

Did the Popular ‘Left Behind’ Series Create End-Times Confusion in the Church?

From 1995 to 2007, Christian authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins wrote a series of 16 best-selling religious novels, now known as the “Left Behind” series.

The popular, apocalyptic scenarios depicted a particular theological interpretation, known as dispensationalism, and focused on various events from biblical eschatology (the study of last things).

The *Left Behind* franchise introduced a cast of characters that can still trigger unsettling thoughts and uncertain theology for some believers, as well as many, curious non-believers.

For some, the series helped to crystallize their own religious viewpoints and expectations. For others, the dreaded thought of being “left behind” when Jesus Christ returns to “rapture” (or “snatch away”) His remaining followers—in a moment of time—remains a troubling mystery.

Paul’s Eschatological Epistles

This perplexing issue also created some confusion in the early church at Thessalonica. In his first letter to the church, Paul taught them about our Lord’s promised return to rule and reign, as the Jewish Messiah and the Gentiles’ Savior.

This second coming of Christ includes key eschatological events (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Paul revealed that the bodies of believers who have died will be resurrected to life first and then the living believers will be raptured and the two groups gathered together to meet the Lord of heaven. This momentous sequence is preceded and accompanied by various prophetic

sights and sounds.

“Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we shall be forever with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17). This revelation was to bring comfort and hope to those hearers and to us!

Subsequent to that letter, some “fake news” had reached that congregation. Purporting to be from Paul, the news was that the Lord’s coming had already happened.

The apostle Paul quickly wrote them a second epistle, seeking to clarify that our Lord’s promised return was *still future* and they had *not been left behind*.

In the first chapter of his second epistle to that Macedonian congregation, Paul told the Thessalonians that he and his associates spoke everywhere with pride regarding their “patience and faith” in the midst of all the “persecutions and tribulations,” which they were enduring (2 Thess. 1:4). He taught that God was aware of their present trials and sufferings (2 Thess. 1:5) and, in His timing, would respond to give them relief and punish their adversaries.

These refining troubles were maturing them in their enduring faith and faithfulness to their Lord Jesus. Paul assured them that when Jesus, the Christ, does return, He will punish with vengeance those who don’t really “know God” and won’t obey or honor the message of our Lord Jesus.

In chapter two, Paul acknowledged that the believers in Thessalonica had been alarmed by some false teachings, which allegedly had come from Paul or his associates. He worried because this deceiving distraction taught that “the day of Christ is already here.” Paul specifically stated that the day of Christ’s return “will not come unless a falling away comes first and the man of sin is revealed” (1 Thess. 2:2-3).

His letter quickly clarified about the future “man of sin” or the “son of destruction” who will deceptively seek to “sit as God in the temple of God.” He will seek to dominate the whole world but is, in fact, doomed to destruction. See 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4.

Paul reminded the congregation that he had previously taught them about this wicked one when he had originally been with them for just a short period. That occasion was recorded by Luke in Act 17:

When they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. According to his custom, Paul went in, and on three Sabbaths he lectured to them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I preach to you, is the Christ.” Some of them were persuaded and joined with Paul and Silas, including a crowd of devout Greeks and many leading women (Acts 17:1-4).

As a result of this evangelistic success, a mob of jealous Jews started a riot in the city. The new believers in Jesus—both Jews and Gentiles—sent Paul and Silas away to the next town, known as Berea and home to Jews who were students of the Scriptures.

More Than the ‘Milk of the Word’

It seems significant that in the short number of weeks he was in Thessalonica, Paul had taught the new believers more than the “milk of the word” (1 Pet. 2:2). Rather, he had explained an esoteric eschatology, including the otherwise scripturally-unmentioned “man of sin” [or “man of lawlessness” (NIV)] who will not be “revealed” until a spiritual rebellion or “falling away” occurs among professing believers.

The epistles of John refer to such a one as “the Antichrist.”

His coming is described to the Thessalonians by Paul as being “in accordance with the working of Satan with all power and signs and false wonders” (2 Thess. 2:9). He said God will send a “strong delusion, that [non-believers] should believe a lie” (2 Thess. 2:11) because they “did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thess. 2:12).

Paul concludes his apostolic teachings and encouragement to the Thessalonians with the reminder of the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus: “But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one” (2 Thess. 3:3).

Actually, our Lord is described as “faithful” 12 times in Scripture, including here in 2 Thessalonians. Faithfulness is a part of our Lord’s character. It is available to his spiritual children as part of the “fruit of the Spirit,” which is enhanced in our lives as we grow spiritually and are “established” in Christ. With this fruit, He continues to purify our character and glorify His own!

The Lord will also guard or protect us from evil (or the evil one). Evil is the direct opposite of holy, and the enemy of our souls, Satan, is also called “the devil” (Luke 8:12) and “the evil one” (Matt. 13:19).

The followers of our Lord Jesus will triumph at the end of time, when the “evil one” will be overcome by the “holy one of Israel” and will join the beast and the false prophet in the lake of fire and brimstone, where “they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). Hallelujah!!

No, We Have Not Been ‘Left Behind’

Our Lord’s promised return is right on heaven’s schedule. Peter explained that God is extraordinarily patient, giving more and more people opportunity to repent and turn *from* sin, with hell’s punishments, and *to* Him, with heaven’s joys and completed salvation (2 Pet. 3:9).