

# Saints and sinners: Is the day of the 'rapture' near?

It's called the "rapture," and there are Christians who take this Bible prophecy literally. Some believers have even pasted instructions on the dashboards of their cars, telling passengers what to do if the driver of the car should suddenly be whisked from behind the steering wheel and transported to heaven. The passengers who find themselves in a driverless vehicle are told, "Do not panic. Shut off the ignition and steer the car to the side of the road."

Many of those who take these precautions seriously are people who have read the runaway best-seller "Left Behind" (Tyndale House, 2000), which purports to be a true-to-life account of Earth's last days when believers will be snatched away from whatever they are doing and taken to "meet the Lord in the sky."

In the apocalyptic suspense thriller, airline

passengers simply vanish in mid-air leaving their clothes and bewildered companions behind while chaos breaks out worldwide. The novel by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins is pure fiction but is based on the Bible. St. Paul describes the "rapture" in one of his letters. The word "rapture" comes from the Latin word meaning to seize or carry off. In the words of St. Paul, "the Lord shall descend from heaven ... and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive ... shall be caught up together with them in the clouds and meet the Lord in the air." In other words, when the end of the world comes, the believers shall be snatched away to safety wherever they are — driving an automobile down the freeway, walking behind a plow or sitting in a theater. Christianity has always taught that the days of



**george plagenz**  
• saints & sinners

this world are numbered. The Bible points to the signs that will accompany the "end times," as they are called. With these Bible signs as their guide, prophets through the ages have warned that the curtain was about to fall on human history. So far they have all been wrong. Even Billy Graham misread the signs. In 1950, the evangelist told an audience, "We may have another year, maybe two years. Then I believe it's going to be all over." Among the biblical signs pointing to the last

days of the world as we know it, Graham mentioned the "perplexity and distress in the world, the breakdown in morals and more devastating and more frequent wars." The end did not come and Graham no longer predicts when the world will end. "God alone knows," he says. But more Christians than ever appear to believe that the "end time" is approaching. Time magazine this summer ran a cover story titled, "The Bible and the Apocalypse — Why More Americans are Reading and Talking About the End of the World." The article said that 17 percent of Americans believe the end of the world will happen in their lifetime. While the number of those who look for the end to come soon is growing, skeptics still outnumber believers. Many Bible scholars believe that when the prophets predicted coming

events, they were referring to happenings which would take place in the near future — usually within the lifetime of their hearers. These scholars say the book of Revelation where many of the Bible prophecies appear was written to be a steadying influence on Christians suffering persecution in the first century. Such expressions as "what soon must take place" or "for the time is near" must stand as warnings against applying the book of Revelation to later centuries, they maintain. The prophets were not talking to us in the 21st century but to their own generation, they say. Meanwhile, we may want to take comfort in something a conference of world scientists said recently. They predicted that the universe can look forward to about five million more years. We should be able to settle our differences by then.

# Rev. Eugene H. Peterson paraphrases the Bible in everyday language

**By Tom Laceky**  
*Associated Press Writer*  
HELENA, Mont. — In the Rev. Eugene H. Peterson's retelling of the Bible, when Jesus raises a young girl from the dead, he first has to work his way through neighbors bringing casseroles to the grieving family's home. The poetic "valley of the shadow of death" from Psalm 23 becomes simply "Death Valley." And when God prepares to flood the earth, he decides to spare Noah because "Noah was different. God liked what he saw in Noah." Those folksy touches are part of the appeal of Peterson's "The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language," published by NavPress of Colorado Springs, Colo. The 2,265-page volume is a compilation of biblical paraphrases that Peterson has written for 20 years.

Released in July, NavPress sold 320,000 copies in advance and ordered an initial print run of 500,000, the largest it has ever had for a Bible, NavPress spokeswoman Kathleen Campbell said. Peterson's New Testament, published in 1993, sold 2.5 million copies, and his other "Message products" — more than 20 in all — have sold 4.5 million. In addition to good sales, Peterson's work has enjoyed gentle treatment from other biblical scholars. Vern Poythress, a New Testament professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pa., says he and fellow conservatives may quibble with many of Peterson's renderings but have leveled few attacks because "The Message" isn't a Bible and isn't presented as such. He sees it as useful for evangelism among people who know nothing about

the Bible, so long as they realize it's merely one writer's interpretation of the biblical message. He says Peterson's work "is at the far end of the spectrum, not only in paraphrasing but cultural updating." Peterson translated the Bible directly from the Greek and Hebrew and avoided earlier English translations. His purpose was to capture the earthy, vigorous tone of the originals. "My intent was to provide something for people who had never read the Bible before, or didn't think they could read it," he said. In "The Message," Paul the Apostle is that "jailbird preacher." In the Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," becomes "God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing." Nobody "begets" anybody in "The Message." They have babies.

"I've been reading the Bible since I was a little kid, but I found myself, when I first cracked it open — I was on an airplane — and I found myself laughing out loud or crying," recalled Brad Rauch, a friend of Peterson's and general manager of Christian radio station KALS in Kalispell. Rauch is just one of many admirers. Peterson, who grew up in Kalispell and now lives nearby on the shore of western Montana's Flathead Lake, has fans all over. Bono, lead singer for the Irish rock band U2, cited "this guy Eugene Peterson" in a Rolling Stone interview last December. "He's a poet and a scholar, and he's brought the text back to the tone in which the books were written," Bono said. "A lot of the Gospels were written in common kind of marketspeak. They were

not at all highfalutin like the King James version of the Bible." Peterson's mother was a Pentecostal preacher, and her son started out his career as a scholar of Greek and Hebrew at New York Theological Seminary and an associate pastor at a Presbyterian church in White Plains, N.Y. In 1962 he went to Bel Air, Md., to organize a new Presbyterian church and stayed 29 years. He still regards himself primarily as a pastor. "The Message" began because Peterson's adult Sunday school class didn't grasp how exciting Paul's Letter to the Galatians really is. He decided to translate it for them. The resulting pamphlet found its way to an editor at NavPress, the publishing arm of The Navigators, a nondenominational, international evangelistic organization. Editor John Stein offered to

publish a New Testament paraphrase by Peterson. These days, Peterson rarely preaches anymore, and turns down most of the scores of speaking invitations that come from around the world. "I'm nearly 70 years old, and I just don't have the energy to do that," he said. "And I just can't handle much exposure anymore. I get people projecting something on me that's not true, and I find it's diminishing." That "something" is adulation. He is working on a five-book series on spiritual theology, but has no deadline: "When I finished 'The Message' I thought, 'Never sign another contract with a deadline in it.'"

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