

An Eye on the Prize: Apocalyptic Fear and the Expectation of the Miraculous

15 Fear of the End

Fear is not a sustaining emotion—except for conspiracy theorists. Last night I lay awake from 1:30 until after 3 distracted by a conversation from earlier in the evening with a fear-filled believer (is that an oxymoron?). The topic was a familiar one. Sometimes the current enemy (Russians, communists, gays, Muslims, liberal media—you name it) will take over America and kill us in our beds. *The end is near! The end is near!* Sometimes, it is the rounding up and persecution of American Christians by current political leaders. *The end is near! The end is near!* Sometimes it is the complete collapse of the economy because wealthy New York Jews control all the money. *The end is near! The end is near!* This particular discussion concluded that martial law would soon be instituted to protect a certain leader's political power.

Of all the effects of being raised Pentecostal, for me, the negativity of dispensationalism has been the most paralyzing even into adulthood. The rhetoric surrounding the eschaton is inherently and designedly frightening. *We are living in the end times. Jesus is coming back any minute. Are you ready? Will he take you with him? What if you are "left behind"?* Sermons on the Second Coming were part and parcel of my childhood church experience. They generally followed a similar formula: Begin with a litany of all that is wrong in "the world" today (15-20 minutes). Double-down on how unaware current believers are of the warning signs (10 minutes). Outline the pain predicted for those whose mistakes (read sins) will leave them out of the rapture (10 minutes). Finish with a call to be ready (5-10 minutes) ending in an altar call of repentance or celebration depending on the underlying message.

The underlying messages were mixed. Sometimes (rarely) I was convinced that Jesus' return could be the happiest and best thing to ever happen to anyone. The "glorious hope." But if I began with that assumption, many times, the next sermon would result in confusion for me. If Jesus's return is to be desired (the end of this world, suffering, loss and the beginning of eternity with God),

then why did so many messages produce fear—fear that we would be caught in a backslidden state, fear the persecution of the church would begin before the rapture, fear of our own failures disguised as concern for “the lost”—those who have no hope of being rescued from the end of the world by the intervention of the rapture.

Almost every A/G kid I knew could report the experience of arriving home after school to an unexpectedly empty house and immediately feeling the bottom drop out of their world because they assumed that the rapture had taken place and they were left.

My own experience of this phenomenon occurred when I was in about 7th or 8th grade. My mom worked part time but was usually at home when I got back from school. On this particular occasion, she wasn't. The neighborhood seemed eerily quiet (not that we thought our neighbors were marked for the rapture, but I was willing to keep an open mind on their behalf). I let myself in the door, called for mom, searched the house, including garage and basement. Mentally, I tried to imagine what the effects of the rapture might look like to those who were not allowed to participate. Would their clothes be raptured too? Were their bodies immediately transformed into spirits or did they leave rapture holes in the ceiling as they were transported into heaven? As I searched the house, I found no piles of clothes on the floor, no holes in the ceiling.

The next thing to do—call someone. I picked up the phone and called the office where both my parents worked. When I got a busy signal, panic began to rise. Of course, if Jesus had returned, the Assemblies of God District Office personnel would *all* have been raptured, even in the middle of phone calls. And if the rapture had taken place, then it would set off mass panic that would jam the phone lines. I called my grandparents' house, busy signal. Same there. Jesus would, of course, take both my ordained-Pentecostal-preacher grandparents. I walked out into the street to see if anything seemed unusual there. Nothing. We didn't know many of our neighbors, but I even ventured across the street to knock on a door, if only to console myself that I was not the only human being left alive

in our neighborhood. As I lifted my hand to knock on the door, a car turned into our street—my mom! She was running late from a very busy day. Nothing more spectacular than that.

One of several paradoxes in this “end times” obsession was the behavior of many people in preparing for it. When looking at the “signs” of the end times, some people immediately set to stockpiling food, investing in gold, and, for some, ammunition. Among some believers, preparing for the end times in a physical way looked very much like militia groups and anarchists preparing for the fall of America. The irony of Christians preparing for the glorious return of Christ by stockpiling provisions and ammunition is almost beyond contemplation.

Another paradox in the preaching about the rapture reveals a deep fault in the theology of the Pentecostalism of my childhood that detracted from the real teaching of the Bible about salvation, grace, and righteousness. The stock-in-trade of youth group sermons was to ask young people to imagine what they would do if they were in a movie theater, a school dance, or some other banned location or state if Jesus came. The fear of missing the rapture was a strong deterrent to unauthorized behaviors.

Trying to sort out what the Bible really said and meant about salvation, my imagination envisioned a scenario about my mother. Although my mom is a scrupulous woman, vigilant about doing the right thing, thoughtful in her study and application of Scripture, she has a quirky mind for petty crime. When shopping malls came into existence, she worried over the possibility that the racks near the open entries to each store could be easily shop-lifted. In museum gift shops or gas station convenience stores on our vacations, she often commented on how easily the impulse buy merchandise, strategically placed for convenient pick up, could walk away. Sometimes I wondered if my mom might have been a spectacular thief if she had not been saved at such a young age. Pondering this possibility, I posited a scenario in which she might, after over 60 years of serving Jesus, simply carry out one of the many schemes for stealing that she had casually observed possible over the years. She would not do so, of course, out of necessity or need, but out of a desire

to see what would happen, if it would work. Imagine, then, that immediately after her candy bar heist, she stepped out into the street and was hit by a bus. Would this one lapse of judgment, this one violation of her own and her God's code of conduct, really render her unfit for heaven? Many sermons of my childhood said yes. This imagined scenario put into perspective my understanding of the long-term work of God in a believer's life. It called into question the event-related view of salvation and reinforced for me the idea that salvation is a process (what Jamie K.A. Smith calls the "direction") of the heart not the immediate disposition of the body at the time of death or rapture. Strong consolation for this fear-ridden Pentecostal. 1274

16 Fear of Decision-making

For many Pentecostals looking for the Second Coming, the expectation was so real that it precluded planning for death, old age, or long-term illness. For me as a young person, it meant that I failed to rationally plan my life. The urgency of the coming end of days meant that long-term planning and goal setting seemed irrational or too time-consuming. Of course, my own failure to plan may have resulted only partly from my eschatology and also partly from living culturally separated from the first wave of feminism. As I headed into college in the late 1970s, I still fully expected to leave those four years married and ready for motherhood. No other plan really had occurred to me because in my world, that was what women did while waiting for Jesus to come. Even after college, my decisions to go to grad school, teach, or choose one job over another were borne out of a need to "do something," rather than attached to a long-term plan of career advancement.

Several of my male classmates, however, managed to live in the tension of the immanence of Christ's return and still plan their careers. Carefully followed degree programs, well-chosen mentors, progressive movement through the ranks of promotion, timely marriages, all suggest their grasp that the soon return of Christ—unpredictable as it was—did not preclude planning for a future that may very well come "should Jesus tarry."

In spite of the quirkiness of an eschatology of fear and its argument against planning, the positive effect of dispensationalist theology was that it increased my sense of urgency about life and service. Intuitively, I learned that life must be lived because it may be cut off at any moment. Jesus could come tomorrow. Or you could die. Either way, what you have done in this life will be over. Therefore, because life is unpredictable, my family believed that “whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might” (Eccles. 9:10 NASB). This teaching blended well with the emphasis in the 1980s and 1990s on professionalism and excellence. If something is worth doing, my mother often admonished, it is worth doing well.

One of the biggest shocks of my marriage came when my husband confessed that his world view was to create the biggest return for the least amount of energy expended, “the biggest bang for the least effort.” In my family, we called this laziness and a lack of commitment, but I have since learned to moderate my understanding of both our positions. In David’s defense, his philosophy of life reserved energy for that which is worth doing, giving less attention and time to less important matters. In my case, the “whatever your hand finds to do” too often applied to “whatever you happen to be doing right now” or whatever someone in authority may ask you to do and often resulted in my working very hard at many things that may not ultimately matter or were not really what God had gifted me to do.

On the other hand, the urgency of the Second Coming—or death—whichever came first, increased my sense that life must be used to serve others. For most Pentecostals, the Great Commission, (Matthew 28:19), is the first and most important commandment. Never mind Matthew 22:37-39 in which Jesus admonishes us to love God and love our neighbor. Witnessing, spreading the Gospel, getting people saved was the backbone of early Pentecostalism and was still an urgent part of the call as I grew up.

But every attempt at witnessing to my friends at school was thwarted in some way. Either my friends were already Christians (at least nominally, if not actually), or they were people I was

being taught at church to stay away from, because they were “worldly.” Stumped by the paradox between keeping myself “pure” from contact with the world and the command to get everyone saved before Jesus returns, I found resolution in Ephesians 2:8-10:

⁸For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:⁹Not of works, lest any man should boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (KJV)

We are saved by grace, not by works (so that we cannot boast—or become celebrity clergy, I suppose). We should see ourselves as God’s *workmanship* (the Greek here is the same word we use for “poem”). We are God’s creative expression, His carefully crafted beings, “created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” (NASB). The purpose comes first. Then we “walk” in that purpose, knowing with confidence that God has fashioned it for us. For some, walking in that purpose includes preaching, witnessing, traditional forms of “church work.” But for many, the very act of living into the purpose—in creativity, productivity, relationships, and other human functions—forms us into God’s creative artifacts from which is character and purpose for others can be witnessed.

This scripture turned upside down the teaching I had heard as a child, that to earn God’s favor we should be “getting people saved” or “spreading the Gospel” **like a disease (as Flannery O’Connor says)**. Not everyone is called to front-line evangelism, not everyone is called to exhortation. However, all are called by their very existence as the workmanship of God to do good work/good works as a natural part of their life journey. **Pentecostalism collapsed the idea of call into a single commission, something measurable, observable, and event-driven. But the motive for this contraction of the Gospel was good.**

17 The Miraculous

Hand-in-hand with the scary aspects of the miraculous Second Coming came a deeper, more long-lasting expectation of the miraculous in the everyday. We lived in daily expectation of miracles. Divine healing, financial intervention, protection on the highways, help finding our keys. If it caused distress, it could be prayed over.

As with other aspects of Pentecostalism, my own experience with miracles has been unspectacular and a little problematic.

A favorite part of the Pentecostal church services (especially Sunday and Wednesday nights) came in the “testimony” service. The pastor would invite congregation members to share with the crowd how God had been working in their lives that week. Primarily, the speakers would bear witness to healing (instantaneous or gradual were both attributed to God’s work), salvation of long-lost relatives, or escapes from life-threatening accidents or disasters. In my own family come stories of divine healing—my father narrowly survived whooping cough as a baby—and provision—food arriving at the door after they had prayed over a meal that did not exist.

When I was about 10, however, I remember praying at camp one Wednesday night (divine healing night, remember?) that God would heal my eyes. I longed to experience a miracle, and poor eyesight was the only thing really wrong with me. I had recently been forced to get glasses. I lay on the top bunk of my cabin after lights out. I remember placing my glasses carefully on the shelf next to my bed, touching my eyelids with my fingertips and praying urgently for healing. The preacher had emphasized that only the “prayer of faith” would be answered. So I mustered my imagination to envision waking up in the morning and not needing my glasses. Instead, my mind crowded with doubts about the worthiness of my request and the necessity of my eyes’ being healed. How did I know that Jesus wasn’t laughing at me—or worse, disgusted with me—for asking for something that had already been corrected with modern technology? Although my global awareness was limited to stories from missionaries, I think I even then had an inkling of my own privilege for being

born into a family who could afford to purchase glasses for me when I needed them. When I woke the next morning, I reached for my glasses without a thought for the prayers of the night before.

But my life-long need for corrective lenses has not dampened my belief that the natural world is shot through with unexplained, unexpected, and unpredictable phenomena. We prayed continually for God's favor, protection, and provision, and my life has been blessed in many ways beyond anything I have deserved. Psalm 16 says, "the lines for me have fallen in pleasant places."

- b. BBTaylor's definition of faith as a swinging bridge (others have faith for you?) is how it works in my life
2. It increased my expectation of the miraculous in the world around me.
 - a. Teachings on "principalities and powers" increased awareness of worlds beyond this world; story of 5th grade slumber party séances/ouji boards/prayer service
 - b. How do we reconcile the "powers" of Satan and the "power of God"? One we seemed to fear; one we seemed to love but not expect very often. Again, ATIGT.
 - c. C. S. Lewis' "deeper magic." Lilly Potter's "love" is strong magic.
3. It helped me hope for the experience of the miraculous in the lives of my loved ones and friends.

One of the elements I value most about my Pentecostal upbringing is the way it sensitized me to the validity of truth that cannot always be summed up with evidence as a data-point, what scholars call non-propositional truth. All around me, the secular world was looking for evidence, believing only what it could scientifically verify, seeking experts to authenticate its facts. But at church, I regularly heard of the way God works outside of our expectations. After all, He made the world, so He has the option to work within its natural laws or outside them.

Although some of the miraculous stories I heard growing up defy any logic and although many "faith healers" and other miracle-workers have been exposed as frauds, the cumulative effect of the testimonies, biblical accounts, healing services, and emotionally charged altar calls was to instill in me an expectation that God can work outside of logic, metrics, or scientifically accepted norms. Some outsiders might observe that much of what the Assemblies of God has taught at one

time or another defies logic or borders on the ridiculous, but as an insider, I can trace a consistent thread of reverence for God's sovereignty to work in any way He chooses, and also his joy in working against our expectations for our good. **Example?**

Probably the best examples of these kinds of miracle stories come from the long missionary tradition in Pentecostalism. Early Pentecostals believed so intensely in the soon return of Christ that they went directly from Azusa Street to the mission field to spread the gospel. In my childhood, missionaries would come regularly to my dad's church for a Sunday night or Wednesday night service. They would strew the front of the platform with snake skins, wood carvings of elephants or caribou, knives and other weapons or feathered and beaded headdresses. The artifacts would keep a little girl's attention long after the words were lost on her.

Accompanying these visits were the many and varied stories of the way God had worked on behalf of those who spread his word. While the missionary and his family were trapped in the cross fire of an African civil war, for example, a lady on the other side of the world in Muncie, Indiana, or Billings, Montana, would awaken in the night with a burden to pray. Months or years later, the missionary would find out that the woman was praying at exactly the moment they were most at risk. How do you explain this coincidence mathematically or scientifically? **David Plymire's book about his dad in this exact situation? I think something SPECIFIC needs to be here.**

The problem with these stories, as well as most spiritual realities, is the impossibility of validation. How can we know these things really happened? Unfortunately, we can't unless we see or experience them ourselves. Miracles are not replicable phenomena. We cannot recreate the conditions and look for the same results. But miracles certainly are observable at times. "The wind blows where it listeth . . ." and you either feel it on your face and admire its power or you brush the hair out of your eyes and turn your back on it.

Sensitivity to the moving of the Spirit that leads to good judgment or right behavior is called discernment. **Summarize Margaret Funk on anagogical thinking here?**

Although many have noted the danger of this practice in misinterpreting mere coincidence or in distorting facts to create “spiritual” realities, I found in my own life that the danger really was less spectacular than these. For me, the real negative of this approach was the tendency to overlook the way God works within mundane realities. When you constantly scan the horizon for the unusual or unexpected, you might actually miss the ordinary beauty of the setting sun. By setting up the expectation for spectacular miracles, we sometimes missed the miracle of everyday life, the beauty and elegance of logical consequences, the order and meaning in creation as it is rather than the creativity of its disruption.

Still, I did not reject the tendency to look for the truth behind the facts, the “deeper magic” as C. S. Lewis identifies it. (i.e. *What might this beautiful sunset mean?*) And that tendency, for me, became the foundation for a literary imagination. Seeing many things as “a sign” from God or an indicator of God’s will moved me toward symbolic thinking, which led me to a more sacramental view of the world. **[Ironic that the symbolic-to-sacramentalism doesn’t extend to the Eucharist for most in the A/G. Flannery O’Connor on anagogical truth?]** From there, it was only a short leap to understand the value of truth in fiction and the way God can speak through stories.

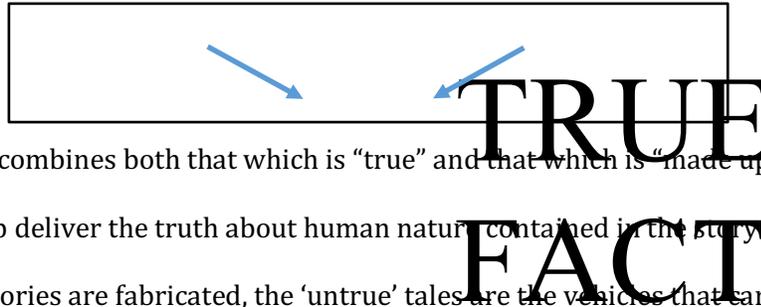
One of the most surprising things about teaching literature to Christian college students is their inability to value the fictional as an avenue to truth, self-reflection, and human understanding. As often as I can, I put the word “True” on the board to start a discussion. Then I ask what the opposite of “true” is. “False!” comes the immediate reply. So I add False to the board to the right of the word True. Something like this:

TRUE	FALSE
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Then I ask students, where do I put the word “Fact”? Under “True” or under “False”? “Under True!” they respond. So there it goes.

TRUE	FALSE
FACT	

Now, where does the word “Fiction” go? Inevitably, the majority in the room answer “Under ‘False!’” And this is where I object. Fiction is not the opposite of fact in the same way that false is the opposite of truth. Instead, I put it between the two, like this:



Fiction combines both that which is “true” and that which is “made up”: characters and plot events that help deliver the truth about human nature contained in the story. Although the plot and characters in stories are fabricated, the ‘untrue’ tales are the vehicles that carry the truths embedded within those fictional characters’ lives. Just as Jesus explained the need for forgiveness in a parable about the unforgiving servant, authors (both Christian and non-Christian) embroider life’s truths into the behaviors and attitudes of their characters. Being able to live in this balance between truth as verifiable and truth as possibility is necessary for the finite creature to relate to an infinite God. Without the competing extremes of the emotionalism in my Pentecostal world and the empiricism of my secular world, I don’t think this balance would have been accessible to me. Shakespeare and Austen, Hemingway and Cather offer truth about human nature and behavior not easily accessed by science, logic, or mathematics. I don’t want to take away from the truths inherent in objective disciplines, but to allow that only such thinking is “truth” is to miss an entire world in which God lives, moves, and has His being.

Although I cannot draw a straight line between my Pentecostal upbringing and my appreciation for the literary imagination, I think there is symbiotic relationship between the two. Discerning the potential truth or falsehood in the stories, testimonies and sermons I was raised hearing was essential for sifting the wheat and chaff of life for spiritual nourishment.

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