

LEFT BEHIND

When I was a teenager our youth group took a trip to Six Flags over Georgia. That was back before the northern and southern branches of the church reunited. Our youth group had formed a relationship with the youth group of a church in Anniston, which at the time in the old southern church was in the same presbytery with our church. So, we went to Anniston for a few days. One of the things we did while we were there was go to Six Flags.

Because we were so close to Anniston- less than two hours drive- we stayed at Six Flags until the park closed at 10 pm. As I was leaving the park I was with a small group of people, and we passed a restroom. I needed to go so I went in the restroom, and when I came back out the group had gone. So, I went out of the parking lot to go to the van. When I got out into the parking lot, all of the cars were leaving because it was closing time.

If you've ever been to Six Flags, you know how large that parking lot is. It was nighttime, and from a distance I spotted a van that looked suspiciously like our church van leaving the park. So, being a teenager and not thinking clearly, I started to chase it. I guess I thought I could outrun it. I must have been a site running across the parking lot yelling "Stop! Stop!" Of course, I was probably a quarter of a mile away from it, so I had no chance to catch it. In fact, all I accomplished was to get turned around. When I finally gave up chasing the van, I realized I had no idea which direction to go or what to do.

I found a little convenience store in the parking lot. I told them what happened and the manager said, "Calm down, son. Maybe you were chasing the wrong van. Where was your van parked?" I told him I didn't exactly where we were parked, but it was close to where the group busses parked. So, he said, "Come on, we'll go get in my little truck and go over to where the busses park. We did: we got into his little truck and drove over to where the busses parked, and sure enough, our van was there. There was a happy ending to that story. We went back to Anniston. I endured the ridicule of the other people in the group for a little while, and the story had a happy ending. But for just a moment I had a real sinking feeling. I understood, maybe for the first time in my life, what it is like to feel that you are left behind.

Some years ago, there was a series of books written with the title Left Behind. There were several books in the series. If you haven't read them, they offer a view of the end times from a very evangelical perspective. These books were wildly popular in the day, and for a time, they started a lot of talk about the end times, which I think is what they were designed to do. There was a lot of talk about being left behind.

I read a few of those books myself. My reaction to them is that they make a good story, even though I question some of the theological matter that they presented. The truth is the end of times has been a popular subject at least over the last 50 years, and I might argue since the beginning of the church.

Some years ago, I was at First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Alabama and we studied the Disciple Bible Study series. It's a series that is put out by the United Methodist Church, but it runs the entire length of the bible. It has a series of videos, and there's some group work that has to be done. As we approached the Revelation lesson, I could feel the anticipation mounting. I could tell the group really wanted to understand this book. Perhaps, I wondered, so they could better prepare themselves for the end. I wonder if some of them were disappointed when the lesson presented the book as a picture of activities going on at the time the book was written. The study took the stance that Caesar was the antichrist and the Beast was the territorial governor- that we weren't really talking about the end of times at all, but a critique of ancient society.

I don't want to get into that too much, because there are people- very dedicated Christians- who continue to believe that Revelation is an account of the end times and others who believe it was a critique of that day. I don't want to get into that too much, because I think something else is driving interest in the apocalypse. I've often said that people are not rational creatures, we are instead emotional creatures with the capacity to reason. We are driven by our hopes, our fears, our needs, our desires, and we reason out why we should act the way that we do to justify the actions that we have taken. If the truth be told, I think a lot of the interest in Apocalyptic literature is because we are mortally afraid of being left behind. One thing all humans have to do is come to grips with their own mortality. We all have one thing in common. Every one of us is going to die one day. The fact is none of us can escape it. But the good news in Jesus Christ is that we can look forward to an eternity of life beyond life- life in Christ.

The fact is it's way too easy to look at a passage like the one from Matthew that I just read and let your fear drive you. "Oh my gosh. When is it going to happen? What am I going to do when it happens?" In fact, that's one of my biggest objections to the way apocalyptic passages have often been treated in the evangelical community. It's easy to present a passage such as this to someone in a way that's designed to scare the proverbial hell out of them. We can use a passage like this to get people to give their lives to Christ- or else. We can tell them, "If you'll just accept Jesus, you can avoid all this."

But I don't think that's what Jesus is after here. In fact, I think it's easy to confuse people if you present them with contradictory images of who God is. How can the same God be Angry, judgmental and vindictive on the one hand, and be merciful and gracious on the other? That's an awfully confusing picture to present to someone who may not know who God is. It just adds up to a zero if you present the gospel story that way. They cancel each other out.

But as I read this passage, I've come believe that's not what Jesus was after all. I think Jesus tells this story as a way to prove a point. The point is this: no matter what trials we must face in life we are never beyond the love and saving grace of Jesus Christ. Ever. We can rest secure in the promises given us by God no matter what. We can rest assured that we have a life in Christ Jesus.

I understand the fear of the end of times. I've understood since it was a boy. I can remember asking my dad to see a movie called, The Late, Great Planet Earth. Some of you may have heard of it. You may have seen it. I was a small boy when it came out. I was no more than seven or eight years old. I can remember asking my dad what he thought about it. Dad said, "Son, You can look at a movie like that and decide that it's all true, but there's nothing you can do about it. So, you can sit here and shake, or you can decide, I'm going to trust God that things are going to work out okay, and I'm going to go on with my life. " That was some of the best advice I have ever had.

I understand the fear of the end times. The descriptions here in front of us are horrible, but are they any more horrible than the reality that we face every day? It seems to me that there has been a mass shooting about every week for the past several years. We're just coming out of a pandemic in which we have seen more than one million people die in this country alone. We're seeing a rise in devastating storms and wildfires around the world. Island countries in the Pacific and Indian Oceans are disappearing due to rising sea levels. Famine is once again becoming a problem in some parts of the world, particularly in northern Kenya where it borders the desert. Our lives are difficult enough as it is. Surely fire and brimstone from the sky or plagues of locusts and frogs could be no worse.

What would be worse than that? Having no hope. A loss of hope would be the worst thing I could imagine. If we no longer had reason to hope. Yet we have hope. We need have no fear. We do have a reason to hope. We need have no fear because we belong to Jesus Christ who saves us. We need have no fear because we have been saved by the grace of Christ for no other reason than that he loves us. We can't be left behind, because the bus has already left the station and we are on it.