

## 2. Attention for the Rapture

### A Novel of the Last Days

The idea of the Rapture was brilliantly brought to life again by two authors, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, in their book *Left Behind, A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Tyndale Press, 1995). For the purpose of this book, LaHaye functioned as the “certified” theologian who is the founder of the PreTrib Research Center while Jenkins, a former editor of the *Moody Monthly*, was the actual writer who novelized LaHaye’s ideas. Together, this dynamic duo has seen much success and reaped great dividends from their series.

What is their idea of the Rapture? Well, it boils down to this: many people, that is, believers, are suddenly taken up to heaven to be with Christ. They simply disappear. You will understand that these “disappearances” cause a lot of suspicion and commotion.

The plot quickly thickens. Family and friends are at a loss to explain what has happened to the raptured. At first, there is suspicion that something criminal has happened. Perhaps these people have been killed and their bodies hidden. CSI teams are brought in to investigate. This is the stuff that makes for thrilling novels, for there is hardly a more potent mix than religion and science.

Since no bodies can be found, each missing person’s case is closed. There is no evidence that leads beyond a reasonable doubt to conclude that homicide has occurred.

Gradually, however, certain people figure it out. It must be a Rapture that has caused so many people to disappear simultaneously. Snippets of Rapture sermons from an old pastor are remembered and shared, and people are faced with the lasting after-effect of a miraculous rapture.

## Left Behind

The first novel in the series makes it clear that not all people are raptured. There are those who are left behind. Somehow, they must come to grips with this disconcerting fact and also seek to meet the conditions for their own eventual Rapture. They have a difficult time convincing family, relatives, and friends of the need to give their lives to Christ and still be saved.

There is another twist. From heaven, those who are raptured try to convince those left behind that they must repent and believe and also be taken up to heaven. Some of those left behind on earth do come to faith and attempt to make others do the same. Otherwise, those left behind will go under in the final meltdown of heaven and earth.

Many of the sequels to the first novel tell the stories of the non-raptured and attempts to save them. It is an exciting race to beat the clock of final judgment. The elaborate *Left Behind* series became very popular and brought great dividends to its authors. Nothing sells like religion, even if it is the great idea of a false religion. But we are not concerned here with finances or profits. We need to concentrate on the matter itself – the Rapture – and learn from this for our own lives.

The *Left Behind* series is a drawn-out docudrama that spans entire generations. Time and again, people are confronted with their sins, come to faith, and are raptured. Usually, they must travel a long and arduous road of stubborn denial and deeply-rooted sinful behavior, but, in the end, many are indeed raptured.

Many evangelical believers happily accept the premise behind these books. It fits with the theology with which they have grown up. In the aftermath of these books, celebrity preachers caused spin-off series. Talk-show hosts interviewed leading churchmen. All this caused quite a stir in churches and in the media. Even Larry King, CNN's venerable and ageless interviewer, dusted off his quorum of assorted clergy to inquire on live television what all this might mean.

Since then, the storm over an ongoing Rapture has died down somewhat, but the result is that many people are even more confused than before. Are we living in “the end of days”? What does the Bible *really* say about these matters?

## Millennium

Central to the concept of being raptured or left behind is the idea of a millennium. The millennium is mentioned especially in Revelation 20, and I have elaborated on the Biblical teaching found therein in my book *Celebrating Salvation* (Premier, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1997, pp. 265-293). I need not repeat here what I wrote there – interested readers can find out for themselves.

But in the scope of our current discussion about the Rapture, we do need to focus for a moment on the place that the millennium has in the thinking of men like Tim LaHaye. It is not the Rapture itself about which we might disagree for I, too, hold to the notion of a Rapture. Rather, it is the *place* of the Rapture that needs to be critically assessed in the light of Biblical revelation.

## Any Appreciation?

Before we delve into the schemes and sequences that LaHaye and Jenkins have made popular, and even come to reject many of these schemes on Biblical grounds, it should be understood that there are things in this system with which I am happy and for which I am grateful.

I particularly like the attention that is given to the “last things.” Our Reformed life has not always reckoned enough with solid eschatology, that is, the doctrine about the last things. Much of our life is focused on the present, and what comes later is sometimes of little concern or has no urgency. The trend of the day is that heaven can wait. LaHaye and Jenkins force us to refresh our thinking in this area.

In its own way, the *Left Behind* series directs us to the return of Christ and the establishing of a new heaven and earth. That is what our faith is ultimately to be focused on. If these writers have contributed to that focus, their effort is to be lauded in this respect.

We need to read their books critically. If, in the end, we reject the entire system they present, we do so with appreciation for the attention given to the last things that we all must one day face. Are we really ready for the Rapture?