

“Left Behind”

A few days after the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, I received an email from a young person in the congregation who expressed fear over the situation in the United States. This young man said a lot of people were talking like this was the start of WWII or the end of the world. He asked if I thought it was the beginning of the end of the world.

(You may remember that soon after 9/11 a jetliner crashed in New York City, raising fears of another attack. One lady at the scene was quoted in the newspaper as saying it seemed like the end of the world).

How would you have answered this teenager? I responded by saying that if you look at the broader picture, there are many countries where people have been living with terrorist attacks, suicide bombings, genocide, and unspeakable horrors. While the terrorist attack on our own soil is new to us, in recent years this has been a way life for people in Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and other nations. No, I didn't necessarily see the 9/11 attacks as a sign that the world is ending.

I've heard a few people talking about the coronavirus pandemic, and wondering if this is some kind of indication that we're nearing the end.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is that season of 4 weeks before Christmas when we prepare for Jesus' birth as our Savior. The word Advent means "arrival". But Advent is also a time when we focus on the *second coming*, *Jesus' return*, in power and glory. He will come again at the end of time and usher in the kingdom of God. Evil finally will be vanquished, and God will completely reign forever and ever.

Tim LaHaye & Jerry Jenkins have written an extremely popular series of books, the first of which was called *Left Behind*, "*A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*". The book was used as a basis for a film of that same title. These novels depict what will happen when believers are “raptured” (taken up), and disappear. Drivers will be sucked out of their cars. Planes will crash as Christian pilots are raptured. Unbelievers are left behind trying to fathom what's going on.

The fact that an enormous number of *Left Behind* books have been bought and read suggests that perhaps a lot of people are intrigued by the events surrounding the end of the world and the return of Christ. What about the view expressed in the *Left Behind* novels? Will people suddenly zip through the sky and disappear?

This scenario is based on one particular interpretation of Christ's return. It's called the “premillennialist” view. Basically, those holding to this view believe that Christ will come and take believers out of the world. Then there will be 7 years of great tribulation before Christ returns to rule for 1,000 years on earth. Then the end comes.

There is another view, however, called the “postmillennialist” view. Believers will *remain in the world* and go through this 7-year tribulation period before Christ comes to reign 1,000 years on earth. On the other hand, other Bible scholars believe that much of the teaching about Christ's Second Coming is figurative, symbolic language, and not to be taken literally.

My own view is that there is no one place in the Bible that gives an entire, systematic description of Christ's return. No one section gives a detailed sequence of events. "Prophecy" teachers with their time lines and charts pull information from various books of the Bible (like Daniel, Revelation, 1 Thessalonians), and combine it in a way that the biblical writers didn't do.

I believe Christ will return – visibly – for all the world to see. This will signal the end of time as we know it. But we only get hints and glimpses of what this will be like. A pastor who was a great teacher and mentor for me – my pastor when I was a teenager – preached a sermon on the Second Coming of Christ. (I still have the church bulletin for that Sunday – please don't ask me what the date is on it!). My pastor's teaching represented the "premillennialist" view. But later he changed his thinking. He admitted that he had read into Scripture what's really not there. He came to believe that we can't be so sure of the details of Christ's return, only that Christ will do it perfectly! He indicated how badly he felt about what he had earlier taught.

We can be so focused on the details of the Second Coming that we miss the main message! Jesus will return in power and glory as King of kings and Lord of lords! God is moving history towards a climax. This present world as we know it will end, and God will create a new order where evil is overcome and God rules completely!

Let's look at Jesus' words about His return recorded in Matthew, chapter 24. Matthew 24:36 says, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Jesus tells us that nobody knows the day or hour of His return – not even Jesus! But these words haven't stopped people from trying to set dates for His return! A man named Edgar Whisenant wrote a book detailing why Christ would return in 1988. The book sold 4.3 million copies! The next year Whisenant sold 30,000 copies of another book telling why Christ would return in 1989! After missing it twice, the retired NASA engineer, who lived in a one-room shack outside of Little Rock, AK, said he could "stand in front of the Lord and say, 'I gave it my best shot.'" I still can't fathom why, if Jesus says He Himself doesn't even know the day or hour of His return, that some of us would presume to know more than Jesus!

Sometimes people ask: "Are we living in the last days?" My answer is, Yes we are! *We have been living in the last days since the coming of Jesus! His death and resurrection signaled the closing of this age and the dawning of a new age, a new creation, called the kingdom of God.*

New Testament writers saw themselves as living in the last days. The Book of Hebrews begins, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but *in these last days* he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1-2). 1 Corinthians 10:11 says, "These things happened to them as an example, and were written as a warning for us *to whom the end of time has come.*" When Jesus set foot on earth, this marked the beginning of the end of this world and the dawning of a new realm called the kingdom of God. Jesus can return at any moment!

Jesus says more: "For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For

as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Matthew 24:37-39).

The time of His return will be like the days of Noah. What does that mean? In Noah's time people were eating, drinking, getting married. You say: "What's wrong with that?" Nothing. That's the point. People were so busy with the normal activities of living that they were surprised by the flood! They were unprepared. Jesus seems to indicate that when He returns people will be going about their normal business, thinking everything is just as it always was (just like the people before the Flood).

Jesus did give us some signs to look for prior to His return. Some of those are mentioned earlier in Matthew 24: false Christs appear, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution of Christians – i.e. stressful, cataclysmic events. Some people point to all the wars and earthquakes and floods today as a sign that the end is near. It could be. Or is it just that we *hear more* about these things because of instant communications in our time. However, I do think we'd be hard pressed to argue that the world is getting better and more calm and stable these days! I don't see that!

Jesus continues: "Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left" (Matthew 24: 40-41). These verses are often used to support the scenario depicted in the *Left Behind* novels ...that believers are taken and unbelievers are left behind. The Scripture doesn't actually say that those who are *saved* are the ones taken, but it kind of *assumes* that. If nothing else, I think Jesus' teaching here emphasizes that when He returns it will be a time of *separation and judgment*.

Since the time of Jesus' return is uncertain, we should be prepared at all times. Our Lord tells us, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (Matthew 24:42-44).

Over and over Jesus emphasizes this: Always be ready for His unexpected return! He will come like a thief in the night. Thieves usually don't leave a note: "Dear Homeowner. I plan to rob your house Thursday night at 2 a.m." A passage in 1 Thessalonians underscores the unexpectedness of His return, and our need to be ready at all times: "When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then suddenly destruction will come upon them" (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

How can we be prepared for Christ's return? And even if He doesn't come back in our lifetime, how can we be prepared to face Him on the Other Side? Since Jesus compares the time of His return to the time of Noah and the flood, we can get some clues by looking at Noah, and how Noah was prepared. Genesis 6 says that by the time of Noah humankind had become very wicked and God grieved that He had created us. But Noah was different from the rest of humanity. He was out of step with his decadent generation. "But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord. These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his

generation; Noah walked with God" (Genesis 6:8-9). *Noah found grace, or favor, in the eyes of the Lord.* There are two reasons mentioned as to why God accepted and favored Noah: (1) he was a righteous man, and (2) he walked faithfully with God.

Noah had faith in God. He trusted God. God told Noah to build this gigantic, 450-foot long boat, in the middle of dry ground. People must have ridiculed and made fun of him, thinking he was going crazy. But Noah built the boat anyway, because God told him to do that.

Noah had faith in God; and also, he was a righteous man (the two go together). He did what is right. It says he was blameless before God. Not only did he obey God by building the ark, it says in Genesis 6:22, "he did **all** that God commanded him." *When the flood came, Noah was saved because of His trust in God and his righteous life.*

So, with Noah as a model, we can see how we can prepare for Christ's return. *We prepare by trusting in the Lord, putting our faith in God.* The faith we're talking about here is "saving faith". We trust in the Lord to save us. Max Lucado has said that *Noah* built a safe place out of the wood of the ark; *Christ* made a safe place for us out of the wood of the cross. Those who trusted in the ark were saved from death and destruction. Those who trust in Christ are saved from eternal death and destruction.

Preparation for Jesus' coming begins when we put our faith in Christ as our Savior. We are sinners, and our sin separates us from God. There's nothing we can do to make ourselves acceptable to a holy God. We can't earn and we don't deserve God's forgiveness and His kindness. But He offers it to us - freely! "*Faith*" is our accepting that gift of salvation God offers in Christ.

As in Noah's time, many people today are immersed in the routine of living: eating meals, working at jobs, shopping, running their children here and there, watching TV – and paying little attention to the gift of forgiveness and new life offered in Christ. Get right with God! Trust Christ to save you! Elsewhere, Jesus said, "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8).

Noah trusted God, but he was also righteous: he lived an upright life. *We prepare for Jesus' return by living an upright life.* Like with Noah, this means walking with God, and doing what He commands.

It's possible to trust Christ as our Savior, but to stray off the path of right living. We can say we're Christians, but we're not living right! I remember there was a girl in our youth group when I was young who said she didn't go to the movies because she was afraid the Lord would return and find her in a movie theater! We used to kid her about this a lot. We may smile and think this is a bit quaint (and remember, movies weren't nearly as bad way back then as they are now!). But the idea is sound. We should live so that if Jesus comes back any moment, we will not be ashamed of what we're doing! 1 John 2:28 urges us, "And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him, at His coming."

Living an upright life and being ready for the Lord's return doesn't just mean that we should quit doing bad things! It also means doing good in Jesus' name: being morally pure, caring about people, living unselfishly.

Martin Luther, one of the great leaders of the Protestant Reformation, was asked what he'd do if he knew Christ would come back tomorrow. He said he'd go plant a tree! Do you see the point? Martin Luther trusted Christ alone for salvation. He was living a life of total dedication to Christ. He didn't need to do anything differently – or cram for the final!

What would you do if you knew Jesus was coming back tomorrow at 5:17 a.m.? (If He comes then, you'll probably have to wake me up). Would we frantically spend today trying to put our house in order? Or, like Martin Luther, would we go "plant a tree" – i.e. just do what we normally do, knowing we're ready for our Lord's return?

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