Lesson 1
Early Edition (How Biblical Prophecy Works)

1. Why are so many people fascinated with the future?

2. What are some methods people use to try to see into the future? In your opinion what makes books like *Left Behind* so popular with readers?

3. If you have read the *Left Behind* books, which one is your favorite, and why?
4. What in the books has made the biggest impression on you? Is your life different as a result? In what way?

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**Unfolding the Story**

*(Left Behind, pp. 121–23)*

The first book of the Left Behind series begins with the sudden disappearance (i.e., the Rapture) of all Christians everywhere. Those not caught up to meet Christ in the air (i.e., unbelievers) are left on the earth to try to make heads or tails of this cataclysmic event.

One of the main characters in the novels, an airline pilot named Rayford Steele, is not a believer in Jesus Christ. He has been left behind. Understandably, he is mourning the disappearance of his wife and son and more than a little concerned about the fate of his daughter and himself. Rayford's wife had been a devout Christian who had tried repeatedly to talk to her stubborn husband about the Bible and the need for faith in Christ. He hadn't listened.

**RAYFORD STEELE LAY ON HIS BACK,** staring at the ceiling. Sleep had come hard and intermittently, and he hated the logy feeling. He didn't want to watch the news. He didn't want to read the paper, even knowing a new one had flopped up onto the porch before dawn. All he wanted was for Chloe to get home so they could grieve together. There was nothing, he decided, more lonely than grief.

He and his daughter would have work to do, too. He wanted to investigate, to learn, to know, to act. He started by searching for a Bible, not the family Bible that had collected dust on his shelf for years, but Irene's. Hers would have notes in that, maybe something that would point him in the right direction.

It wasn't hard to find. It was usually within arm's reach of where she slept. He found it on the floor, next to the bed. Would there be some guide? An index? Something that referred to the Rapture or the judgment or something? If not, maybe he'd start at the end. If genesis meant “beginning,” maybe revelation had something to do with the end, even though it didn't mean that. The only Bible verse Rayford could quote by heart was Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and
the earth.” He hoped there’d be some corresponding verse at the end of the Bible that said something like, “In the end God took all his people to heaven and gave everybody else one more chance.”

But no such luck. The very last verse in the Bible meant nothing to him. It said, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen.” And it sounded like the religious mumbo jumbo he had heard in church. He backed up a verse and read, “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming quickly.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

Now he was getting somewhere. Who was this who testified of these things, and what were these things? The quoted words were in red. What did that mean? He looked through the Bible and then noticed on the spine, “Words of Christ in Red.” So Jesus said he was coming quickly. Had he come? And if the Bible was as old as it seemed, what did “quickly” mean? It must have meant soon, unless it was from the perspective of someone with a long view of history. Maybe Jesus meant that when he came, he would do it quickly. Was that what this was all about? Rayford glanced at the last chapter as a whole. Three other verses had red letters, and two of those repeated the business about coming quickly.

Rayford could make no sense of the text of the chapter. It seemed old and formal. But near the end of the chapter was a verse that ended with words that had a strange impact on him. Without a hint of their meaning, he read, “Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.”

Jesus wouldn’t have been the one who was thirsty. He would not have been the one who wished to take the water of life. That, Rayford assumed, referred to the reader. It struck him that he was thirsty, soul thirsty. But what was the water of life? He had already paid a terrible cost for missing it. Whatever it was, it had been in this book for hundreds of years.

Rayford idly leafed through the Bible to other passages, none of which made sense to him. They discouraged him because they didn’t seem to flow together, to refer to each other, to have a direction. Language and concepts foreign to him were not helping.

5. Why do you think Rayford opted for his wife’s Bible and not the big family Bible on the living room shelf?
6. Why do you think he went looking for help and answers in the book of Revelation?

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Back to Reality

Rayford wasn’t alone in his confusion, in his inability to understand the Bible. Most people, including a high percentage of Christians, don’t have a clue how to make sense of the Bible, especially the parts of the Bible that concern future things.

7. What would you say are the primary reasons the average person doesn’t know more about the Bible?

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8. What keeps people (especially those who claim to be followers of Christ) from reading and studying the Bible?

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9. On a scale of 1–10 (with 1 meaning “total cluelessness” and 10 meaning “absolute comprehension”), how would you rate your own understanding of what the Bible says about the end times?

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In his classic work *Living by the Book*, Dr. Howard Hendricks lists a number of reasons people give for not reading the Bible:

- The Bible doesn’t seem relevant to my life.
- The Bible seems confusing and hard to understand. I don’t know how to make sense of it.
- I used to read the Bible, and it made me feel good. But after a while, it didn’t seem to have the same impact, so finally I gave it up.
- I feel guilty when I read the Bible.
- The Bible is hopelessly out-of-date. It may have some interesting stories, but it has little significance for life today.
- I rely on my pastor or minister to explain the Bible to me. If I need to know something, he will tell me about it.
- I have doubts about the Bible’s reliability.
- I don’t have time. I’m just too busy.
- The Bible seems boring to me.
- I don’t own a Bible.
- The Bible is full of myths and half-truths. Why study something that lacks credibility?
- I don’t read, period! It’s not just the Bible; I don’t read anything.

Can you identify with any of these sentiments? Make a check by any that sound familiar. If you’re wrestling with one or more of these issues, we encourage you to share your struggle with your study leader.

10. What sources have been most influential in helping you understand prophecy to the degree that you do?
Understanding the Word

Whatever reasons people give for not reading and studying the Bible, the fact remains that a huge blessing awaits those who do dig into God’s Word. You are to be commended for embarking on this study. If you will make the effort to know and understand God’s truth and if you will persevere in these lessons, you will find great blessing.

Consider the example of Ezra, a priest during Israel’s time in exile. Notice his practice with regard to God’s Word:

Ezra had determined to study and obey the law of the LORD and to teach those laws and regulations to the people of Israel. (Ezra 7:10)

Ponder the response of the God-fearing Jews of Berea when the apostle Paul came and preached in their synagogue:

Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11 NASB)

11. How did these different people from history approach God’s Word? Do you see any common themes in these passages? What qualities in Ezra and the Bereans should we imitate?

And then we have Paul’s rousing counsel to Timothy, a leader in the early church:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15 NASB)

12. What did Paul mean when, reminding Timothy of the need to handle God’s Word with accuracy, he urged him to be a “diligent . . . workman”?
Second Timothy 3:16–17 says:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. It is God’s way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do.

13. What does this passage tell us about the importance of studying the Bible? Based on the Bible’s purposes, in what ways do we benefit by studying what God’s Word has to say about the end times?

The Greek word Paul used in 2 Timothy 3:17 that is translated “fully equipped” was used in extrabiblical works to describe a wagon outfitted for a long journey, or a rescue boat loaded with all necessary equipment. What a great picture! Speaking through Paul, God is telling us that if we make the effort to know and understand his Word (including all that the Bible teaches about the end times), we will be equipped and ready for whatever we encounter along the journey of life.

Finding the Connection

At the beginning of *Left Behind*, Rayford Steele is a worldly man. Like most people, he is busy and distracted. He has no real interest in the Bible. He does not share his wife’s hunger to know God’s truth, and so he is oblivious to what the Word of God says about most everything, including the end times. The Bible, to Rayford, is nothing more than a quaint religious relic. Because he sees the Scriptures as irrelevant to modern life, he chooses to remain ignorant as to their content.
By contrast, Ezra, the Bereans, and Timothy made God’s Word a priority. They followed in the footsteps of the psalmist who cried: “Truly, I love your commands more than gold, even the finest gold” (Psalm 119:127). They were eager to know what God had said. They diligently (and daily!) studied his Word. And—here’s the crucial point—much of what they studied was prophetic material: that is, God’s revelation about things to come. Bible teacher and scholar Charles Ryrie has written:

*It is said that one-fourth of the Bible was prophecy when it was written (of course many of those prophecies have already been fulfilled) and that one out of every five verses in Paul’s writings concerns prophecy...*

*Furthermore, the Lord gave a promise to the disciples and to us concerning the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit in this dispensation. He promised that the Spirit would “announce to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13 Williams). “Things that are to come” seems to be a specific area of truth within the broader promise that the Spirit “will guide you into all truth.” In other words, special attention to prophecy is promised. Some understand those coming things not to refer to end-time events but to the revelation concerning the Christian church period (which was future when Christ spoke). Even if that interpretation is correct, “things that are to come” cannot exclude the events at the end of the church period, so... the Lord, then, expects us to understand prophecy.*

14. Before beginning this study, how much of the Bible would you have said has to do with the future? Now that you have a better idea of how much of Scripture contains prophetic material, how does that affect your interest in the study of biblical prophecy?

15. Why do you think God went to the trouble of giving the world a sneak peek at all that is to come?
16. Many people have argued that we really can’t know for certain what the future holds—that the Bible is unclear, and that wise and godly scholars interpret all these “end-times” passages differently. How do you respond to this common viewpoint?

17. Why do some of these same Christians have very strong opinions and convictions about other areas of theology—for instance, the doctrine of salvation or the doctrine of Christ? What is it about this whole subject of “last things” that makes so many believers hesitant to study and reluctant to arrive at firm convictions?

Making the Change

(Left Behind, pp. 209–10, 214)

Like so many people, Rayford Steele never gives God much thought until his whole world quite literally collapses. He waits until he is in serious trouble to take a hard look at the prophetic truths of Scripture.

In the novel he is given a videotape recorded by a Bible-believing pastor prior to the Rapture. (The pastor had “left behind” this tape, so that people “left behind” could understand the supernatural, prophetic events unfolding around them.) We enter the scene as the videotape begins, with the absent pastor speaking:

“**That you are watching** indicates you have been left behind. You are no doubt stunned, shocked, afraid, and remorseful. I would like you to consider what I have to say here as instructions for life following Christ’s rapture of his church. That is what has happened. Anyone you know or knew of who had placed his or her trust in Christ alone for salvation has been taken to heaven by Christ.
“Let me show you from the Bible exactly what has happened. You won't need this proof by now, because you will have experienced the most shocking event of history. But as this tape was made beforehand and I am confident that I will be gone, ask yourself, how did he know? Here's how, from 1 Corinthians 15:51–57.”

The screen began to roll with the passage of Scripture. Rayford hit the pause button and ran to get Irene's Bible. It took him a while to find 1 Corinthians, and though it was slightly different in her translation, the meaning was the same.

The pastor said, “Let me read to you what the great missionary evangelist, the apostle Paul, wrote to the Christians at the church in the city of Corinth:

“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’ The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Rayford was confused. He could follow some of that, but the rest was like gibberish to him. He let the tape roll. Pastor Billings continued, “Let me paraphrase some of that so you'll understand it clearly. When Paul says we shall not all sleep, he means that we shall not all die. And he's saying that this corruptible being must put on an incorruptible body which is to last for all eternity. When these things have happened, when the Christians who have already died and those that are still living receive their immortal bodies, the Rapture of the church will have taken place. . . .

“Bible prophecy is history written in advance. I urge you to find books on this subject or find people who may have been experts in this area but who for some reason did not receive Christ before and were left behind. Study so you'll know what is coming and how you can be prepared.”

18. What are the advantages of knowing the prophecies of the Bible?
19. Is it enough just to know what the Bible predicts? What else must we do?

20. If the Rapture happened today, how certain are you that you are ready to meet Christ in the air? Why?

Pursuing the Truth

Philippians 2:14 says, “In everything you do, stay away from complaining and arguing.” Acts 19:8 reports, “Then Paul went to the synagogue and preached boldly for the next three months, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God.”

One passage forbids arguing, and yet the other says that the apostle Paul did little else but argue for three months straight. Is this a contradiction? Was Paul in sin? No. The word used by Paul in Philippians has a negative connotation. Taking the context into account, the passage is frowning on petty bickering and prideful disputes in which the goal is personal glory. The kind of “arguing” spoken of in Acts 19 is “reasoning and persuading.” Paul’s goal there was to make his case, to engage in thoughtful discussion and constructive dialogue.

When we begin any new Bible study, especially one in which Christians have various opinions, we need to ask God for a spirit of humility. We need to be open and teachable. We need to be willing to listen. It is possible to disagree without being disagreeable, to dialogue about ideas without destroying other people. When discussing these matters with those who do not yet know Christ, we need to defend the faith without becoming defensive, testy, or prickly.
21. What excites you as you think about embarking on this study? What intimidates you?

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22. Someone has said that, among other things, biblical prophecy demonstrates:
   a. God’s love and concern (that his creatures understand and prepare for what is to come);
   b. God’s faithfulness (that what he says, he will do); and
   c. God’s sovereignty (that the world—despite appearances—is not careening wildly out of control but moving toward its appointed end; God really does have the whole world—and all of human history—in his good, big hands).

Does thinking about these traits of God make you less anxious about world events and the unknown future? In what way?

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“It is evident that God intended to draw aside the veil of the future and to give some indication of what His plans and purposes were for the human race and for the universe as a whole. . . .

“In the nature of Christian faith a solid hope for the future is essential. Christianity without a future would not be basic Christianity. In contrast, however, to the eschatology of heathen religions which often paints the future in a forbidding way, Christianity’s hope is bright and clear and offers a Christian the basic fact that for a Christian the life to come is better than our present life. . . . In the Christian faith the future is painted as one of bliss and happiness in the presence of the Lord without the ills that are common to this life.”

John Walvoord
23. In what ways could this topic or this study be used by God in your life to prompt your friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, and classmates to consider the claims of Christ and the Bible?


24. What are your biggest questions about the end times? Write them in the space provided. Then over the course of this study, check once in a while to discover how many have been answered.


25. Consider signing the following commitment (particularly if you are beginning this study with a group).

Because I want to know what God has said about the future, I agree to the following:

☐ To diligently read, ponder, and study all Scripture passages in these lessons.
☐ To thoughtfully answer all questions.
☐ To earnestly ask God's Spirit to lead me into truth.
☐ To humbly open my heart and mind to what God is saying.
☐ To faithfully pray for others in this study.
☐ To boldly share what I am learning with others.

Signed on this date ________________________________________
by ________________________________________________________
Lesson in Review . . .

- Major blessings await those who study and apply God’s Word.
- The Bible equips us for whatever life throws our way.
- A large percentage of the Bible was prophetic (i.e., future) at the time it was written.
- By following certain principles, we can grasp what the Bible says about the future.