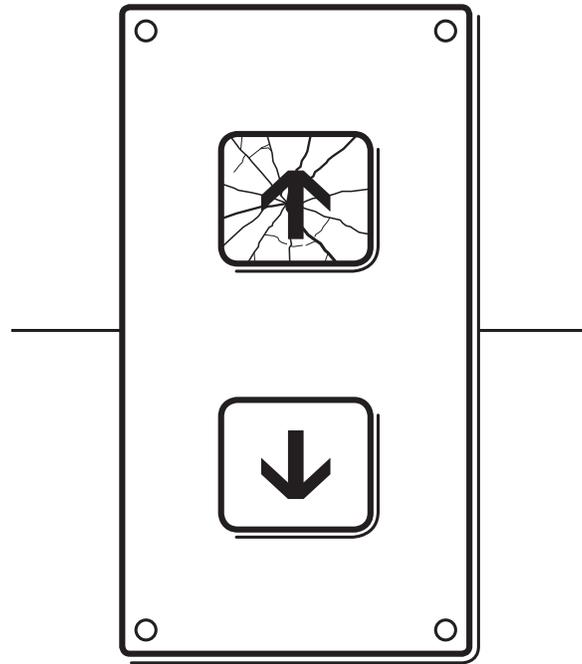


Unraptured



How End Times Theology
Gets It Wrong

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Study Guide by ERICA HUNT

CHAPTER 1

Left Behind

1. How things end is important. Anticipated endings of books keep us reading, the idea of accomplishing a goal or receiving an award motivates us to hone our craft and put in extra hours of practice. Knowing that the end of vacation is coming, we cherish every last moment of relaxation. Where do you notice a connection between your ideas about the end of the world and the way you live your daily life?
2. To what degree has your faith formation been guided by a strict list of moral behaviors? Were there things you were terrified to do for fear of God turning away from you?
3. Have you had what you consider to be a conversion experience, a specific moment when you decided to follow Jesus? What was that experience like, and how often do you think about it?
4. Have you ever had a Grandma Ruthie figure in your life (pp. 23–24)? Might there be people who perceive you as that type of figure in their lives?
5. Would you describe your early understanding of faith and discipleship as primarily personal and private or collective and public? Is this still your understanding, or has it evolved over time?
6. Some people's faith is defined by clear compartments or categories. They identify beliefs and behaviors as either right or wrong on the basis of their interpretation of Scripture and church tradition. What are some pros and cons to living out our faith in this way?
7. What would you say are the cornerstone beliefs of your Christian faith? If you discovered that one or more of those core beliefs was misguided, incomplete, or wrong, how might that affect your faith?
8. The author identifies this book's purpose as exploring "what Christianity looks like without the rapture . . . what [it] looks like when salvation isn't something that happens to us in the future but rather something that God does through us in the present" (p. 22). As you consider Hunt's goals for you as a reader, what thoughts and feelings do you have about progressing through this book?

CHAPTER 2

Old-Time Religion

1. If you grew up in the church, what was your denominational affiliation? How has your denominational home shaped your theology and practice as a Christ-follower? What level of familiarity do you have with other denominations?
2. Many, if not all, church traditions have experienced crises. These challenges are usually over theological differences or poor behavior of leaders or founders. What has been your personal experience with denominational crisis? If you have only observed from a distance, what did you notice? Has your faith community changed at all because of a major crisis?
3. In some traditions, like the one Hunt comes from (Nazarene), the idea of holiness is emphasized as the goal of all believers so that entrance to heaven is guaranteed. What does holiness mean to you, and how was leading a life of holiness taught to you by your faith community?
4. Have you ever experienced what you would call legalism in a church community? What are some attractions and pitfalls of this approach to following Jesus?
5. Not many of us would claim that perfection in following Jesus is attainable. We recognize the limitations of our humanity. Yet perfection remains a goal of many Christians. What are the merits and drawbacks of aiming for perfection?
6. Where is there a place for guilt in our spiritual lives? In what ways have you seen or experienced guilt serving a helpful, restorative purpose in the church? In what ways have you seen guilt lead to damaging dynamics or relationships in the church?
7. God's relationship with humanity is complex. Considering the untold number of human beings since the beginning of our existence and the mess we can make of our lives, God has a lot to consider! Where does punishment from God to humans fit in this relationship, if at all? What is your understanding of God's active reprimand for human fallibility?
8. How does your church community respond to conflict or clear doctrinal differences with other denominations? How do you tend to handle conflict with another believer over doctrine?

CHAPTER 3

Late-Night Television

1. We live in the era of binge-watching television shows. Streaming services make it *so easy* to keep watching more and more episodes until—poof!—there goes the weekend. Have you ever been hooked on a show or found yourself obsessively thinking about a book you were reading? Looking back now, do you still get why it was so compelling to you at the time?
2. Has there ever been a theological debate that has captured your attention in a significant way? What was it, and what made it so intriguing to you?
3. Some Christians approach evangelism with a deep and passionate fervor. Others see it as optional and leave it up to the Holy Spirit to woo people toward following Jesus. Where does active evangelism fit within your faith tradition and experience?
4. Have you ever been on the receiving end of someone relentlessly trying to convince you to agree with them about something, whether trivial or important? Have you ever been the one doing the persuading? What made those experiences positive or negative?
5. What strategies do you think are more helpful or less helpful when it comes to evangelism?
6. What is it about end-times theology that can so easily feed the ego of stalwart believers? Where have you seen this same need for certainty in other theological debates?
7. How familiar are you with some of the vocabulary used in this book? Could you explain dispensationalism, eschatology, rapture, tribulation, or apocalypse to someone outside the church?
8. Imagine a version of end-times theology that nonbelievers might find appealing or inviting. Describe it as best you can.

CHAPTER 4

Catching Cannonballs

1. Remember on the eve of the year 2000 when people were freaking out? A lot of people in sectors across society, including the church, worried about computer glitches wreaking havoc on life as we know it. If you were old enough to be aware of that frenzy, what were you thinking would happen? Did you do anything to prepare for the worst-case scenario?
2. Have you ever imagined the rapture? Why do you think the idea of the faithful being suddenly swept up to heaven has captured the imagination of so many Christians? Before reading *Unraptured*, did you know that the rapture was invented and popularized within only the last two hundred years?
3. The book of Revelation is weird. It is powerful and prophetic and poetic, but it is also strange. How has the book of Revelation fit into your faith journey so far? What do you make of the imagery?
4. How familiar are you with the Left Behind book series or movie? Are there other end-times media you know more about? How have these sources influenced your understanding of the end times and your faith journey in general?
5. Jesus clearly talks about his return and teaches us how to prepare, so we know it is important. Where is the line between faithful obedience to Jesus' instructions and an unhealthy preoccupation with dispensational predictions and theories?
6. How do you understand the relationship between our understanding of hell and our commitment to discipleship? Is there a clear connection for you?
7. How well do you know the biblical prophets? How have the prophetic messages of the Old and New Testaments fit into your discipleship? Do you see clear themes of justice, restoration, and repentance in prophetic texts, as the author suggests?
8. If the primary focus of Revelation is to unveil the church's cooperation with empires of the world and to call the church to greater faithfulness that looks like love, how might that change our individual and collective discipleship? How would we have to change our focus?

CHAPTER 5

Losing My Religion

1. What was your experience with youth events or youth ministry when you were a teenager? If you were following Jesus at that stage of life, how would you describe your faith?
2. Have you ever had a sense of God's calling on your life? Many Christians report hearing from God about a vocation or career, a significant relationship decision or a new lifestyle; others report smaller episodes of feeling called to help a stranger or give to a charity. What has been your experience of sensing a clear nudge from God to do something you otherwise would not have done?
3. There is a lot of talk about God's will in churches, which sometimes refer to God's will as a specific road map with one route to the desired destination. What if we lose our way? Hunt confesses that in his late teenage years, he was "terrified of not following God's will for my life" (p. 89). Have you ever felt that way? Do you think of that experience as resolved or still characterized by fear?
4. To what degree do you think God has a specific plan in mind for each individual to follow? How do your ideas about this influence your decision-making?
5. Looking back on your life of faith, do you see evidence of rebellion against God? Have you ever knowingly and intentionally participated in a season of rebellion? If so, what were the underlying causes? If not, what are some of the protective factors that kept you from rebellion?
6. What kind of learner are you? Do you tend to eagerly soak up new information and find ways to make space for new discoveries? Or are you more likely to hold fast to what you know and be wary of new information?
7. How is faith and discipleship a learning process? Do you see the journey of discipleship as linear, where we learn and grow on a steady line toward Christlikeness, or as more cyclical, where it is a mix of learning, forgetting, and meandering our way toward Christlikeness?
8. The author calls the need for certainty one of the greatest challenges of the church today (p. 103). Do you tend to agree with him? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 6

Couch-Skiing

1. How long had you been following Jesus before you realized that other believers practice faith in the same God in very different ways? What was this bubble-bursting experience like for you? Have you incorporated any of your lessons or observations into your own discipleship?
2. It is difficult to escape the "us versus them" dichotomy that can frame all kinds of societal differences. In this age of hyperpolarization, it's like the air we breathe. What are the differences that you notice most in your personal life and that of your faith community? Who are the groups that are most likely to be judged or alienated?
3. What does it take to move from demonizing others to humanizing them?
4. What is your understanding of the rapture? Where did your ideas come from, and how have they shaped your approach to following Jesus?
5. The idea of a sudden rapture, where the faithful are taken up and the degenerate are left behind, is in the fabric of many church teachings. What are some of the hidden dangers of this theology?
6. The rapture has captured the imagination of millions of Christians for its promises to whisk the faithful away, rescuing them from the horrors of tribulation on earth. How well does this "great escape" reflect the lives of notable biblical characters like Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and Jesus? Where do you see inconsistencies?
7. How closely do you connect modern-day Israel with end-times prophecy? Do you tend to agree or disagree with the author's cautionary message about centering Israel in our end-times theology?
8. For Christians, dispensationalists or not, do the ends ever justify the means? Should these Machiavellian ethics ever guide Christian practice? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 7

Undragoning

1. How easy is it for you to laugh at yourself? Who is someone in your life that does this really well?
2. What qualities help us to be gracious in defeat or correction?
3. What is a life lesson that was difficult or painful for you to learn but led to beauty, transformation, or redemption?
4. In this chapter, Hunt shares about his process of rethinking the purpose of the Bible and his relationship with this sacred text. “We forget that the Bible didn’t drop from heaven. Inspired by God, the words of the Bible were written by human beings, human beings whose own biases, prejudices, cultural context, and historical ignorance sometimes got in the way of the good news” (p. 149). How do you understand the impact of the humanity and fallenness of biblical writers on the text itself?
5. How hard should Christians have to work to understand the Bible? How should our perceptions and beliefs from childhood change as we get older? Do you think confusion over the text is a bad thing?
6. The author’s reframing of Scripture was guided by the writings of ancient church fathers Origen and Augustine, which emphasize more openness, less dogma, and a strong undercurrent of love for God and neighbor. Is it really that simple? What aspect of these ancient teachings would be the most challenging for you to live out?
7. Have you ever experienced biblical text being used as a weapon? Why is weaponizing Scripture attractive to Christians sometimes? What, if anything, does it accomplish?
8. How might your personal Scripture study, or that of your faith community, need to change so that love of God and neighbor is at the center of every interpretation and application?

CHAPTER 8

Mill Creek

1. Water is a central character in the biblical narrative; the stories of creation, Noah, and Moses all have water as a central figure, and water shows up in Jesus’ life, including his baptism and several miracles. How do you understand the spiritual significance of water?
2. Has your spirituality so far in life included space for myth? What, if anything, were you taught about the role of myth in understanding biblical truths?
3. There is growing scholarly attention given to the idea that the creation narrative is a myth rather than a literal telling of historical events. How does your understanding of the literal or figurative telling of creation influence your faith and discipleship?
4. Hunt asserts, “The text of Revelation is alive, and is ever open to new interpretations in new contexts and historical settings. Such is the power of myth” (p. 170). This notion that the Bible could have evolving interpretations is unsettling to some Christians. What about you? How open are you to the possibility of new or different interpretations?
5. As you consider the book of Revelation as an unveiling, what do you consider the two or three most important truths or messages for the church today?
6. How do you understand the concept of privilege and, more specifically, the potential impact one’s social, economic, or political privilege might have on a person’s interpretation of Scripture?
7. Hunt quotes Latin American theologian Pablo Richard in his comments about plagues and natural disasters: “Today the plagues of Revelation are rather the disastrous results of ecological destruction, the arms race, irrational consumerism, the idolatrous logic of the market, and the irrational use of technology and of natural resources” (p. 180). What are your thoughts about the assertion that disasters are rarely “natural” but rather the result of self-centered human action?
8. Do you imagine that the Bible was written with you in mind? If so, how does that affect your interpretation of the text? What might be some hidden biases applied to your interpretation?

CHAPTER 9

Saved

1. Reflect on your earliest memories of how you learned about salvation. Who were the key people around you and what was the core message about what salvation meant? Has your concept of salvation ever gone through a significant transformation? If so, what was that experience like for you?
2. What is your two-minute elevator speech on the meaning and purpose of salvation through Christ?
3. Hunt confesses, “I had no real need for the kingdom to come in my life. I had my daily bread. My life was comfortable, safe, privileged. The only thing I thought I needed saving from was an eternity in hell” (p. 196). How do you understand the connection between the comfort of our earthly lives and our perceived need of salvation?
4. What areas of your discipleship could grow toward a closer alignment with the specific commands of Jesus in the Gospels, reflecting a “red-letter theology” (p. 200)?
5. How influential is the message of Matthew 25, where Jesus talks about separating for eternity those who served the least of these and those who did not, on your understanding of salvation? What does it mean for us to work out our salvation in the way we treat others?
6. How would you describe the connection between Christian faith and Christian life? What does this mean for you personally and your faith community? Where do you find inspirational examples of authentic connection between faith and life?
7. In what ways can the incarnation of Jesus shine a light on our path toward a life of loving others? What does incarnated love look like in your context?
8. Hunt assures us that we have, indeed, been left behind. “Salvation isn’t a finish line,” he writes. “It’s just the beginning of our journey of faith” (p. 215). As soon as Jesus walked out of the tomb, we were left behind to continue his ministry of love until he comes again. How does an understanding of salvation as a beginning point change our sense of purpose as disciples?

CHAPTER 10

The Last Days

1. In reflecting on his childhood hero Jack Van Impe, Hunt calls him the “living symbol of all the problems that end-times theology creates” (p. 225). What are some of these problems as evidenced in the life of Van Impe?
2. This chapter includes the author’s strongest language about the church’s lack of loving witness; he suggests that, inflated by our beliefs and the need to be theologically right, the church is failing in our mission to love as we have been loved. How well does this match your experience with the church?
3. What role has the Lord’s Prayer played in your faith and discipleship so far? To what degree does this chapter reframe your understanding of its meaning for our daily lives?
4. How would your life and relationships change if you applied the message of love in 1 Corinthians 13 to every aspect of your life?
5. Love, and agape love in particular, is both simple and complex. We can overcomplicate it in our minds and oversimplify it in our actions. How do you approach demonstrating agape love to people in your life?
6. To what degree do you see conflation between the American empire and the church? What is the impact of this relationship on the church’s witness?
7. What are some examples of how Christlike discipleship could translate to subversive, non-violent resistance in your own life and that of your community?
8. In what ways have you witnessed or participated in
 - . . . the kind of love that inspires a faith worth believing in?
 - . . . the kind of love that builds a church worth belonging to?
 - . . . the kind of love that reveals a Jesus worth following?