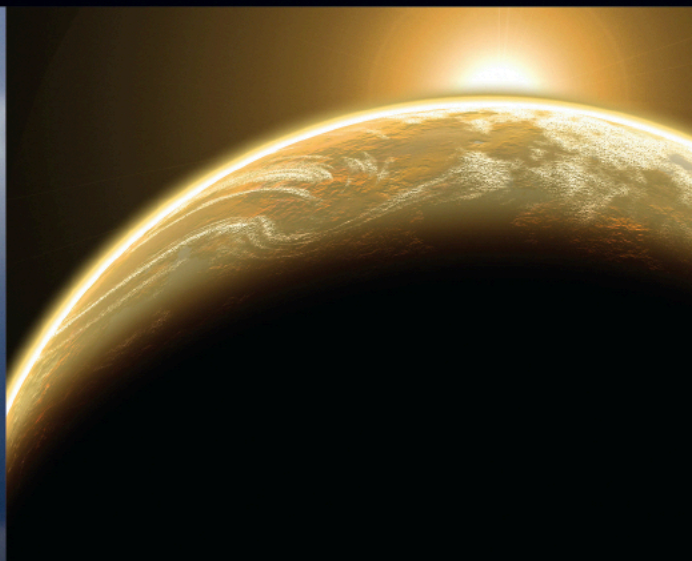


ROSE GUIDE TO

END-TIMES PROPHECY



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WHAT MATTERS MOST WHEN IT COMES TO THE END OF THE WORLD



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Introduction

“Tell us,” the disciples asked after their master predicted a future calamity in the city of Jerusalem, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3). Even after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers found themselves with at least a few unanswered queries about the end of the world as they knew it. Gathered on the Mount of Olives, the disciples questioned Jesus about how and when he would consummate his kingdom: “Lord,” they wondered, “are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

These disciples weren’t the first or the last to ask such questions. In every generation since sin entered the cosmos, God’s people seem to have wondered, “When and how will God make things right in the world?”



The Prophecy of the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by James Tissot (1886–1894)

TWO COMMON AND OPPOSITE ERRORS WHEN STUDYING THE END TIMES

Sometimes such wonderings degenerate into endless debates and unwarranted speculation about specific details. Other times, end times curiosity comes to a screeching halt as people throw up their hands at what they've begun to feel is an impossible and fruitless enquiry.

THE SLIP INTO UNWARRANTED SPECULATION	THE SLIP INTO SHOULDER-SHRUGGING CYNICISM
A slip into the rut of unwarranted speculation and guesswork results in a desire to wring more detailed data out of Scripture than Scripture clearly provides. The prophetic passages in Scripture are inflated until the rest of what Scripture has to say is marginalized, pushing Jesus and the gospel to the edges and corners of each page.	A slip into the rut of shoulder-shrugging cynicism about the end times results in down playing or ignoring end times texts. A balanced understanding seems unattainable, so Christians abandon careful study of the end times. Jesus is decentralized as readers fail to wait expectantly for their Savior as the consummation of God's plan for the ages.

These two possibilities represent two dangerous ditches in any study of the end times.

There's a saying that once crackled between truckers on their C.B. radios in the days before cellular telephones: "Keep your britches between the ditches." And, by God's grace, that's precisely what we plan to do in this book. Our aim is to steer carefully between the ditches of wild-eyed speculation and dreary-eyed disillusionment. As you peruse this text and the many charts and tables, you *will* gain much knowledge about the end of time. Yet the purpose of this book is not simply to raise your eschatological I.Q. This text focuses first and foremost on Jesus the crucified Messiah and risen King, the One in whom God the Father has made all things new and through whom God is setting the world right.

WHAT THE BIBLE IS REALLY ALL ABOUT

Why this single-minded focus on Jesus in a book about the end times?

Simply this: Our goal is to understand what the Scriptures have to say about the end times, and Jesus is the central focus of all Scripture—even of Scriptures that describe the end of time.

When some religious teachers questioned Jesus about his messianic credentials, Jesus retorted, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39).

Did you catch that?

“These are,” Jesus said of the Scriptures, “the very Scriptures that testify about me.”

The very Scriptures where the religious teachers looked for life by connecting themselves with particular patriarchs and laws were not primarily about those



Jesus teaching in the Temple by James Tissot (1886–94)

rules or family identities at all! The Old and the New Testaments were—and are—about Jesus. That’s why, when Jesus ran across a duo of downtrodden disciples on the road to Emmaus, he began “with Moses and all the Prophets” and showed them how he was the central subject of “all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). That’s also why the apostle Paul pointed out to his pastoral protégé that the purpose of “the Holy Scriptures” was to make God’s people “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15).



Jesus with the disciples at Emmaus, by Abraham Bloumaert (1622)

What, then, will this book provide?

- Deeper understanding of Old Testament prophets and prophecies, especially the writings of Daniel.
- Insights into the New Testament prophecies, especially the apostle John’s Book of Revelation, and what they meant to the people of that day.
- Different Christian interpretations of the Book of Revelation, and the biblical perspective for each.
- Various Christian understandings about key prophetic words and concepts: rapture, tribulation, seals, trumpets, Babylon, the Beast, Satan, 666, the millennium, and more.
- And what about a richer perspective on how Old Testament prophecies pointed both to Jesus and to the end of time?
- How about a clearer view of what the Jewish people expected the Messiah to be and why this matters for our understanding of the end times?

What we are seeking is a deeper recognition of the majesty and sovereignty of Jesus in all of life—including the end of time.

- What about tools that will help you to develop your own biblically-based perspective on when and how time will end?
- Perhaps most important, how about a broader understanding of how Bible-believing Christians throughout church history have understood end-times prophecies in very different ways?

What this means for this book is that we are not searching for one more detailed road map to tell us the precise conditions of the Messiah's return. What we are seeking is a deeper recognition of the majesty and sovereignty of Jesus in all of life—including the end of time. God's promises and prophecies are not launching pads for our own speculations. They are a lens through which we can see clearly the supremacy of Jesus in the unfolding story of the cosmos. And so, if your deepest desire is to nail down the exact identity of the Antichrist or to calculate the precise date when time will end, you could be a bit disappointed as you read this book. If your desire is to understand how to view the end times in light of Jesus, read on. This book provides precisely what you've been looking for.

END TIMES

Events leading up to and including the physical return of Jesus to earth and the formation of new heavens and a new earth.

CHAPTER
1

Keeping Your Eyes on the Right End

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,” Bilbo Baggins exhorted his nephew in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. “You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.”¹

Much the same might be said about opening a book that focuses on the end of time. *Studying the end times is dangerous business*. Once you begin exploring this subject, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.



A well-intended overemphasis on the end times has been known to drive people to sport prophetic placards on street corners, to stare at bar codes in search of that mysterious mark of the beast, to publish faulty predictions of the world's end, and to engage in a host of other behaviors that are likely to result in lots of blank spaces in social calendars. What's more, a quick glance at history shows that studying the end times has even had the capacity to bring out a bit of violence from time to time.

EXAMPLES OF END-TIMES PREDICTIONS GONE WRONG

1. Only a couple of decades after Jesus rose from the dead, false prophets in the city of Thessalonica proclaimed that Jesus had already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:2). This caused all sorts of worry when it occurred to the Thessalonian believers that, since they didn't recall seeing Jesus in the sky, they must have missed something significant. To this, Paul replied "that day will not come until ... the man of lawlessness is revealed" (2:3). This resulted in centuries of speculation about who "the man of lawlessness" might be, but it apparently made the Thessalonians feel better about their situation.



Eleventh-Century Illustration of the Beast in the Book of Revelation

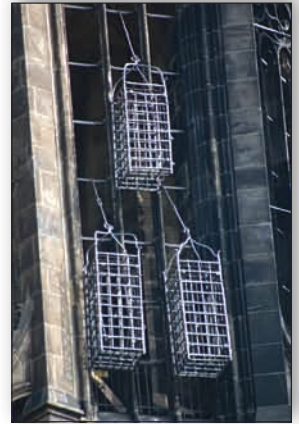


Bust of the Greek goddess Attis wearing a Phrygian cap. Marble, 2nd century AD.

2. A century later, in the mid-100s, a man named Montanus became a believer in Jesus and developed a strong interest in prophetic themes. Before long, Montanus had predicted that the New Jerusalem would soon show up in Pepuza, a backwoods parish in the province of Phrygia. Then, Montanus began to claim that he spoke as God, declaring, "I am Father, Word, and Comforter" and "I am the Lord God All-Powerful."² Churches typically frown on members who say things of this sort, and the congregation that Montanus attended was no exception. After his church disfellowshipped him, Montanus started his own religious community, but Pepuza never did play host to the New Jerusalem.

3. In the fourth century, a popular church leader named Martin of Tours declared that “the Antichrist has already been born” and that this ruler would rise to power in Martin’s own lifetime.

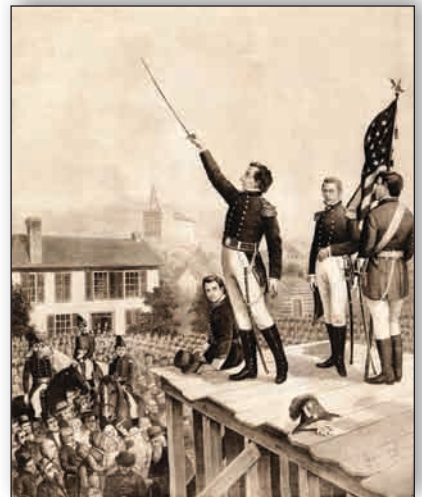
4. A monk named Radulfus Glaber—translated, his name means “Ralph the Bald”—described a wave of apocalyptic worries in the decades around the year AD 1000. According to Bald Ralph the Burgundian monk, a blazing sign in the heavens had presaged a mysterious fire in a monastery. Fears of impending apocalypse and tribulation deepened when a famine struck on the thousandth anniversary of the death of Jesus.³ Despite these many worries, the monastery was repaired, the famine passed, Ralph remained bald, and life went on.



Cages of the Muenster Rebellion
at St. Lambert's Church

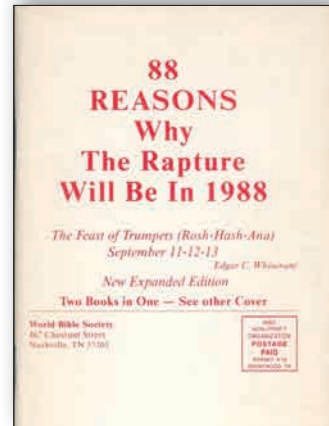
5. In 1534, a Dutch baker named Jan claimed that the New Jerusalem would soon appear in Muenster, Germany. After a supposed series of apocalyptic visions, Jan and his followers subjugated the city of Muenster. One of Jan’s cohort declared himself the successor of the biblical King David and took sixteen wives for himself. In the end, the New Jerusalem did not arrive in Muenster, but a rival army did. The corpses of the apocalyptic revolutionaries were suspended above the city in iron cages. To this day, those cages still hang from the steeple of St. Lambert’s Church, silent reminders of an apocalyptic expectation gone desperately wrong.⁴

6. Three hundred years later, Joseph Smith claimed that Jesus would establish the New Jerusalem in Jackson County, Missouri—and, in the process, launched a worldwide religious movement that denied essential biblical truths about Jesus. Still today, Mormons expect Jesus to return somewhere along the eastern outskirts of Kansas City.⁵



"Lieutenant" Joseph Smith, Jr. leading a militia in Illinois after he and his followers were expelled from Missouri.

7. Fast-forward to the twentieth century and we see the same patterns again: In 1987, a retired NASA engineer published a pamphlet entitled *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. He targeted three days in September 1988 as the divinely-selected deadline for the return of Jesus. “Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong,” he declared to the news media. A few months later, the NASA engineer published a subsequent set of pamphlets suggesting that he had made a mistake and that perhaps 1989 was the right date.⁶ That date too appears to have been an error. The mathematical skills required to get a shuttle into orbit are apparently quite different from the ones needed to calculate the end of time.



This pamphlet from Edgar Whisenant caused one of the authors of this book several sleepless nights in October 1988.

8. About the time that the first copies of *88 Reasons* were rolling off the presses, a then-unknown leader of an obscure apocalyptic sect changed his name to David Koresh and urged his disciples to see themselves as “students of the



Seventy-five of David Koresh's “students of the Seven Seals” perished here after a 51-day siege in April 1995.

Seven Seals” in Revelation.⁷ Koresh embraced polygamy and claimed that the end-times prophecies in Scripture would be fulfilled at his communal compound near Waco, Texas.⁸ In 1993, David Koresh and seventy-five of his followers perished after a 51-day siege.

9. And still, in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, apocalyptic predictions and expectations show no signs of slowing down. There have been doomsday expectations surrounding the year 2000, one prediction that Jesus would return on May 21, 2011, and several claims that connected a convoluted Mayan prophecy about the end of time with the year 2012.⁹ Thus far, these too have proven to be misguided predictions.

KEEPING OUR FEET—AND OUR HEADS—WHEN IT COMES TO THE END TIMES

After even the briefest survey of predictions that ended in disaster but not in the apocalypse, we might take a turn from Bilbo’s exhortation to Frodo: “It’s a dangerous business, studying the end of time. If you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

But don’t take this book back to your local bookstore quite yet!

And, whatever you do, *don’t* decide that a study of the end times isn’t worth the risk.



The Mayans calculated dates using a "long-count calendar." Dates were represented through glyphs, such as this small section of a stele. Some people have speculated that, because the Mayan calendar came to an end in December 21, 2012, the world would either come to an end or undergo a radical change on that date.

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REASONS TO STUDY THE END TIMES

The question is *not* whether we ought to study the end times. Christians should and must consider the end times! Here's why:

1. The apostles of Jesus commanded God's people to search the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:14–17; 2 Peter 1:19–20), and Scripture testifies that God will bring the world as we know it to an end (Isaiah 65:17–25).
2. Jesus repeatedly reminded his disciples to watch for his future arrival (Matthew 24:42; see also Matthew 25:13; Mark 13:35–37; Luke 12:37).
3. Paul said to his hearers, “But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief ... let us be awake and sober” (1 Thessalonians 5:4, 6).
4. In Revelation, John recorded this blessing from the very lips of Jesus: “Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake” (Revelation 16:15).

So our question shouldn't be whether to think about the end times; God clearly expects us to consider the end times. Instead, our question should be, “How can we ‘keep our feet’ in our study of the end of time? How do we study the second coming of Jesus without veering into dangerous doctrinal territory? How can we explore the end times in a way that focuses on Jesus?”

There's one simple fact that you need to know to keep yourself headed in the right direction when it comes to a study of the end times: *It's only dangerous when you focus on the wrong end.*

FOCUSING ON THE RIGHT END

According to Scripture, the endpoint and goal of God's work in human history is not a specific series of apocalyptic events or even a particular celestial place; it is, instead, a Person. The endpoint and goal of God's work in human history is Jesus.

Jesus himself declared, “I am the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:13). Jesus is the source of the created order (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16), the one “for whom and through whom

everything exists" (Hebrews 2:10). Jesus is the source of God's creation and God's story, and he is the goal of God's plan.

To be sure, God *will* end the world as we know it at some particular time and in a particular way—that's what we call the "end times"—but it isn't simply the termination of time for which the entire cosmos is groaning. What all creation expectantly awaits is the revealing of Jesus alongside a redeemed multitude of brothers and sisters (Romans 8:18–23).



"Alpha" and "omega" are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. © Zvonimir Atletic

ALPHA AND OMEGA

The first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. The apostle John used these terms to describe Jesus as both the beginning and the goal of God's work in human history. John also used these terms to make it clear that Jesus is God in human flesh. In Revelation 1:8, the "Alpha and Omega" is "the Lord God"; then, in Revelation 22:13–16, the same words are applied to Jesus.

God's purpose is not simply to get people into heaven; God's plan has always been to display his glory throughout the cosmos in and through Jesus. According to the apostle Paul, God "set forth" his purpose "in Christ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (Ephesians 1:9–10). The present fellowship of Christians that will someday culminate in the communion of heaven is simply an outgrowth of God's plan to bring everything together in Jesus the Messiah. Jesus is the source of God's creation and the goal of God's plan. He is "the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Hebrews 12:2).

But, before we wade any deeper into our study of the end times, there's one more issue involved in keeping our eyes on the right end: To keep our eyes on the right end is not only to recognize

Jesus as the goal of God's creation. It's also to see that, through the work of Jesus on earth, the last days have already begun.

GREEK

Language in which the New Testament was written, in an ancient dialect known as *koine* or "common" Greek.

LOOKING FOR THE LAST DAYS

It's a question that someone eventually asks whenever I teach about the end times. The precise wording may differ, but the question always runs something like this: "So, do you think we're living in the last days right now?"

My answer is always an adamant, "Yes!" But what I say next is sometimes far from what the questioner expected: "And we have been in the last days ever since Jesus completed his Father's work on earth, almost two thousand years ago." What the individual asking the question typically wants is a list of specific signs of the times that somehow correlate to recent events in the news. What I provide is a reminder that the last days have already begun.

Why do I say that we have been in "the last days" ever since Jesus fulfilled his Father's will on the earth?

Because that is precisely what Scripture says.

When the Holy Spirit seized people's lives on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed that this outpouring had been predicted "by the prophet Joel" and identified these events as part of "the last days" (Acts 2:16–17). Another New Testament text makes the point even clearer: "In these last days," the author of Hebrews wrote, "[God] has spoken to us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:2). The work of Jesus on earth was the ultimate sign of the times (Matthew 12:39–40) and, in him, "the last days" have already dawned.

Because of the finished work of Jesus, Satan has been thrown down (John 12:31–33; Hebrews 2:14). Jesus has



Pentecost by Titian (1488–1576)

received the power over death, and he has demonstrated his triumph by means of his resurrection (Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:20–26; Revelation 1:18; 9:1; 20:1). This work of Jesus on earth accomplished God's victory and inaugurated a kingdom that he will consummate at the end of time. And so, the biblical authors were able to describe the entire period between Jesus' victory over death and the end of time as "the last days" (Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2). In him, God's triumph has already been accomplished and guaranteed.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE KEEP OUR EYES ON THE RIGHT END

Whenever a search for specific signs becomes the primary goal in our study of the end times, *we are focusing*

on the wrong end. Such a misguided focus may drive some toward extremist cults. Others may become obsessed with increasingly specific schedules for the termination of time. But, even among the most stable persons, the results of fixing our eyes on the wrong end are far from the best. Such a focus tends to produce anxiety about the future and perhaps even a desire to stockpile more and more details about how time might end.

But how might our perspective change if we fix our eyes on the *right* end?

What would happen if we focused on the risen King Jesus himself as the goal of God's plan?

And how might this new focus reshape our perspective on the end times?



Three Marys at the Tomb by William Bouguereau (1825–1905)

Thankfully, we aren't the first people to struggle with such issues. The first generations of Christians dealt with similar challenges—and what Jesus and Paul told these men and women is just as profitable for us as it was for them. Let's take a look at their words to discover what happens when we focus on the right end in our study of the end times.

READINESS, RESPONSIBILITY, AND REST: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE FOCUS ON THE RIGHT END

When we focus on the right end, we will be ready for Jesus to return at any time. When

Jesus predicted the destruction of the Jewish temple, his first followers asked him, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” In response, Jesus *did* provide them with a few signposts that would precede the fall of the temple and the end of time. At the same time, the closing parable of his discourse makes it clear that his primary concern was not simply for them to have a detailed understanding of these signs. His desire was for them to be ready for his presence whenever and however these events might unfold (Matthew 24:3, 42–51). His purpose was not for his followers to become caught up in specifics of the end times; it was for them to be ready to welcome him at *any* time.



Paul at His Writing Desk by Rembrandt (1629–30)

When we focus on the right end, we see our responsibility to proclaim the gospel all the time. After the resurrection, when the apostles demanded details about the end of time, Jesus replied quite curtly, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority”—then, he immediately reminded them of their responsibility to share with others what they had seen

in him (Acts 1:7–8). Jesus turned their attention from “times or seasons” and focused them on his work and on their commission to proclaim the gospel. The words rendered “times or seasons” in English translations represent two different Greek words that describe time. “Times” translates a form of the word *chronos*, which points to chronological, linear time as measured by a calendar or a sundial or a clock; *chronos* includes years and months, days and hours. “Seasons” renders a form of the word *kairos*, a word that points to the quality or type of time; the focus of *kairos* is on the opportunity or significance of a particular time. By using both terms, Jesus made it clear not only that it wasn’t his disciples’ place to know *when* he might return but also that they wouldn’t necessarily even know *what type of time* it would be when he returned.

When we focus on the right end, we rest in the certainty that God will make the world right again. Even after Jesus vanished into the eastern sky, his followers struggled with issues related to his return. Twenty years or so after the ascension, someone forged a letter in Paul’s name and informed the Thessalonian church that Jesus had already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:2; 3:17). Not surprisingly, the thought that they might have missed their Savior’s return caused quite a stir among the Christians in Thessalonica! Paul responded by making it clear that Jesus had not yet returned after all. Before the return of Jesus, there would be a rebellion of humanity against God and a revelation of a lawless man (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Yet Paul did not dwell long on these details! In fact, he spent fewer than a dozen verses on these issues. The outcome that Paul projected for these truths (“the teachings we passed on to you,” 2:15) was not to drive the Thessalonians to speculate about who the lawless man might be or when the rebellion might come. It was, instead, that “our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father” would “encourage [their] hearts and strengthen [them] in every good deed and word” (2 Thessalonians 2:16–17). Paul wasn’t afraid to talk about the end times, but he knew that end times are not the endpoint of God’s plan. And so, he called the Thessalonians to rest and to find comfort in God’s promise that he will one day make all things new.

Notice the pattern in each of these New Testament discussions of the end times: The focus is not on the details of how time might end. Some future occurrences are certainly mentioned, but again and again, the emphasis is on the sufficiency of Jesus, the one through whom God will bring about the end in his own time. Jesus is the goal of God’s plan and the ultimate sign of God’s work in human history. Because Jesus perfectly fulfilled his Father’s will, the last days are already

underway and God's triumph is guaranteed. That emphasis is what it means to keep our eyes on the right end.

FINDING THE CORNER PIECES OF THE END-TIMES PUZZLE

From the words of the New Testament, it is clear that the result of considering the end times should not be smug satisfaction that comes from gaining more details about the future. Instead, where such study should drive us is toward a simultaneous sense of rest and responsibility that is found only in the gospel of Jesus. The result should not be increased speculation about the end of time but an increased capacity to work for the glory of Jesus the Messiah while watching and waiting patiently for his return.

That's why the primary goal of this book is not for you to learn intricate end times details but to learn more of the One whose arrival will fulfill a divine design that is more ancient than time. If the end of time is a puzzle, Jesus is the corner pieces; only when he stands in the most prominent place can the end-times puzzle begin to make sense.

It's a dangerous business, studying the end of time. If Jesus becomes the center point of your study, the danger won't completely go away—but the danger will take a quite different form. The danger won't be becoming caught up in all sorts of end-times kookiness. What will be endangered is our comfortable assumption that if only we can connect all the right charts with all the right verses, we can figure out exactly what God is doing when it comes to the end of time. During the days that he walked the dusty roads of Judea and Galilee, not even Jesus knew the precise details of the end of time (Mark 13:32). What Jesus did know was that his Father had a plan and that his Father's plan was glorious and good. And that's the truth about the end times that every follower of Jesus can rest in still today.



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