



Right Behind

So, where would you rather be? “Left behind” in a frenzied quest to crack the code and read the signs so that you, too, can get it right at last and be found worthy to survive the coming tribulation? Or “right behind” Jesus when he says “Follow me”? Left behind in a sea of wrath and destruction, or right behind our Lord who promises to go and prepare a place for us?

“Left behind” is about fear, exclusion, wrath, and self-righteousness; “right behind” is about trust, inclusion, grace, and discipleship. Guess which one is the gospel.

Fine, it’s too easy to beat up on the *Left Behind* phenomenon, with its view of Revelation that, though invented only a century or so ago, is now somehow claimed to be the position of all “true” Christians. But occasionally there comes a time to say that it is never “more faithful” to be wrong. And *Left Behind*’s premillennialist, dispensationalist view of Scripture is simply wrong. It puts together texts never meant to be read in tandem, it mistakes deliberately figurative language for historical prophecy, it forsakes the transparent word of God that is open to all for the sake of a gnostic understanding reserved for the few, and, worst of all, it turns faith into a belief in certain propositions about the last days rather than a humble trust in God and his promises.

Still, our task, finally, is not to expose the inadequacies and heresies of *Left Behind*—though both the inadequacies and heresies are real and need exposing, so we do have a penultimate teaching responsibility here. Not knowing how to read is a serious inadequacy, and turning faith into a work is a dangerous heresy. People need to understand these things. But, finally, our task is to offer something better, to preach the gospel. The success of *Left Behind* is, to be sure, in large measure a tribute to the success of American entrepreneurial marketing, but it no doubt also points to a hunger for meaning in turbulent times. What will we say to the latter?

Whereas, in the Bible, “left behind” gets one poor disputed verse (1 Thess 4:17), the gospel of “right behind” permeates everything. Indeed, it comes as close as anything to defining the biblical God, from the exodus to the eschaton. In the exodus, “The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night” (Exod 13:21); in the eschaton, Jesus promises, “And if I

go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3). Right behind our Lord is clearly where we belong and where we want to be.

“Right behind” is the good news, the word of hope needed by those who flock after *Left Behind*. It is the gospel announced by Hans Walter Wolff in a sermon on Mic 2:13 (“The one who breaks out will go up before them; they will break through and pass the gate, going out by it. Their king will pass on before them, the LORD at their head”):

The breakout into freedom occurs only from following him. But it *does* occur, as people follow him! Let us take this promise home with us for those hours when we are depressed and we despair because of our weakness, our tendency to succumb to temptation: “Our leader has broken out before us; our king is going before us; he is leading the way for us.”¹

Bach, too, knew that none who believed and were baptized could be “left behind” by a loving Father. We will ascend as surely as did our Lord:

Faith creates the wings of the soul,
so that it may soar to heaven;
baptism is the seal of grace
that brings us the blessing of God;
and therefore a blessed Christian
is one who believes and is baptized.²

Now the critics will enter and denounce the quietism of “simply” believing and being baptized, urging the need for the zeal inspired by the kind of legalistic Christianity espoused in *Left Behind*. But, of course, faith in the gospel remains quietist only until one actually believes the gospel. Then—when we actually get it, when it dawns upon us (by the power of the Spirit) that God really does go before us, that Christ really has prepared the way, that our sins are forgiven and that it is not up to us, that all the gates of paradise are already opened for all who follow Jesus—then we will understand that to enter into discipleship is, as Bonhoeffer said, to “enter into Jesus’ death.”³ Then we will know at last what it means to love God with all our strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Then our hearts will soar along with our souls, and nothing and no one will be left behind.

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¹Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah the Prophet* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 60–61.

²Johann Sebastian Bach, “Wer da gläubet und getauft wird,” Cantata for Ascension Day, BWV 37 (trans. Rebekah Schulz and Fred Gaiser).

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 87.