

# The End-Times: Can we be optimistic or should we worry?

## Here be dragons!

There are some Biblical subjects that frequently cause controversy between Christians of differing views. The study of the 'end times' is one such area. The book of Revelation, with its lurid and sometimes confusing imagery of dragons, beasts and celestial upheavals, has been a ripe source of speculation (and questionable hermeneutics) for many, and it can be tempting to steer well clear. Many people's interpretations seem very pessimistic about the future – but is this justified?

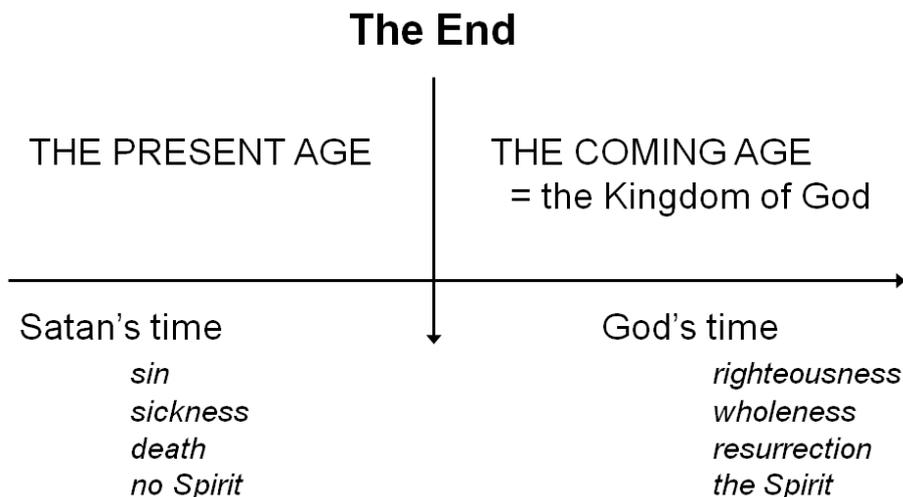


*"A right understanding of God's plan for the end of the age does not instil fear, but rather inspires faith." – Timothy Larsen, McManis Professor of Christian Thought, Wheaton College, USA*

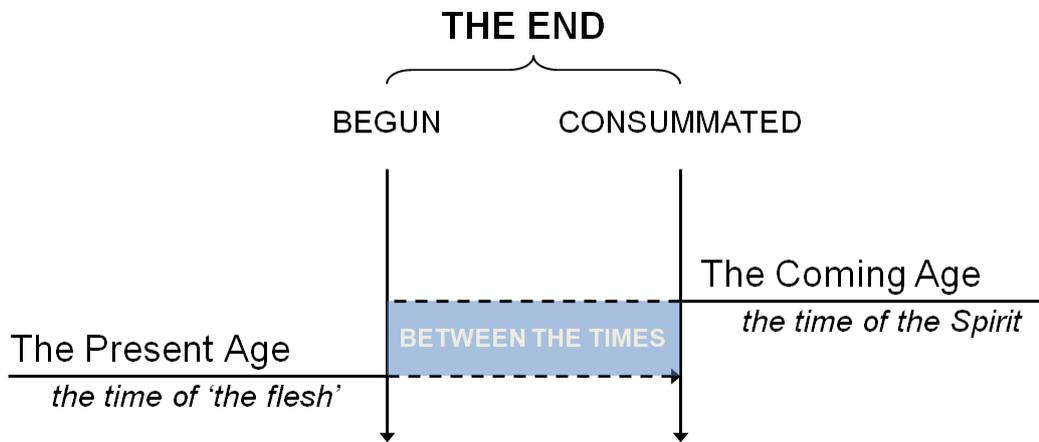
## What do we mean by 'end times'?

We are talking here about 'eschatology', the study of the last things, especially the end of the age and the return of Christ. The early Christians believed they were already living in the last days (see Heb 1:2) and in a sense the whole period between Christ's first and second coming are the 'last days' when God's redemptive plans are reaching fulfilment.

Before Christ came, the Old Testament promised that a new age was coming, when God would decisively intervene, the Messiah would arrive and God's kingdom would transform the world. The expected timeline was something like this:



The coming of Jesus added a new twist to this picture, in that the end did not come all at once. The kingdom broke in when Jesus came but did not immediately fill the world. The church was to be the instrument for a *gradual invasion* of God's kingdom. The new age had begun but was to coexist for a time with the old age. The new understanding was like this:



The 'time of the end' therefore spans this whole 'between the times' era, starting at Jesus' first coming and concluding with his second. In the mean time, we get to 'taste the powers of the coming age' (Heb 6:5)!

## What do Christians generally agree on?

### A physical return

Although Jesus, in one sense, returned in the person of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and could also be considered to return personally for believers at the point of death, most Christians agree that there will be a personal and physical return of Christ to the earth that will usher in the kingdom in a new fullness. The angels seen at his ascension (Acts 1:11) said, '*This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.*'

### Resurrection, judgement and destruction of evil

In one sense, evil has already been judged, condemned and overcome at the cross, but the return of Christ will signal the final weeding out of evil from creation, the destruction of the devil and all that causes sin. Both believers and unbelievers who have died will be raised from the dead. A final judgement will set things right and bring justice to the world. Believers need not fear because they have already been declared righteous! (See TLS on Justification and Righteousness.) Persistent unbelievers will reap the consequences of their continued rejection of Christ (but remember the possible avenues of hope outlined in the TLS on Hell – which are not accepted by all Christians!)

## Glory and the eternal state

Christ's people will receive new, glorious, immortal bodies and fully enter the age to come, the eternal state where there will be no death, pain or



sin, and where God's kingdom rule will extend fully through all creation. No wonder Paul told the Thessalonians to encourage one another about these things (1 Thess 4:18)!

## Where do Christians disagree?

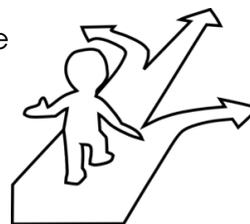
There are many areas of detail, such as the exact order of events around the return of Christ, the place of the nation of Israel in God's plans, the nature of the 'millennium', the identity of characters such as the 'antichrist', the 'beast' and the 'man of lawlessness', on which Christians have widely differing views. Does this matter? Are these all points of fine detail that don't affect our everyday lives? Or is there more at stake?

## Common distinctions – the millennium

The thousand years mentioned in Rev 20:1-10 is a common way of identifying the general gist of someone's eschatology (surprisingly, given it only occurs once in the Bible). The timing of Christ's return relative to the supposed 1000 year reign of Christ is a significant point of difference.

Some believe Christ returns *before* the 1000 years and sets up an earthly kingdom, but which does not completely eliminate evil. Believers are resurrected before the millennium but unbelievers are not raised until afterwards. This is **pre-millennialism**. Others believe there will be a 1000 year (or indeterminately long) period of kingdom growth and gospel success where evil is mostly suppressed, *after* which Christ returns to usher in resurrection, judgement and final state. This is **post-millennialism**. Still others believe the millennium refers to the whole period between Christ's two comings and to the present reign of Christians, either in heaven or in life generally, under the influence of God's kingdom (**α-millennialism**).

Whilst these views on the surface only relate to the future order of events, they can actually have a significant impact on the outlook and motivations of the people who hold them.



## Discussion time...

You have probably been exposed, over time, to a range of views and teachings about the end-times. What effect has this had on you? Were you encouraged or disturbed? Excited or unsettled?

How was the future progression over time of the world and the church presented? What effect could this have on our expectations, our evangelism and our confidence in the gospel?

## Part 2: An eschatology of hope

### More on the millennium

There are respected and godly proponents of all three broad views of the 1000 years. However, each view tends to carry with it a certain flavour. Premillennialism (especially the more extreme version of it, *dispensationalism* – of which more later) tends to assume that the world will get progressively worse until the end and is therefore a more pessimistic outlook in terms of what the church can become and achieve. Postmillennialism believes in great success of the gospel in Christianising the world and is therefore inherently optimistic. Amillennialism believes in ongoing tension between good and evil right until the end, and can therefore sometimes fall into dualism, as though God's and satan's kingdoms were equally matched.

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My view (firmly held, but respectful of those who think differently) is mostly aligned with the amillennial position that the 1000 years is a figurative way of describing the present overlap of the two ages, but with a flavour of postmillennial optimism about God's kingdom increase this side of Christ's return. This view, I believe, agrees best with the principles of hermeneutics we have explored throughout the TLS series. However, although this view is increasing in popularity, it is still not the dominant view in large sections of the worldwide church.

### The dominance of dispensationalism

Dispensationalism is a branch of premillennial thinking that originated in the 1800's with teachers like Darby and Scofield. It divides the history of the world into distinct 'dispensations' during which God deals with humanity on different terms. It interprets the Bible very literally and has a complex interlocking system of beliefs about the end times. It can involve belief in 7 dispensations, 8 covenants, up to 4 resurrections, between 4 and 7 judgments, 2 'Raptures' and 2 separate peoples of God!

Dispensationalism has evolved over time (as better hermeneutics forced its teachers to rethink beliefs that had become untenable) but still holds

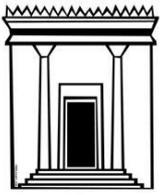


sway in many denominations and church streams as well as popular culture<sup>1</sup>. Many believers are so accustomed to this system that they are not even aware that another way of thinking exists. However, it has several big pitfalls – practical as well as theological.

### Two peoples or one?

Dispensationalism believes God has a special purpose for the Jewish nation which differs from that of the Church. It says the kingdom of God

<sup>1</sup> E.g. the very popular 'Left Behind' series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.



has not yet arrived, but at the return of Jesus the Church is removed from the earth and (after 7 years of wrath) Jesus sets up an earthly kingdom in which he reigns as king of the Jews from a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, complete with reinstated animal sacrifices and rituals. The kingdom of God is therefore a Jewish kingdom only.

This, in my view, totally contradicts the teaching in Ephesians 2 and 3 about God making one united people from Jew and Gentile, and also in Hebrews about the abolition of the physical temple sacrifices. Why go backwards to obsolete forms? Moreover, the practical result of this thinking is that, since the Church has no role in bringing the kingdom to earth, the best we can hope for is divine rescue from an increasingly dark world to let the Jews do the job later! This promotes passivity and defeatism. In contrast, the early disciples believed in the victory of the cross over evil and the power of the gospel to transform the world!

### Church whisked away?

Most dispensationalists believe in a secret 'rapture', the sudden disappearance of believers from the earth, leaving everyone else in chaos and suffering for seven years. It is based on 1 Thess 4:16-17 and is thought to be followed by a second return of Christ later on, accompanied by his people (supposedly referred to in 1 Thess 5). However, the words used by Paul across the two chapters, the structure and message of the letter, and the theology of the rest of the New Testament run counter to this argument. The words for 'coming' and 'meet' refer to the visit of a ruler to a city when its inhabitants would travel out and meet the ruler and accompany him on the last stage of his journey to the city. God is not going to evacuate his people to heaven before pouring wrath on the world – rather his people are to reclaim the world and see it restored, with the final push being the return of Christ. The church will indeed be 'caught up' to meet Christ, but then we will immediately return with him to a transformed earth, rather than him returning to heaven with us in tow. We should not have an escapist mind-set but a victorious one!

### Great tribulation – reason to fear?

Dispensational theology makes much of a supposed future period of 'tribulation' (distress), which it equates with God's wrath poured out on a rebellious world, the church having been rescued in the Rapture beforehand. Many Jews and some Gentiles will come to faith in this period, and continue to suffer with everyone else. Much evangelism therefore concentrates on warning people to escape this terrible tribulation before it is too late. 'Don't get left behind!', as the Larry Norman song goes. There is great fear attached to



this. However, the return of Christ is meant to encourage Christians not produce dread. In fact, to equate tribulation with wrath is a mistake. Tribulation normally refers to the general opposition and suffering encountered in living the Christian life. The 'great tribulation' is actually a reference to an already completed historical event, as we shall see later.

### Antichrist, beast and man of lawlessness

Fanciful theories and wild assumptions abound concerning the identity of a supposed world ruler who will arise in the last days to oppose the church. There have been many candidates, all dropped again when history did not go as expected. But antichrist, beast and man of lawlessness (man of sin) are names that actually refer to different things in Scripture. Antichrist only occurs in John's letters and he saw it as already present in the first century – any spirit or person that denied Christ. The beast in Revelation represented the Roman emperor – the number 666 is the numerical value of the name 'Nero Caesar' written in Hebrew. The man of lawlessness is harder to identify. It is possible that it does refer to a future enemy, however another credible possibility is that it again refers to Nero, with the 'one holding him back' being the previous (less hostile) emperor Claudius. (The name Claudius is derived from the Latin word 'to restrain'.) Paul certainly anticipated the coming of the lawless one in the near future, not in 2000 years' time. Rather than fear the coming of a satanically inspired world ruler, we should have confidence that Christ in us is 'greater than the one (antichrist) who is in the world' (1 John 4:4). We have the victory in Christ! (1 Cor 15:57)



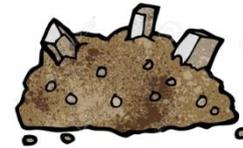
### What did Jesus teach about his return?

The most important end-times teaching is that of Jesus himself. On visiting the temple he declared that it would be destroyed. The disciples assumed this would be at the end of the age and asked, 'When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' (Mat 24:3). Jesus' response, given on the Mount of Olives (and therefore sometimes called the Olivet discourse), is recorded in three gospels<sup>2</sup>. Many people interpret his response in a totally future-oriented way, assuming that the wars, famines, heavenly signs etc. are all yet to come. People therefore count earthquakes to see if they can detect that Jesus' coming is getting near! Proper hermeneutics and a knowledge of first century history point us in a different direction though.

Many Bible scholars agree that much of what Jesus said refers to the literal destruction of the temple, which took place in the year AD70. Looking at Matthew 24, the passage is usually divided into verses 1-35 as referring to AD70 and verses 36 onwards referring to Jesus' return. The

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 24 and 25, Mark 13, Luke 21.

disciples had asked two questions: when will the temple be destroyed, and when will the end of the age come? Jesus took these in turn and answered each. The wars, persecutions, famines and backsliding all occurred in the first century in the run up to the Romans destroying the temple (and doing away with the sacrificial system for all time!) The 'abomination that causes desolation' (expressed in Luke as 'Jerusalem surrounded by armies') refers to the advancing idolatrous Roman army. The symbol on their standards was an eagle (same Greek word as vulture), hence Jesus talking about the vultures gathering around the dead 'carcass' of the temple. Even the heavenly signs in sun, moon and stars, when seen in the light of similar Old Testament prophetic passages, refers to the fall of a nation, not the end of the world. 'Coming on the clouds of heaven' (see Daniel 7) refers to Jesus entering the presence of God in his ascension, being validated as true by the fulfilment of his words about the temple. 'Messengers' (alternative translation to 'angels') would then be sent out and turn people to God all over the world, now that the removal of the temple had cut the umbilical cord that tied the early church to its Jewish roots.



From verse 36, Jesus starts talking about his return, introduced by the word 'But...' He is starting a new thought. From then on there are no startling signs to watch for. In fact, he stresses that life will continue normally with *no* special signs! Seeing things this way, we do not need to expect a mass falling away ('love of most growing cold') before the return of Christ, as this was fulfilled (along with many other details) in the first century.

### Final thoughts – reason to be optimistic!

Jesus is not returning for a defeated church, cowering in fear, longing to be rescued from God's wrath, with evil prospering all around! Rather, he will return for a glorious 'bride [that] has made herself ready' (Rev 19:7)! This can motivate us to work hard for the advance of God's kingdom!

*"We wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good."* – Titus 2:13-14

For further reading, some excellent books on the subject are:

*Win the World or Escape the Earth? The end times controversy,*  
Ian Rossol and Tony Wastall, River Publishing, 2011

*The Lion and the Lamb: Reflections on the book of Revelation (Volume 1),*  
Tony Ling, Destiny Image Europe, 2006

*The Lion and the Lamb: More reflections on the book of Revelation (Volume 2),*  
Tony Ling, Destiny Image Europe, 2007