and embraced by faithful men and women of God. Thus, the blessed hope of Titus 2:13 began to be seen more and more for what it is, a precious promise of deliverance from the wrath to come and not a doctrine of devils as some would claim. It is the Blessed Hope and not the Blessed Hoax.

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