



## *Leave It Behind*

“Now he (Christ) has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:26b-28).

“For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40).

A popular series of best-selling books has just been turned into a motion picture. There is nothing new about that, except that this series of books is written by Christian authors claiming to portray future events described in the Bible. If you haven’t heard of it already, the “Left Behind” movie is about to add to the popularity of the already popular “Left Behind” novels.

Not that the books needed any boost in popularity. The seven books released so far have all made it to the New York Times bestseller list. To date, Tyndale House, the publisher, has sold 23 million copies of Left Behind items, including audio books and a children’s series. Earnings from the books have netted their publisher hundreds of millions of dollars.

Fortunately, the stories are classified as “fiction,” and Christians who read them should be warned that they contain more fiction than even their authors realize.

The stories paint a fantastical picture of what life will be like on earth after Jesus has suddenly snatched or “raptured” believers past and present up to heaven and ushered in seven year period of tribulation. This is all intended to set the stage for Jesus’ return to earth to establish a 1000 year reign in which good triumphs over evil.

However, it’s not just the characters in the stories who are fictional. The basic premise of people suddenly disappearing because they have been whisked away to heaven, or an earthly reign of our Savior for 1000 years, is foreign to the Bible.

Defenders of such doctrines will point to the 1000 years mentioned in Revelation 20:4-6. A close look at the context, however, reveals that these are goings on in heaven, not on earth. While there are many Biblical references to the tribulations God’s people suffer through on earth, nowhere does one find a reference to a specific 7 year period which will be avoided by the faithful. The “rapture” or sudden disappearance of



Christians living and dead is supposed to be taught by 1 Thessalonians 4. What that chapter does teach is the comfort that when Jesus returns on the last day, those who are alive will not be leaving those who died behind, but we will all greet our Lord together in the air when he returns as Judge on the last day.

We don't look forward to a future golden age here on earth, because when Jesus came to sacrifice for our sins the first time he already ushered in the last age of world history. The Hebrews passage above tells us that Jesus' appearance 2000 years ago took place "at the end of the ages." He is only coming back one more time, and Jesus himself tells us in John 6 that he will raise all believers from the dead on the last day. We don't look for another 1000 years of world history after Christ's return during which another crop of believers will live and die.

This is what we confess in the Apostle's and Nicene Creeds every Sunday. This is what we review during the last 3 weeks of the church year leading up to Advent on an annual basis. Perhaps it is fortunate that this movie is being released precisely during that time of the year in which we again focus on a Biblical view of what the end times and our Savior's return are all about.

We can be happy that the Left Behind series is fiction. We have the comfort that when Jesus returns, he is bringing heaven with him, not another 1000 years in this sad and sinful place. While each of us must decide for himself whether to read the books or see the movie, perhaps the title itself suggests the best thing to do with them. They may be better left behind.

In Christ, Pastor Vieths