



## WHAT'S UP WITH THE END TIMES?

If films are any indication, today's culture is fascinated with the idea of apocalyptic disaster. Nearly every summer Hollywood churns out a would-be blockbuster or two that portray cataclysmic destruction and speculate on the fate of the survivors. The plot is often predictable: life is going on as usual when something ominous happens. Then disaster strikes; millions of dollars of computer graphics and special effects appear on screen, depicting death, destruction, and doom. Attention next shifts to the survivors as they struggle to exist and overcome the threat. Finally, human ingenuity or luck eliminates the threat, and humankind turns to the task of rebuilding. Recently, speculation has focused on the Mayan calendar and its supposed prediction of worldwide mayhem in 2012. Predictably, in 2009 Hollywood released the film *2012* to capitalize on this sudden interest in calendars.

The formula for apocalyptic movies is so fixed (and successful) that about the only thing that changes is the threat. Is it aliens from outer space (as in *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds*)? Or is it the effects of climate change (*Waterworld*, *The Day After Tomorrow*)?

Is it a biological plague (*I Am Legend*)? Is it nuclear holocaust (the *Terminator* movies)? Occasionally the disaster is narrowly avoided (as in *Armageddon*, in which fast action averts earth's destruction), but the point is always the same: We face a danger that threatens all human life—how will we respond?

Interest in apocalyptic matters is not limited to film. A recent twist on this theme asks the question, "What would the world be like if humans did not survive apocalyptic disaster?" This is the premise of the current television series *Life after People*. It explores how the natural world would reclaim cities and other human places once we are gone. Although this series doesn't focus on the sorts of catastrophes that might wipe out humanity, it still testifies to the interest people have in widespread destruction and possible annihilation.

The level of interest is confirmed by public opinion polls. In a poll conducted by Harris Interactive in 2002, 59 percent of Americans polled believed that "the events described in the Book of Revelation will occur at some point in the future," and 35 percent said that they "are paying more attention to how news events might relate to the end of the world."<sup>1</sup> Interest in the end, then, is widespread, even in the non-Christian population.

Clearly if we are looking for evidence of intense interest in the end times, we need look no further than the *Left Behind* series. Previous generations of Christians had their share of end-times media, including the 1970s film *A Thief in the Night* and Hal Lindsey's books. However, these media are only a trickle compared to the tsunami of the *Left Behind* books, films, and video

games. The books have sold tens of millions of copies and been translated into numerous languages. These publications have transcended the boundaries of the Christian world and become a cultural phenomenon.

To be fair, not all Christians are fans of the *Left Behind* view of life. The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod has offered this critique:

In *Left Behind* trusting God for the future is often overshadowed and outweighed by a curiosity to know the details of that future. . . . [This series] causes more confusion when it promotes the idea that there is not just one return of Christ (the rapture), nor two (Christ's appearing to usher in his 1000-year rule), but three comings of Christ. The last advent, it teaches, will be at the end of the millennial reign or the Great White Throne Judgment of Rev 20:11–15.<sup>2</sup>

According to the organization Methodist Evangelicals Together,

The idea that there will be two future comings of Jesus—one secret and one public—runs contrary to the plain teaching of Jesus and Paul. Passages such as 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 and Matthew 24:36-44 show clearly that Jesus' coming to gather his people into his presence and his coming to judge the world belong to a single event.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately for the Lutherans and Evangelical Methodists, no one is listening to them. This is partly because, like the fascination with apocalyptic films, many people are deeply interested in colorful and speculative end-times subjects. Cautious Scripture-based teaching about the return of Jesus has a less sensational

feel than the imaginative storytelling of apocalyptic movies and the *Left Behind* books. We've been trained by Hollywood and other media sources to desire vivid storylines and emotionally laden images. In comparison, traditional views of the end times seem unstimulating and flat.

So how should Christians think about apocalyptic matters? How should we interpret the Bible's texts that relate to the future? How can we navigate among the many opinions found in the Christian community? What is truly important in the Bible's teaching about the future?

To answer these questions, we must first lay some significant historical groundwork.