

*You can see all the stars as you walk down Hollywood Boulevard  
Some that you recognize, some that you've hardly even heard of*

This line is from the song by The Kinks. If you don't know The Kinks, they were the 4<sup>th</sup> biggest band of the British invasion of the 1960s, after The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and The Who. The Kinks were active from 1963 to 1996. The line I quoted was from their 1972 song, "Celluloid Heroes." It was written by Ray Davies, the lead singer of The Kinks. The majority of the song deals with the trials of various people who have stars on Hollywood Boulevard: Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, Rudolf Valentino, Bette Davis, Mickey Rooney, George Saunders.

*You can see all the stars as you walk down Hollywood Boulevard  
Some that you recognize, some that you've hardly even heard of  
People who worked and suffered and struggled for fame  
Some who succeeded, some who suffered in vain*

But at the end, the theme of the song shifts. Ray Davies gets very introspective. He says,

*I wish my life was nonstop Hollywood movie show  
A fantasy world of celluloid villains and heroes  
Because celluloid heroes never feel any pain  
And celluloid heroes never really die*

And that's a powerful fantasy. Never feel any pain. Never really die. That's escapism at its best.

I don't know about you, but for me, such an idea is incredibly seductive. Yes, I live in the wealthiest, most powerful country in the history of the world. Yes, I live in a comfortable, suburban, middle class setting. But I know things are not always easy. In my life. In your lives. Disease, fear, inflation, debt, war, pain, death. Those are part of our reality.

At times, it seems like a wonderful fantasy to be able to escape that reality. Beam me up, Scotty. Take me away.

*I wish my life was nonstop Hollywood movie show  
A fantasy world of celluloid villains and heroes  
Because celluloid heroes never feel any pain  
And celluloid heroes never really die*

Almost two centuries ago there was a group<sup>1</sup> who had such longings of escape. They read the Bible selectively, looking for a loophole, an escape clause. They found what they thought they were looking for in couple of verses of 1 Thessalonians.<sup>2</sup>

They decided, that, contrary to what every other Christian believed, there was not only going to be a second coming. There was also going to be a third coming.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on John Nelson Darby's dispensationalism, c 1830

<sup>2</sup> 1Thess 4:15-17

In the 1830s, this small minority group of Christians came up with the idea that before the difficulties associated with the end of the world, Jesus would somehow come and secretly sneak his people out. He would literally beam his followers up and leave the rest of humanity behind to suffer. They labeled this idea "the Rapture." Later, and more technically it was labeled a "pre-tribulation pre-millenarian rapture."

It was a rather strange, 2 tier system. Jesus would come back two more times. There'd be a secret second coming and years later a more public third coming. And there would be two resurrections, an initial one for believers, and a second one for everyone else. Strangely, during my lifetime this idea has gained a lot of traction in some Protestant circles.

The rapture has no real basis in the plain text of scripture.<sup>3</sup> And yet it's become quite popular. You may know of the series of twelve *Left Behind* novels written by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye between 1995 and 2007. They've sold millions of copies—capitalism is a great thing—more power to them.

But what does worry me is the initial premise of the whole *Left Behind* series, that the books take place in a time of Tribulation after the secret rapture of Christians. Early on there's a scene where a flight attendant is telling an airline pilot about a number of passengers who have vanished. She says,

"I'm not crazy! See for yourself! All over the plane, people have disappeared."

"It's a joke. They're hiding, trying to—"

"Ray! Their shoes, their socks, their clothes, everything was left behind. These people are gone!"<sup>4</sup>

Now as escapist fiction, that's okay. But as Biblically based doctrine, it's extremely shaky. It's putting way too much weight upon a questionable interpretation of a few verses of scripture.

But it IS seductive. If you're a good Christian, God is going to rescue you from suffering. If you're a good Christian, you'll never feel any pain. If you're a good Christian, you'll never really die.

That's so attractive.

However, it flies in the face of Church history. There have been millions of people who have suffered death for the sake of the Gospel. These martyrs weren't rescued miraculously. They embraced their cross of suffering. In fact, scripture is full of instances where suffering is guaranteed for Christians. Jesus himself tells us to expect pain, persecution, suffering and death. He does not promise miraculous escape.

However, there is something that Jesus does promise us. And for that, I want to turn to our Epistle lesson from Revelation.

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<sup>3</sup> See the book by my New Testament professor, Robert Jewett: *Jesus Against the Rapture*

<sup>4</sup> *Left Behind*, p. 16

Last week, in ch7 of Revelation, we heard of the multitude of the faithful departed gathered around God's throne. They had suffered persecution and death on behalf of the Lamb. "Therefore," John said, "the one seated on the throne will shelter them."

Good news for the faithful departed. God would shelter them forever. Note: Revelation did NOT say that these faithful martyrs were rescued from death.

No! They indeed suffered persecution and they died for the sake of the Gospel. But the promise of Revelation is that death isn't the end. God gathers these faithful martyrs around his heavenly throne to bask in his presence, forever.

But there's more. And for that we turn to our lesson for today, from Revelation ch21. John relates this marvelous vision:

"I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."<sup>5</sup>

This is not about God helping us escape from the earth. This is about God transforming the earth--making it new. And it's about God making his permanent dwelling place there, on the new, transformed earth.

John continues:

"I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.'"<sup>6</sup>

And the effects of God's intimate presence are set forth: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."<sup>7</sup>

Never feel any pain? Sorry, that's not what's promised.

Never really die? That's not the way it works.

All of us will experience pain. That's part of the reality of living in the world. And unless the second coming happens in our lifetimes, all of us will experience death. God will not magically rescue us. But God will transform us. God will make all things new. Pain and death will be eliminated.

And this is not "pie in the sky by and by." This is not escapism. This is information we can use in living our lives right now. We don't have to fear death. Death will one day be destroyed. We don't have to deny the reality of death. We don't have to look for a loophole. Instead, we can embrace our mortality, we can live our lives boldly, trusting in the power of the God of Resurrection.

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<sup>5</sup> Rev 21:1-2

<sup>6</sup> Rev 21:3

<sup>7</sup> Rev 21:4

We don't have to fear the pain of loss and separation. One day such grief will be ended. Separation is a temporary state, not a permanent one. We don't have to be afraid of those who can harm the body but cannot touch the soul. Pain and suffering are transitory. Resurrected life in God's presence is forever. We don't have to wait for rescue.

Instead, we can live, now, today, in the power of the New Jerusalem, in the power of Jesus' Resurrection. We can confidently trust the God who raised Jesus from the dead. We can trust the God who makes all things new.

Life is often tough. If you think things are always going to be easy, think again. The real world is full of challenge and difficulty, and yes, often suffering and pain as well.

Being a Christian will not exempt you from the difficulties of life. In fact, following Jesus Christ often makes life more difficult. But being a Christian can allow you to live boldly in the midst of what's frightening. By faithfully following Jesus, you can move forward in hope when things look bleak.

God never promises to rescue you. But God does promise to be present, to be with you, to guide you, to give you purpose and direction in your life.

You will experience pain and suffering. You will eventually die.

But will you let these realities determine the course of your life?

Or will you trust in God? Will you live in hope? Will you see suffering and pain and death as only temporary setbacks?

Will you pray that God's kingdom comes, and that his will is done, on earth, as it is in heaven?

That's your choice.

Will you live in fear and long for rescue?

Or will you live in the freedom of the promises that God's kingdom brings?

"Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

God will always be with us. And God will make all things new.