Changing Currents

Take a dashing airline captain, an attractive, flirtatious flight attendant, a rising young-buck reporter, and the mysterious disappearance of millions of people, and what do you get? The best-selling Christian fiction series, *Left Behind*, from authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. With over 60 million books in print and a host of complementary products for sale (devotionals, calendars, a children’s version of the series), *Left Behind* aims to please.

Were that not enough, the series also offers a worldview that appeals to many Christian readers. But for some, while *Left Behind* offers a fast-paced, heart-pounding thriller sprinkled with religious concepts and terminology, its view of the end times is in direct conflict with their beliefs. With scary scenarios of crashing jets, piled-up cars, and disappearing bodies, *Left Behind* twists Christ’s return for His people from an opportunity for hope-filled joy to an occasion for serious concern.

This study takes a brief look at three Bible passages used to support the theological position presented in the first *Left Behind* book. Participants will find this study more enjoyable by referring to the glossary, and can learn more about the theology behind *Left Behind* by reviewing the additional resources that are suggested. Both are listed at the end of this study.

1. If you had to choose between reading fiction and biography, which would you choose and why? What kind of material do you like to read at home? To take with you on long trips?

2. *Left Behind* is classified as “Christian fiction,” where Christian themes are woven into a fictional story. With what other works of “Christian fiction” are you familiar?

3. Three movies have been based on the *Left Behind* series. The third, *Left Behind: World at War*, was released October 21, 2005—but only in churches. What might this suggest about the series’ popularity?
Unchanging Word

A Thousand Years

After Left Behind is stripped of its story, what’s left is several misinterpretations of Scripture. One of these is a form of millenniumism called dispensationalism (see both in the glossary). Dispensationalism was popularized in North America by eighteenth century English evangelist John Nelson Darby, and received further publicity in the Scofield Reference Bible. Many American evangelical “Bible prophecy” authors, including Left Behind’s LaHaye and Jenkins, espouse these theories, which are based in part on an inaccurate understanding of Revelation 20:4–6:

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

1. Some books of the Bible (apocalyptic literature; see glossary) like Revelation use numbers, symbols, and other devices to reveal divine truth. Why is it important to keep the type of biblical literature in mind when trying to interpret specific books or passages? Why must we also look at the teachings of Scripture as a whole?

2. Revelation 20 depicts history from the time of Christ to the Last Day. John saw the “souls” of dead believers reigning with Christ in heaven, not earth (believers’ souls are with Christ; see Philippians 1:22–23). How does John’s vision contrast with a theory of Christ ruling over a literal, earthly kingdom?

3. “Coming to life” and “the first resurrection” refer to our regeneration brought about by the Gospel (John 5:24–27; Ephesians 2:4–6) and by Baptism (Romans 6:1–11; Colossians 2:9–3:17). How do these Bible passages also speak about God transforming your life by His grace?

4. Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Understanding Revelation as apocalyptic literature favors a symbolic interpretation of the number 1,000. Both of these facts clearly refute a literalistic reading of this passage. Nevertheless, what additional divine truth does John reveal (see also Revelation 5:9–10; 1 Peter 2:4–10)?

Caught Up Together

In the first Left Behind novel, what raptured (see glossary) people leave behind is their clothing and jewelry, shocked and grieving loved ones, and a world ripe for diabolical domination. The rapture referred to in Left Behind and in other popular end times books refers to Christ secretly and invisibly rescuing His Church from a literal tribulation. This teaching divides Christ’s final return into two events, and is based on a misinterpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:16–18:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up [Latin: rapiemur, hence “rapture”] together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

1. In this passage, Paul depicts Christ’s final return in an unmistakably “audible” fashion: Jesus will come from heaven with a “cry of command,” a “voice of an archangel,” and a “sound of the trumpet of God.” How does this refute Left Behind’s assertion that Christ will secretly and silently “rapture” His Church?

2. In 1 Corinthians 15:51–58, Paul describes the bodily transformation of all believers, both living and dead, when Jesus returns, when the “trumpet will sound.” By His death and resurrection, which of our enemies...