Then two shall be in the field. One is taken and one is left. Two women grinding at the mill. One is taken and one is left.

**Apologetics Commentary:**

**Question:** Is Jesus teaching that there will be a secret rapture of Christians prior to the end of the world?

**Answer:** No, the rapture of Christians, as depicted in the scene above and other Scriptures (notably 1Th 4:13-16), occurs at the last day, at the end of the world and the Second and Final Coming of Jesus Christ. There is no rapture of Christians prior to these final events.

The concept that Christians will be raptured from the earth prior to the end of the world is part of a larger eschatological viewpoint known as "premillennialism." The word "millennial" refers to the one thousand year period mentioned six times in the Apocalypse (20:1-6). According to the premillennial view, the millennium is yet future. It will begin when Christ returns at His Second Coming. At that time He will establish a glorious earthly kingdom in which He will rule the nations from Jerusalem for one thousand years. After the millennium, the view holds that the present world will end and Christ will usher in the eternal state.

The rapture of Christians is said to occur before the beginning of the millennium, which is the essence of the prefix pre- in the word "premillennial." This "pre-return" of Christ to rapture Christians is said to be "secret," since Christ will not appear visibly in the sky. It is further stated that Christians will be snatched away in the midst of doing their normal activities, and the rest of the world will not understand what is taking place.

Premillennialists hold that prior to Christ’s establishment of the millennial kingdom, there will be a seven-year “tribulation period.” The length of “seven” years is taken from the prophetic “week” of Dn 9:27. Most premillennialists believe that the rapture of Christians occurs immediately before the tribulation period, and are known as “pre-tribulation rapturists.” Other premillennialists hold that the rapture of Christians occurs sometime in the middle of the tribulation, and they are known as “mid-tribulationists,” while still others claim that the rapture occurs after the tribulation, and are called “post-tribulationists.” In any case, the rapture occurs before the millennium.
The more popular and detailed strain of premillennialism is Dispensational pre-millennialism. This view provides the larger foundation upon which premillennial eschatology is built, since it interprets certain OT prophecies as predicting the millennial kingdom. Specifically, the divine promises of physical land to Abraham, recorded in passages such as Gn 12:2-7; 13:14-17; 15:5-7, 13-21; 17:1-21; 22:17-18, are said to be awaiting fulfillment in the millennial kingdom (although they are said to have been partially fulfilled in the OT). Moreover, passages in the genre of Is 11:1-16, which describe such things as the “wolf lying down with the lamb,” or Ez 37:15-28's description of the reunion of Judah and Israel, are interpreted as being fulfilled in the millennium of Ap 20:1-6.

The one thousand year period of Ap 20:1-6 is understood as the “seventh dispensation.” The previous “dispensations” are: (1) innocence (Gn 1:28); (2) morality (Gn 3:7); (3) government (Gn 8:15-17); (4) promise (Gn 12:1); (5) law (Ex 19:1-6); (6) church (Ac 2:1). Dispensationalism interprets passages such as Mt 5:1-48 (the Sermon on the Mount) as applying primarily to the millennium and only indirectly to the present age.

The seventh dispensation is deemed to be the climax of all divine revelation. Its salient feature is God’s restoration of His relationship with Israel that began in the OT. In this new movement, God is said to choose one 144,000 Jews to be the rulers of the millennium, to lead the Gentile nations back to God (Ap 7:4-8). Accordingly, Dispensationalism interprets passages such as Mt 25:1-46 (The Judgment of the Nations) as occurring after the millennium, since at that time Christ is said to judge the degree of Gentile obedience to Jewish leadership. Gentiles show their worthiness for the kingdom by catering to the Jews during the millennium, who are said to be represented by Mt 25:40’s “least of my brethren.” Because of the prominence given to the seventh dispensation, the sixth dispensation, the Gentile-Church age, is considered only a “parenthesis” of the divine economy, since its main purpose is to make way for the seventh dispensation ruled by Jews.

Thus, the rapture is much more than just a Christian panacea of escape from tribulation. The rapture is the key ingredient in the requirements for Dispensational-premillennial eschatology, since it is the crucial moment when the Gentile Christians are removed from the world to provide the Jews the opportunity to rule in the millennium. Not until the Church is removed can the Jews begin their reign as God’s leaders on earth, and the rapture is what accomplishes that removal.

The premillennial view also holds that the binding of Satan (Ap 20:1-3) occurs immediately after the seven-year tribulation. The Jews will
then be able to influence the rest of the world because Satan will be bound for the entire one thousand years. Regarding Ap 20:7-8, it is believed that Satan will be loosed for a short while just prior to the end of the millennium.

The proponents of this particular view come mainly from Protestant groups, especially those associated with the Plymouth Brethren movement from the early 1800's, and particularly the students of John Nelson Darby. But despite its meager beginnings, premillennialism is the most widely held view in contemporary Protestant evangelicalism.

Historically, the premillennial view of eschatology has some roots in an earlier belief known as Chiliasm, a view even entertained by some Fathers, though not many (Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, Lanctantius). Chiliasm held that there would be a future glorious kingdom on earth after the Second Coming of Christ. Chiliasm was based on the imminent return of Christ, which many Christians believed was going to take place within their lifetimes. But since by the latter half of the second century the return of Christ did not materialize, there was a dramatic shift away from Chiliasm. In the Greek church, Chiliasm was thoroughly discredited, but the Western church tolerated it for a few years, partly because it had some basis in the tradition, and partly because some heretical groups (Marcionites, Gnostics) had excluded it. By the fourth century, however, Chiliasm was not a going concern.

Augustine, leading the way for Fathers both before and after him (Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius), interpreted Scripture as teaching that the millennium of Ap 20:1-6 began with the First Coming of Christ. This view gained much acceptance, partly because it coincided with the reign of Constantine which began in 312 A.D. Constantine, who is said to have converted to Christianity himself, brought peace and power to Christianity, which then developed into the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages.

Augustine and his contemporaries interpreted the one thousand years of Ap 20:1-6 as representing a symbolic period portraying the “completeness of time” until the Second Coming of Christ. In this view, the rapture occurs at the Second Coming of Christ and is one event in a simultaneity of events that ends the present world’s existence. This interpretation of Scripture is commonly known as the amillennial view, since the a- prefix denies that there is a future millennial period after the Church age. This has been the most accepted view in Catholic tradition.

A somewhat varied form of amillennialism is postmillennialism, adopted mostly by Protestant groups. Similar to the amillennial view, the
postmillennial positions holds that the millennium begins at the First Coming of Christ and ends at the Second Coming (or merely extends into eternity). The main difference between the two positions is that the amillennial view sees the Church and the world growing progressively worse during the latter end of the millennium; whereas the postmillennial view sees them growing progressively better, until such a time that most of the world is converted to Christianity. When a substantial portion of the human race is converted, Christ is said to be ready to return to take His virtuous bride and end the present world. Some adherents to the postmillennial view also adopt the concept of “theonomy,” a view which holds that OT civil laws should be literally enforced during the Church age in order to facilitate the needed progress toward a Christian society.

Another strain of millennial teaching, which for lack of a better term, could be categorized as past-millennialism, holds that the one thousand years of Ap 20:1–6 is a symbolic period representing the whole OT, from Creation to the First Coming of Christ. More literal versions hold that the millennium began with the reign of David around 1000 B.C. and transpires for one thousand years to the birth of Christ just prior to 1 A.D. In this view, much of the Apocalypse is interpreted as portraying the history of Israel, with the climax being Christ’s death as the “Lamb” of God.

A fifth possible view is transmillennialism, a view which holds that the Apocalypse is written in cryptic and symbolic language precisely because the author does not want the reader to confine the prophecy to one period of time, but only to redemptive and historical themes and events that occur cyclically in both the Old and New Testaments, albeit with a climax at the end of time.

Regardless of one’s eschatological view, however, according to 1Th 4:13-16 the rapture occurs at the resurrection of deceased Christians, and with a heavenly fanfare that is not incidental (e.g., “a shout,” “voice of the archangel,” “trumpet of God” “in the air”):

13 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again: even so those who sleep in Jesus, God will bring with him. 14 For this we say to you in the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not precede them who are asleep. 15 For the Lord himself shall come down from heaven with a shout and with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God: and the dead who are in Christ shall rise first. 16 Then we who are alive,
who are left, shall be taken up together with them in the clouds to meet Christ, into the air: and so shall we be always with the Lord.

Each millennial view must give an answer to the manner and timing of this singular event. The major obstacle for the premillennial view (an obstacle that its adherents have never satisfactorily overcome) is that according to various NT passages, the resurrection of deceased Christians, and thus the rapture of living Christians, occurs at the same time as the resurrection of deceased unbelievers. Jn 5:28-29 is quite clear in this regard:

...the hour comes wherein all who are in the graves shall hear the voice of the Son of God. And they who have done good things shall come forth to the resurrection of life: but they that have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.

Hence, the problem faced by contemporary rapture theorists is that the NT depicts the rapture as contemporaneous with the resurrection of both believers and unbelievers, and thus there would be no possibility for a "secret" rapture prior to the Second Coming of Christ.

As noted, Jn 5:28-29 and 1Th 4:13-16 portray the resurrections of believers and unbelievers as simultaneous with the rapture. The simultaneity is reinforced by the words "hour" (which signifies a precise and singular time period) and "all" (which encompasses all the deceased). Those of the premillennial persuasion, whether they adopt a pre-, mid-, or post-tribulation rapture, must then answer the exegetical dilemma by positing that the "one thousand years" of Ap 20:1-6 comes between Jn 5:29's "resurrection of life" and Jn 5:29's "resurrection of judgment." But this explanation is indefensible, since the text simply gives no hint of a millennial interlude between the two resurrections.

Additional evidence from the NT also dictates against separating the two resurrections by one thousand years. Six passages in the NT refer to a "last day" resurrection. Five of them refer to the righteous (Jn 6:39, 40, 44, 55; 11:24); while the sixth, Jn 12:48, refers to the unrighteous. Hence, because both resurrections occur on the same day, the very "last day," then they must be simultaneous, and consequently, would discount a secret rapture prior to the judgment of the last day. This is reinforced by many other passages which teach a simultaneous resurrection of believers and unbelievers (cf., Ac 24:15; Dn 12:2; Lk 11:31-32; Rm 14:10-12; 2Co 5:10-
11; Ap 20:11-15; 22:11-12). The only way to synthesize all these passages is to conclude that the rapture occurs at the end of time, on the “last day,” at the Second and Final Coming of Christ, and is coincident with the resurrection of all people, some to eternal life, others to eternal damnation.

Rapture theory also posits that the Scriptures which depict Christ coming as a “thief in the night” refer to His secret snatching of Christians from the world (e.g., 1Th 5:2: “For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord shall come as a thief in the night”). It is claimed that this secret rapture allows the Christians to escape the “wrath” of God mentioned in 1Th 5:9 (“For God has not appointed us to wrath: but to the purchasing of salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ”), which is identified with the seven-year tribulation period of Dn 9:27. But this is not supported either by the context or the manner in which “thief” language is used in Scripture. For example, two verses later (1Th 5:4), Paul tells the Christians that Christ will not come as a thief for them, since they are ready for His coming: “But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you as a thief.” It is clear that Christ comes as a “thief” only for the unbelievers who are not expecting His arrival, not for believers who are waiting for Him to secretly rapture them. Other passages using the “thief” language also regard it as referring to Christ coming in judgment upon unbelievers at the end of time, or at death (2Pt 3:10; Ap 3:3; 16:15).

**Patristics and Medievals:**

**Didache:** “In the last days, then, false prophets and corrupters will be multiplied. Sheep will be turned into wolves and charity will be turned into hate. As lawlessness increases, men will hate one another and persecute and betray; and then will appear the deceiver of the world as a Son of God. He will work signs and wonders and the world will be given over into his hands. He will do such wicked deeds as have not been done since the world began. Then will all created men come to the fire of judgment, and many will be scandalized and will be lost; but those who persevere in their faith, will be saved out from under the accursed thing itself. And then will appear the signs of the truth. First, the sign spread out in the heavens; second, the sign of the sound of the trumpet; and third, the resurrection of the dead. Not the resurrection of all men, but, as it was said: ‘The Lord will come, and all His saints with Him.’ Then the world will see the Lord coming on the clouds of heaven” (16, 3); **Cyril of Alexandria:** “The Divine Scripture says that the judgment is to take place after the resurrection of the dead. But the
resurrection is not to take place until Christ returns to us from heaven in the glory of the Father with the holy angels. So too says the all-wise Paul, 'The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of an Archangel, and with the trumpet of God. For the trumpet shall sound and the dead in Christ shall be raised incorruptible'" (Against the Anthropomorphites, 16); Jerome: "After the captivity which took place under Vespasian and Titus and afterwards under Hadrian, the ruins of Jerusalem are to remain until the end of time, although the Jews themselves think a gold and jewel-bedecked Jerusalem is to be restored and that there will again be victims and sacrifices and marriages of the saints and a kingdom in the lands of the Lord and Savior. Granted that we cannot accept this, neither, however, do we dare to condemn it, because so many men of the Church and martyrs said the same" (Commentaries on Jeremiah, 4, 15, 2); Augustine: "But it is continually being asked whether those whom Christ is to find living in this world...are never to die at all, or whether in that precise moment of time when they are caught up in the clouds, along with those rising again, to meet Christ in the air, they will pass with marvelous speed through death to immortality. For it must not be said that it is impossible for them to die and come to life again in that space of time when they are being carried on high through the air....The apostle himself seems to demand that we should take his words in this sense; that is, we should take it that those whom the Lord will find alive here will undergo death and receive immortality in that brief space of time. He confirms this interpretation when he says, 'In Christ all men will be brought to life,' and by his statement in another passage, dealing directly with the resurrection of the body: 'The seed you sow does not come to life unless it first dies'" (The City of God, 20, 20, 1-2); "For the Lord will reign on earth with His saints, as the Scriptures say, and here He will have His Church, into which no wicked person will enter, separated and cleansed from every contagion of iniquity" (Sermons, 259, 2); "Those who, because of this passage in this book, have suspected that the first resurrection is future and bodily, have been influenced, especially, among other things, by the number of a thousand years, to suppose that it were fitting that among the saints there should be during that time a kind of sabbatism, a holy vacation, as it were, after the labors of the six thousand years since man was created....This opinion would be somewhat tolerable, if the delights of that sabbath to be enjoyed by the saints were, through the presence of the Lord, of a spiritual kind. For we too were at one time of this opinion" (The City of God, 20, 7, 1); Ambrose: "Therefore he is aroused that he may live, that he may be like to Paul, that he may be able
to say, ‘For we that are alive shall not precede those that are asleep.’ He speaks here not of the common manner of life and the breath which we all alike now enjoy but of the future merit of the resurrection” (On the Resurrection, 2, 92-93); Chrysostom: “We are carried upon the chariot of our Father. For he received him up in the clouds, and ‘we shall be caught up in the clouds’” (Homilies on 1 Thessalonians, 8); Gregory of Nyssa: “Therefore, we believe according to the words of the apostle, that we also ‘shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air’” (Against Eunomius, 12, 1); Rufinus: “And do not marvel that the flesh of the saints is to be changed into such a glorious condition at the resurrection as to be caught up to meet God, suspended in the clouds and borne in the air...It is in no way absurd, then, if the bodies of the saints are said to be raised up in the air, seeing that they are said to be renewed after the image of Christ’s body, which is seated at God’s right hand” (Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed, 46); Venerable Bede: “...those who are going to be alive in the flesh at the Judge’s coming. At one and the same moment, both of them, having been caught up ‘in clouds to meet the Lord in the air,’ will be led into eternal life, as soon as the judgment is brought to completion” (Homilies on the Gospels, 1, 24); Justin Martyr: “But I and such other Christians as judge rightly in everything believe that there will be...a thousand years in which Jerusalem will be built up, adorned and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and the others declare” (Dialogue with Trypho, 80); Eusebius: “The same author [Papias] presents other accounts as if they had come to him from unwritten tradition, and some strange parables and teachings of the Savior, and some other more mythical accounts. Among them, indeed, he says that there will be a period of about a thousand years after the resurrection of the dead, when the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth” (History of the Church, 3, 39, 11); Theodore: “Those men create for themselves in imagination a period of a thousand years, and luxury that will pass, and other pleasures, and, along with them, sacrifices and Jewish solemnities. As for ourselves, we await the life that knows no growing old” (Compendium of Heretics’ Fables, 5, 21); Aquinas: “The day of the Lord is said to come as a thief, because the exact time is not known, since it will not be possible to know it from those signs: although, as we have already said, all these most manifest signs which will precede the judgment immediately may be comprised under the judgment day....At His first advent Christ came secretly, although the appointed time was known beforehand by the prophets. Hence there was no need for such signs to appear at His first coming, as will appear at His second advent, when He will
come openly, although the appointed time is hidden" (*Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 73, A. 1); "The fire in question will in reality, as regards its beginning, precede the judgment. This can clearly be gathered from the fact that the resurrection of the dead will precede the judgment, since according to 1Th 4:13-16, those who have slept ‘shall be taken up...in the clouds...into the air...to meet Christ coming to judgment.’ Now the general resurrection and the glorification of the bodies of the saints will happen at the same time; for the saints in rising again will assume a glorified body” (*Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 74, A. 7).

**Pope, Councils and Catechism:**

**Pope Pius XII:** “In recent times on several occasions this Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office has been asked what must be thought of the system of mitigated millennarianism, which teaches, for example, that Christ the Lord before the final judgment, whether or not preceded by the resurrection of the many just, will come visibly to rule over this world. The answer is: The system of mitigate millennarianism cannot be taught safely” (*Decree of the Holy Office, AAS*, July 21, 1944); **Council of Toledo XI:** “There sitting at the right hand of the Father, He awaits the end of time to be the judge of all the living and the dead. Thence with the holy angels and men He will come to judge, and to render to everyone the due of his own reward, according as each one living in the body has done good or evil” (DS 287); **Lateran Council IV:** “…to come at the end of time, to judge the living and the dead, and to render to each according to his works, to the wicked as well as to the elect, all of whom will rise with their bodies which they now bear, that they may receive according to their works, whether these works have been good or evil, the latter everlasting punishment with the devil, and the former everlasting glory with Christ”; **Catechism:** “When? Definitively ‘at the last day,’ ‘at the end of the world.’ Indeed, the resurrection of the dead is closely associated with Christ’s Parousia” (¶ 1001); “Christ will raise us up ‘on the last day;’ but it is also true that, in a certain way, we have already risen with Christ” (¶ 1002).

**Notes:**