

Left behind—It's a good thing: Luke's apocalypse

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

"I tell you, that on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left." Luke 17:34-35, NRSV.

The "Left Behind" fiction series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins borrows its title from passages like those in Luke 17 in which Jesus describes events of the end times. Verses 34 and 35 are widely interpreted to mean that those taken are the lucky ones. Moreover, Left Behind fans and others influenced by dispensationalist theology tend to see the ones taken as "raptured" heavenward to be with the Lord.

Not so, says New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III.

"A first-century audience would have understood [Luke 17:35] to mean one will be taken away for judgment, while the other will escape judgment by remaining where she is," he wrote recently in *Bible Review*. "This is clear from the context, which is about the coming judgment—a judgment that, in Jewish literature, everyone is expected to face."

Witherington says it was very common in both Jewish and Greco-Roman literature of that era to see the phrase "taken away for judgment." The Asbury Seminary professor said he interprets the term "taken" in this context "of the long history of Israel's being taken away into exile, and individuals being taken away for trial and judgment, including Jesus," he said.

"Those left behind are spared judgment or exile or the like," he said. "And, of course, nothing [is said] here about avoiding tribulation." In other words, even the ones remaining were likely to face eventual chaos and tribulation in end-time scenarios. He said he suspects that "Left Behind" theology attempts to harmonize this Jesus saying with Paul's colorful imagery of believers being caught up, or raptured, into the clouds in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, as if the two scenarios

envisioned the same thing.

Mainstream New Testament scholars are divided on who is the lucky person—the one taken or the one left—especially when attempting to interpret a following verse, Luke 17:37. The disciples ask Jesus, “Where, Lord?” He answers, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.” The footnote in the HarperCollins Study Bible says: “This saying seems to mean that to find those left, one must look for the circling vultures.” Yet it could also be argued that the the disciples are asking where those taken will find themselves. The location of those left is known—still in bed or at the grinding mill.

Robert C. Tannehill of Methodist Theological School in Ohio wrote in a 1996 commentary that “being ‘taken’ would indicate deliverance. This, however, is not certain. Futhermore, there is nothing here about escaping a period of tribulation that is coming on the rest of the world, as in the current doctrine of the rapture.”

In another book on Luke published the same year, British scholar Christopher M. Tuckett indicated that those “taken” face sudden judgment. Of the parables in Luke 12 on the thief at night and the waiting servants, he said that “both warn of an event which may come at any moment and catch out those who are unprepared with disastrous consequences.” The same is to be found in the apocalyptic material in Luke 17:23-37, he said.