

Left Behind - A Movie Review

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Several people have asked me to comment on the recent movie, "*Left Behind*", so I rented and watched the video version of the movie. Before I present my thoughts, I need to make four statements. First, even though the story line in this movie is a work of fiction, it should not be regarded as "just another movie".

This movie belongs in a special category because the story line represents the Biblical beliefs of many evangelical Christians. Second, this movie was produced by certain evangelicals for the purpose of making a religious statement to both Christians and non-Christians.

Unlike "entertainment movies," the mission of the sponsors and producers of "Left Behind" is to inform as many people as possible about their particular view of Bible prophecy. Third, this movie is based on a prophetic schematic that is sometimes called "the pre-tribulation schematic." The term "pre-trib" is used because this view predicts that all born-again Christians will be taken to Heaven *prior* to the commencement of the Great Tribulation in an event called "the rapture."

My fourth statement is the most serious. All claims (including my own) about the future fulfillment of prophecy are a matter of faith, not fact. These claims are not a matter of fact because it is impossible to *prove* the accuracy of a prediction that has not occurred.

For example, no one can prove there will be a Second Coming. Jesus said He will return, but a promise is not evidentiary fact. People may put their *faith* in the promises of Jesus, but faith is not fact. (John 14:1-3; Heb 11:1-6) Faith and fact are mutually exclusive.

When something has become a known fact, there is no need for faith. Therefore, all prophetic schematics concerning the future are ultimately statements of faith, not fact.

The truthfulness found in these four statements level the playing field as far as humanities' grasp of God's future plans. *It is important to remember that all end-time schematics are based on faith, and do not have an equal chance of being accurate.* When it comes to the accuracy of prophetic schematics, popularity and scholarly endorsement mean nothing. Noah's "flood schematic" had less than a dozen believers after 120 years of preaching!

So, the prophetic schematic that is proven to be true in the end is the one that accurately explains the intended meaning of God's Word. I believe it is possible to test a prophetic schematic to see if it is true or false before predicted events occur and this is done by using valid rules of interpretation (hermeneutics).

In other words, the key to accurately understanding apocalyptic prophecy is based on understanding and administering valid rules of interpretation that dictate the meaning of prophecy. We know a set of rules are valid if they align past fulfillment of prophecy with

recorded history.

This process helps the Bible student anticipate future events because they harmonize with events that have already been fulfilled. God is consistent and there is a beautiful harmony that is revealed from the sum of all its parts. If a person uses valid keys of interpretation appropriately, that person can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, discover the intended meaning of apocalyptic prophecy.

Keep in mind that valid rules of interpretation do not favor one particular denominational view over another. Valid rules of interpretation are self-evident within the Bible itself.

The Movie

The story line in the movie is based on a series of bestselling books written by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. I found the movie to be entertaining and enlightening for two reasons. First, this "true-to-life" drama illustrates several prophetic concepts that pre-trib evangelicals believe are true.

It was interesting to see pre-trib views portrayed in "real-life" situations. Second, some evangelicals are using this movie as an "entering wedge" to convey their concepts of God and the necessity for salvation before secular minds. They hope that revenues from this movie will finance the production of additional movies. The basic message of this movie is "Get right with God now – or be left behind."

I do not think we can expect this movie to measure up to Hollywood's expensive docu-dramas. The special effects are not quite as convincing as some of the more recent multi million dollar Hollywood movies. But as I watched, these deficiencies did not hurt the core message of the movie.

A secular viewer with no previous understanding of the pre-trib schematic may not understand how certain details connect in the story and will probably forget most of the details within a few days. The one element the viewer may not forget, however, is the emotional response of being "left behind".

On the other hand, I believe this movie will have a lasting impact on individuals who sincerely believe in the pre-trib schematic. If the movie is financially successful, I suspect sequels will soon follow that clarify other anticipated pre-trib events during the seven years of the Great Tribulation.

The Pre-Trib Schematic

Perhaps some readers of the *Day Star* are not acquainted with the pre-trib framework, so the following three paragraphs present a brief overview of some of the elements that were presented in the movie:

In the near future, Arab enemies will try to destroy Israel and the Jews (God's chosen people), but God will miraculously protect Israel. On or about the time of this attack, without warning or notice, God will snatch up all born-again Christians from Earth and the wicked will be "left behind." (Hence the title of the movie.)

This event is called "the rapture" and it marks the beginning of a seven-year period called "*The Great Tribulation*".

After the rapture, it is believed that a series of judgments from God will occur on Earth (These events were not presented in the movie). Much destruction and human turmoil will follow. The rapture of millions of Christians will be seen as a powerful fulfillment of prophecy.

Upon witnessing this event, it is believed that 144,000 Jews will convert to Christianity. They will begin to evangelize the whole world like the apostle Paul, preaching the gospel of Christ. (The concept of 144,000 Jews evangelizing the world was not presented in the movie either.)

At this time, many people will give their hearts to the Lord for two reasons: First, the sudden disappearance of millions of people will confirm the pre-trib version of the gospel. (This concept was strongly promoted in the movie.) Second, the Great Tribulation will impose so much suffering on all nations that people will repent of their disbelief to avoid eternal destruction. (This point was obliquely mentioned.)

While the gospel is being heralded throughout the Earth by the Jews, a man from Europe will come to the attention of Earth's inhabitants. This man gains influence and control over the world through the United Nations. Soon, it becomes evident that this man is the dreaded Antichrist.

Some pre-trib believers think the Antichrist is presently living in obscurity in Europe and will quickly rise to fame and popularity on or about the time of the rapture. At first, he will appear to be very effective in his pursuit to restore peace between the nations of Earth.

It is believed that He will gain control over the nations of Europe (presented as ten valuable sectors of the world), but as circumstances change, his masquerade is removed about midway through the Great Tribulation, revealing his true identity as the evil Antichrist.

Continuing in the pre-trib view, the Antichrist will declare himself to be God and establish himself in God's temple. (2 The 2) Pre-trib adherents believe the term, "God's temple" refers to the soon-to-be-rebuilt Jewish temple and they believe the Antichrist will eventually rule the world through a one-world religion from the rebuilt temple. (This idea was emphasized in the movie.) When the midway point of the Great Tribulation is reached, the Antichrist will show his evil side and force everyone to worship him.

The inhabitants of Earth will be forced to receive his mark or suffer the consequence of death. At the end of the seven years, Jesus will appear in clouds of glory with all of the raptured Christians accompanying Him.

They will be met by a great multitude of believers on Earth (the fruit of the work of the 144,000). Jesus will establish His kingdom here on Earth and the converted Jews will serve as priests over all the Earth. The devil will be put in prison for 1,000 years so he cannot tempt the nations.

Pre-trib proponents believe there will be 1,000 years of peace and righteousness. At the end of 1,000 years, the wicked will be destroyed and eternity will begin.

Commentary

I personally do not believe the pre-trib view is a valid schematic. I do not want to sound critical and I realize my assessment of the movie's message may not be too popular, but I have found numerous flaws in this presentation.

Ironically, the movie and the bestselling books upon which the movie is based may contribute to the undoing of the pre-trib schematic if end-time events do not unfold as the movie predicts. Such is the double-edged sword of interpreting prophecy.

If a widely accepted view eventually proves to be false, where do believers turn when their doctrines fail? Many prophetic schematics have gained notoriety only to be abandoned when the passage of time proved them wrong. A good example of how this process works is the story of Baptist evangelist, William Miller.

He preached that the Second Coming would occur in 1844. When it did not happen, the Millerite movement collapsed. When C. T. Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, claimed that Jesus would return to Earth in 1914, followers then claimed that Jesus returned to Earth in secret. I believe the Witnesses have now discarded this prophetic position.

The Theological Problems

Left Behind - (The Movie) is a story that depicts the end-time scenario as certain evangelicals understand it. Does the Bible confirm this view of end-time events? The answer depends on whom you ask. Do not misunderstand. The creators of this movie have every right to present their views before the world. They did a good job of staying within the boundaries of the pre-trib schematic.

I am not quibbling about the contents of the movie or the freedom people have to present their religious views to the world. I say, "More power to them!" However, I do challenge the Biblical basis for the movie that I find to be inherently wrong.

For example, in the movie, the viewer is informed that those "left behind" have a chance to repent of their sins and become believers in Christ. This implies that if you miss the rapture, there is another chance to be saved. I believe the doctrine of a second chance as presented in the movie to be non-Scriptural.

Consider the problem: A pre-trib rapture mandates an eternal judgment of every living person

on Earth *prior* to the rapture. This judgment would be necessary to determine who will be raptured and who will be left behind. Where is this pre-rapture judgment described in the Bible?

Although the apostle Paul and others describe a time that we will stand before the judgment bar of Christ to receive our reward (2 Cor 5:10), Paul writes nothing about being judged twice. If a person is sentenced to eternal death before the rapture, how can he be sentenced to eternal life later on?

Further, why should people living at the time of the alleged rapture be given a second chance to be saved when previous generations were not given this reprieve? Think of the billions of people who have died since Abel – none of them got a second chance.

Converted to What?

The essential premise of the pre-tribulation schematic is that millions of people will be converted to Christianity because the rapture proves the superiority of Christianity over every false religion of the world. By taking born-again Christians to Heaven *first*, the world suddenly awakes to the realization that God favors born-again Christians and disfavors the rest of humanity!

Pre-trib proponents believe there will be a wholesale conversion of 144,000 Jews to Christ after the rapture. These converted Jews will then carry the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world during the seven years, expecting many converts as a result.

How do Jews today receive this assertion? Not very well, I am told. It is highly unlikely that the rapture of millions of Christians will convert 144,000 Jews. In fact, if there was a sudden worldwide rapture of millions of born-again Christians, the Jews, Arabs, Moslems, Hindus and other religions of the world might all agree, "good riddance."

While "Get right or get left!" may work as a sound-bite, it is not judicially fair for people to be *forced* to accept Jesus as a Savior, based on being left behind if they refuse to accept Christ today. Heaven is no fire escape from hell.

Fear is a powerful motivation for uninformed people, but decisions made under duress or torture are neither valid nor result in a long-lasting decision. Wouldn't it be much better for people to grasp the gift of salvation through the atoning death of Jesus and let His love draw us to Him? Love should be the motive for marriage and love should be the motive for becoming a follower of Jesus.

True love prompts us to confess our sins and ask forgiveness. Foxhole conversions do occur, but few foxhole converts remain committed Christians for a lifetime.

The Antichrist

The purpose and role of Antichrist as depicted in the movie in my estimation limit his role in end-time events. The coming Antichrist is not a mere man, but is Lucifer, the devil garbed in the

flesh of man.

The Antichrist will attempt to mimic Jesus' return, by appearing in clouds of glory and attended by millions of angels. Masquerading as God for a period of time, he will deceive the world into thinking he is Almighty God. He will use miracles to deceive many people and will eventually gain control of the world by killing a third of mankind.

The pre-trib conclusions about the coming Antichrist are grossly understated.

Who is Israel?

My review of *Left Behind* comes to an end with a few words about Israel. Surprisingly, the movie does not present a number of issues concerning the Jews that are core issues to the pre-trib schematic. A large part of the pre-trib schematic is based on the idea of dispensationalism, which claims that God treats Jews differently than Christians.

A quick read of Romans, Ephesians and Galatians defeats the notion of dispensationalism. The pre-trib rapture is based on the idea that God needs to remove all born-again Christians from Earth so He can finish His original plans with a converted Israel.

However, we need to step back for just a moment and ask just who constitutes Israel. As far as God is concerned, Israel is made up of people who put their faith in Christ, just as did Abraham. (Rom 9:5,6; Gal 3:28,29)

In summary, I believe "the movie is worth seeing." It is more than entertainment. It is education. If the movie encourages you to get out your Bible and find some answers, the money and time spent viewing the movie could prove to be a great investment.