

# Left Behind Review from Lutheran Witness

*Will You be 'Left Behind'?*  
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*The 'Left Behind' books say that Christians suddenly will disappear when Christ returns, leaving the heathen behind. But what does the Bible say?*

*By: G. Brent McGuire*

Planes dropping out of the sky. Chaos on the roads. Newborns vanishing mid-delivery. Missing corpses.

These are the amazing scenes in the opening pages of *Left Behind*, the first in a series of apocalyptic novels that have earned for their creator and author--Timothy LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins--some \$20 million in royalties.

What is perhaps more fantastic than the plots of the books themselves is the fact that millions of Americans actually believe that the scenario described in *Left Behind* is Scriptural. The [website](#) for the "Left Behind" book series claims that "Left Behind" has become "the all-time best-selling Christian fiction series."

As refreshing as the popularity of a religious--even Christian--book may seem, Christians should, nevertheless, "test everything" (1 Thess. 5:21). The question, then, is: How much of the "Left Behind" series is truly Biblical? And how much is simply fiction?

## ***The Story***

*Left Behind* tells the story of the millions of people who remain on earth after the sudden disappearance of all Christians. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear to most of the principal characters that the mysterious event is explained by the Bible's prophecy of a "Rapture"--the "snatching up" of all believers by God prior to a seven-year tribulation period that leads into Christ's Second Coming.

The Book of Revelation, in particular, indicates the various events the characters witness--the Antichrist's rise to power, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, the emergence of a one-world currency, and so on.

## ***Who's Left? Who's Taken?***

*Left Behind* takes its title from two passages in the Bible, Luke 17:34-35 and Matt. 24:40-41, where Jesus says: "Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left."

In the opening pages of *Left Behind*, three of the main characters are on an airplane, when, suddenly, half of the passengers disappear. (Fortunately for the remaining passengers, the pilot is a pagan.) Meanwhile, traffic on the roads comes to a standstill, as Christian drivers simply vanish.

The authors of *Left Behind* take for granted that the "one taken" is a believer and the "one left" is an unbeliever. In Matthew 24 and Luke 17, Jesus does not expressly identify which is which. However, the immediate context of the verses in Matthew 24 suggests that the "Left Behind" books have it *entirely backwards!*

In the verses immediately preceding the passage, "One will be taken and the other left," Jesus draws an analogy to the days of Noah (Matt. 24:38-39). In the example, the ones who are removed from the earth are the men and women who were destroyed in the Flood--"and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away." The ones who are left are Noah and his family.

Immediately following Matt. 24:40-41, Jesus draws another analogy, this time to a householder whose house is invaded by a thief. Again, the illustration depends on the assumption that having one's belongings "taken" is a bad thing. Thus, having one's house "left" is a good thing (Matt. 24:43).

The word for "taken" in the original Greek of Matt. 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-35 can also be used to mean "seized" or "taken prisoner." For instance, Jesus is "taken" by the soldiers prior to His crucifixion (Matt. 27:27). Moreover, the word for "left" is often used in the Bible to mean "to pardon" or "to forgive." The same verb is used in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matt. 6:12; Luke 11:4).

Given the immediate context and the different meanings possible for the words "taken" and "left," a strong case could be made that when Jesus refers to the "one taken" he speaks of those who will be judged at the Second Coming. Those who are "left," then, are those who are forgiven and receive eternal life. Thus, the fundamental premise of *Left Behind* is based on a questionable interpretation of Scripture.

### ***The Rapture***

The other main text on which the premise of the "Left Behind" books is based is 1 Thess. 4:16-17:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

The phrase "caught up" is the Biblical basis for the concept of "rapture." One of the most glaring problems with the "Left Behind" scenario is that the "Rapture" is presented as a secret--the people who are "Left Behind" have no idea what has happened. But in both 1 Thessalonians 4 and in Matthew 24, Christ's return is described as visible: "as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Matt. 24:27), and audible: "with the voice of the archangel" (1 Thess. 4:16), and "with a loud trumpet call" (Matt. 24:31).

And Christians will not be the only ones who experience the event. Jesus tells us in Matt. 24:30, "[Then] all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

The authors of "Left Behind" also ignore the Lord's coming down (1 Thess. 4:16). Why do they suppose that Christ will change directions once Christians meet Him in the air? Instead, Jesus compares the event

to the five wise maidens who meet the Bridegroom, and then accompany Him as he continues into the wedding feast (Matt. 25:1-13). In other words, Jesus continues to descend.

Christians who read "Left Behind" or who have seen the movie of the same name should keep in mind that Holy Scripture nowhere suggests that there will be multiple days of judgment. There will be one final Day of Judgment on which Christ will return once and for all to judge both the living and the dead (Matt. 13:40-43; 25:31-32; 2 Peter 3:7). Unbelievers will not be given a "second chance."

### ***Other Problems***

The *Left Behind* series is fraught with other misinterpretations of Scriptures. For instance, the Antichrist is portrayed as a political figure rather than a spiritual threat. But Paul writes in 2 Thess. 2:34, "The man of lawlessness ... will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up *in God's temple*, proclaiming himself to be God."

More generally, the *Left Behind* approach to prophecy severely undermines Jesus' words, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matt. 24:36). After all, the authors of *Left Behind* regard certain specific events as necessary for Christ's Second Coming, such as the rebirth of the nation of Israel, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and a one-world currency. If this were true, the Christians who lived and died between A.D. 70, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, and 1948, when the modern nation of Israel was established, were foolish to think that Jesus could have returned in their day, since the Jews were without their own country during that time.

But Christians have always been right to expect their Savior might return soon. When the disciples ask Jesus to tell them the signs that the end of the world is near, Jesus answers by pointing to events that have been with us since the beginning--"wars and rumors of wars," "nation rising against nation," "earthquakes in various places," etc. In other words, there has never been a moment since the beginning of Christianity in which Christians could not reasonably expect Jesus' imminent return.

### ***Law and Gospel***

Although there is some good in books that compel people to think about their eternal destiny and perhaps even induce some to go to church, there is a danger in the *Left Behind* books that goes beyond its misrepresentation of the final judgment.

*Left Behind* actually presents a softer version of God's Law than God would have us know in His Word. By suggesting that people will be given a second chance, LaHaye and Jenkins foster a kind of false security. A reader may think to himself, "I'll just wait and see if this rapture thing pans out. If so, I'll know that I have seven years to get my act together." Ironically, LaHaye and Jenkins offer a sort of Protestant "purgatory"--a temporary purging period for those who are *Left Behind*.

Jesus will indeed return. The prospect of His return as Judge should terrify unrepentant sinners. However, Christ will also come as Savior to those who believe in Him (1 Cor. 15:58). The preoccupation of *Left Behind* with final judgment and the future fulfillment of prophecy ultimately distracts from Jesus' chief message of comfort: the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Because of the teachings of the Church in the Middle Ages, Martin Luther grew up imagining Jesus as a "stern Judge sitting on a rainbow." LaHaye and Jenkins portray Christ in that same way. They transform

faith into a work one does in preparation for the Day of Judgment. And the Christian, troubled in conscience over past sins, is left to look *inward* and ask, "Am I doing enough? Am I believing enough? Will I be 'Left Behind'?"

Jesus invites us, however, to turn *outward*, to His Word, to Baptism, and to His Supper, where we find His assurance that "no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:29). "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17).

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