

The Gospel According to  
Luke

**“You’ll Want to be Left Behind”**  
or  
**“Prophecy is for the Birds”**  
Chapter 17:20-37

Introduction

You’ve undoubtedly heard of the *Left Behind* series of books, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. They are Christian fiction that depict life in the biblical end times, during the Great Tribulation on earth. They are the best selling adult fiction of all time. The fifth and sixth books in the series both made the top ten on the New York Times bestseller list; the seventh book made its debut at number one.

The title, *Left Behind*, is a warning to be ready when Jesus returns to Rapture the Church. If you’re not ready, you’ll be **left behind** to endure the awful tribulation that is coming upon planet earth.

You definitely do not want to be left behind at the Rapture. **But there is a time when believers will want to be left behind.**

Jesus gave His disciples some insight into His Second Coming to earth. At one point He described people being **taken**, but other people being **left** behind. His disciples were confused; they asked Him, **Where, Lord?** They wanted to know **where** some people would be **taken**.

Jesus answered, **“Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.”**

*Huh?* What kind of an answer is that? A good one, as it turns out! The word translated, **eagles**, is *vultures*. He was talking about scavenger birds who feed on carcasses. Jesus was describing a scene of death and carnage.

You can read all about it in the last book of the Bible, The Revelation of Jesus Christ. At His Second Coming, Jesus returns during a great battle on earth, the Battle of Armageddon. All the armies of the world are gathered together; and, when they see the Lord returning, they attempt to fight against Him.

**Bad idea!** Rather than me telling you about it, let me read it to you:

Revelation 19:11 Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war.

Revelation 19:12 His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself.

Revelation 19:13 He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God.

Revelation 19:14 And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses.

Revelation 19:15 Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

Revelation 19:16 And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written:  
KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Revelation 19:17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the **birds** that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come and gather together for the supper of the great God,

Revelation 19:18 **that you may eat the flesh** of kings, **the flesh** of captains, **the flesh** of mighty men, **the flesh** of horses and of those who sit on them, and **the flesh** of all *people*, free and slave, both small and great."

Revelation 19:19 And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army.

Revelation 19:20 Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone.

Revelation 19:21 And the rest were killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse. **And all the birds were filled with their flesh.**

Notice several references to the scavenger birds? **It is the same future event Jesus was describing to His disciples in Luke 17.**

At His Second Coming, some people will be **taken**, while others are **left** behind. The unbelievers who are fighting against Jesus will be

**taken** away to judgment. Believers who survive the Great Tribulation will be **left** behind, on the earth – *and that will be good!* They will be **left** behind to enter into the kingdom of heaven on earth that Jesus will establish at His Second Coming.

Don't get confused:

1. Jesus promised to return and remove His Church in an event called the Rapture. The Rapture precedes the Great Tribulation. At the Rapture, you will not want to be **left** behind.
2. Jesus also promised to return to earth, to establish a kingdom on earth, in an event called the Second Coming. The Second Coming follows the Great Tribulation. At His Second Coming, if you are a believer who has survived the Great Tribulation, you will want to be **left** behind!

You don't want to be left behind – unless you are left behind, and then you'll want to be left behind! Got it? We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Can Miss Jesus When He's Right In Your Midst, and #2 You Will Miss Jesus Until He's Back In Your Midst.

#### #1 You Can Miss Jesus When He's Right In Your Midst (v20-21)

As we pick-up our story, the Pharisees asked Jesus a question: When will the **kingdom of God** come to earth? It seems to be a reasonable question. First John the Baptist, then Jesus, had been going around declaring that the kingdom of God was at hand. OK, so when would they see it?

In fact this is one of the saddest questions that the religious leaders ever asked the Lord. It indicated that they had totally misunderstood everything Jesus had said or done.

Before we go on... I began wondering which of my questions show a sad misunderstanding of the nature of God. After all God has done for me, in sending Jesus to take my place by dying on the Cross so I might be saved; still I ask Him **why** He allows certain things; or

demand to know **when** I can expect certain things; or **where** my life is heading; or **how** He is going to accomplish His will.

Getting back to our story: Why was their question so sadly inappropriate? **Because the kingdom of God was right in their midst, but they missed it!**

Luke 17:20 Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation;

Let’s talk about the word, **observation**. Jesus does not mean that the kingdom of God cannot be observed or seen; He does not mean it is secret, or spiritual; He does not mean there will be no signs to announce its coming. His use of the word **observation** means that they didn’t recognize the kingdom of God because they were *observing* it incorrectly. They were expecting the kingdom of God to come the way other kingdoms come – with political and military revolution. They were looking for a king who would rally the people to overthrow the Roman Empire. Jesus was letting them know that they were observing for this – looking for this - in vain.

God wasn’t doing things according to their expectations:

1. Jesus had been born, not in a great palace; but in a humble manger.
2. He lived a relatively obscure life for almost thirty years.
3. When He burst onto the scene, He was announced by an odd man – John the Baptist.
4. His personal choice for disciples were mostly ignorant fishermen and a few other questionable folks.

You see, the kingdom of God **was** in their midst – but they missed it. Their expectations led to the wrong observations.

This helps us understand a greatly misunderstood statement, in verse twenty-one:

Luke 17:21 nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.”

Jesus was talking to unbelieving Pharisees. He was certainly not teaching that they had God within them; or that everyone has a spark of the divine; or any other such nonsense.

The words **within you** can mean *in your midst* – **and that is what they do mean here!**

With Jesus on earth, the kingdom was at hand. He could have established it – as promised in the Old Testament. But they did not recognize Jesus as their king. In fact, they would refuse Him, and reject Him, as their king.

Now you can see, and even feel, why their question was so very sad. It put a spotlight on their hearts – revealing their ignorance of exactly who Jesus was. They missed Him, and thus missed-out on the kingdom.

It's not too different today. Unbelievers still have their observations. They have their own ideas and expectations of what God should be like. The Gospel is preached to them; Jesus is clearly revealed to them; but they miss Him, because He doesn't fit their agenda.

Unbelievers miss Jesus when He is right in their midst. It's beyond sad; it becomes tragic, because there is no other solution for their sin but to receive the Lord and be saved.

Jesus used the question of the Pharisees as an occasion to explain some things about the future to His disciples.

#2 You Will Miss Jesus  
Until He's Back In Your Midst  
(v22-37)

There is a lot about Bible prophecy in these remaining verses. The details are not as wonderful as the **desire** Jesus mentions right at the beginning. In verse twenty-two, He said,

**Luke 17:22** Then He said to the disciples, "The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see *it*."

Jesus would be refused and rejected by the religious leaders of Israel. As a result, He would ascend into heaven without establishing the kingdom of God on earth. He would be absent from the earth for a time. In His absence, believers would **desire to see one of the days**. In other words, *they would miss Jesus!*

Even though God is everywhere present; even though Jesus promised to be spiritually present in our gatherings; even though God the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the heart of every believer; you miss Jesus. You long to see Him face-to-face. It shows no lack of faith to say so.

What would it be like, life on earth without Jesus? The Lord skips over many centuries of human history and describes what it would be like on earth just before He would return the second time. All of these comments, in verses twenty-three through thirty-seven, are set in the Great Tribulation that will come upon planet earth for seven years prior to the Second Coming of Jesus. There is no talk or thought about the Rapture of the Church. The people Jesus was describing were believers (mostly Jewish believers) who survive until the end of the Great Tribulation to see His return.

**Luke 17:23** *And they will say to you, 'Look here!' or 'Look there!' Do not go after them or follow them.*

The final years on earth before the Lord returns will be a time of spiritual deception. You see signs to that effect even today. Cults and the occult are flourishing. Practices that would have been considered demonic even by unbelievers are now mainstream; e.g., mediums who claim to contact the dead are brought right into your livingroom.

**Luke 17:24** *For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day.*

This is a poetic summary of the passage from The Revelation that we quoted earlier. The Second Coming of Jesus will be visible to the entire planet as He descends from heaven to earth in His full glory.

Why the delay in establishing the kingdom of God on earth?

Luke 17:25 But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

Jesus was letting His disciples know that He would be refused and rejected by their **generation**. He would be arrested, illegally tried and convicted; and executed as a criminal. The kingdom would therefore be delayed.

When the kingdom did come, it would bring judgment upon unbelievers. Jesus used two Old Testament historical examples to describe the judgment that would precede His Second Coming.

Luke 17:26 And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man:

Luke 17:27 They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.

Luke 17:28 Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built;

Luke 17:29 but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed *them* all.

Luke 17:30 Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

The point here is not that people will be enjoying their normal lives when the Lord returns. When you read about the Great Tribulation, you see that life on earth is anything but normal.

The point Jesus was making was that people will not observe that judgment is coming – **no matter the warning signs**.

1. In the days of Noah, the warning sign was the building of the Ark. The people laughed and mocked – right up until the time the flood took them away to judgment and left Noah and his family behind.
2. At Sodom and Gommorah, the warning was brought by two angels in the midst of the people. The people ignored the warning – right up until fire and brimstone rained upon them as a judgment. Lot left the city, and was left behind on earth.

When Jesus is about to return, it will be obvious – **but ignored!** Californians can relate to ignoring warning signs. Often, when driving, signs are ignored.

Luke 17:31 “In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods *are* in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise the one who is in the field, let him not turn back.

Some disasters give you warning – like, for example, hurricanes. Some do not; they simply come upon you. The Second Coming of Jesus will come with warnings; but unbelievers will feel as though it has come without warning.

Luke 17:32 Remember Lot's wife.

Luke 17:33 Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.

As the angel was escorting Lot, his wife and their two daughters out of town, Lot's wife looked back. She was judged – turned into a pillar of salt. (It could mean that the fire and brimstone fell upon her).

She was seeking to **save** her old **life**, as a citizen of those wicked cities. As a result, she lost her life. Lot lost what he had; and his life was preserved.

Here comes the point:

Luke 17:34 I tell you, in that night there will be two *men* in one bed: the one will be taken and the other will be left.

Luke 17:35 Two *women* will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left.

Luke 17:36 Two *men* will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left.”

When Jesus returns, unbelievers will be **taken** by surprise, and be **taken** away to judgment. Believers will be looking for Him, and will be **left** behind.

They will want to be left behind – because Jesus will return to set up and establish the kingdom of God on earth. The great promise of the Old Testament, and the great hope of so many of the prophets, will finally be realized on planet earth.

The disciples were a little freaked-out:

Luke 17:37 And they answered and said to Him, “Where, Lord?”

They understood that people would be **taken**; they wanted to know **where** they would be **taken**.

So He said to them, “**Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.**”

They would be **taken** away to judgment, because they were spiritually unprepared for Jesus Christ to return as King.

### Applying the Word

If you are a **believer**... Do you miss the Lord? Even though you've never seen Him, you miss Him. Don't let the things of this earth crowd out your love for Him.

Jesus didn't explain it here; but later He would discuss His return for believers prior to His Second Coming, in the Rapture. You could see the Lord at any moment.

If you are an unbeliever... If the Rapture occurred right now, you'd be left behind. You don't want to be left behind to endure the horrors of the Great Tribulation. It might be somewhat romantic to think you would be left behind to join the Tribulation Force that fights against the antiChrist; but it's naïve at best.

Jesus is here, right now, in your midst. **Don't miss Him!**