END TIMES

MADE EASY

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Are We Living in the Last Days? 4

CHAPTER 2

What Will Happen in the End Times? 16

CHAPTER 3

What Is the Book of Revelation About? 46

CHAPTER 4

What Did Jesus Say about the End Times? 67

CHAPTER 1

Are We Living in the Last Days?

Are we living in the last days? On the one hand, this is a simple question to answer. Yes, we are! The Bible says so:

- When the Holy Spirit filled people's lives on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter proclaimed that this outpouring had been predicted by the Old Testament prophet Joel, and Peter identified these events as part of "the last days" (Acts 2:16–17).
- The book of Hebrews makes the point even clearer: "In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:2). The work of Jesus Christ on earth was the ultimate sign of the times, and in him the last days have already dawned.

In this sense, the New Testament writers were able to describe the entire period between Jesus's resurrection and the end of time as "the last days."

On the other hand, the question "Are we living in the last days?" can actually be a bit more tricky to answer. Often when people ask this question, they're looking for answers to an array of questions about the end of time: *How soon will Jesus return? Will he come back in our lifetimes? Are the events we see in the news signs of the end of the age? What can we expect to happen in these last days?* How Christians answer these types of questions depends on how they interpret biblical prophecies and divine promises. Or more specifically, it's determined by how they view the fulfillments of God's promises; how they understand the book of Revelation and other parts of the Bible like it; and what they take Jesus's words to his disciples on the Mount of Olives to mean.

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

We'll look at all these things in the pages ahead, comparing the different ways Christians understand the end times. No matter what you may already think about the end times, this study can provide encouragement for your daily life.

If you feel very certain about a particular end-times view, consider this an opportunity to see what other Bible-believing Christians with different viewpoints think will happen in the last days.

If you're not sure what you believe about the end times, this book will help you sample the different views and search the Scriptures for yourself. And whichever view you land on (if any), you can still be encouraged to do what Jesus told his disciples: "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Matthew 24:42).

If you're worried that studying the end times is too complicated, too strange, or just not worth the effort, you can use this book to dip your toe into the water and discover that God designed every detail of Scripture, even the parts about the end times, to "prepare and equip his people to do every good work" (1 Timothy 3:14 NLT).

Keeping Our Eyes on the Right End

Studying the end times might feel like dangerous business. An overemphasis on the end times, no matter how well-meaning, has been known to drive people to some peculiar behaviors. Whether it's sporting "The End Is Near!" placards on street corners or staring at barcodes in search of the mysterious mark of the beast—people sometimes worry they might find themselves veering off into hazardous end-times alleyways.

But there's one simple fact that you need to remember to keep yourself headed in the right direction: *It's only dangerous if you focus on the wrong end.*

In the gospel of John, there's a story about a time when some religious teachers questioned Jesus about his messianic credentials. Jesus replied to them, "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 about the Bible, "the very Scriptures that testify about me."

The Scriptures—where the religious teachers looked for life by observing religious laws and connecting themselves with patriarchs like Abraham—were not primarily about rules or family identities at all. The Scriptures were (and still 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 Paul pointed out to his pastoral protégé, Timothy, 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).

ESCHATOLOGY: From the Greek word *eschaton,* meaning "final" or "last," and *logos,* meaning "word" or "idea." Eschatology is the study of the events leading up to the end of time.

The endpoint and goal of God's work in history is not a specific series of apocalyptic events or even a particular celestial place; it is, instead, a Person. It is Jesus who declared, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" (Revelation 22:13). He is the source of the created order, the one "for whom and through whom everything exists" (Hebrews 2:10; Colossians 1:16). 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 his followers (Romans 8:18–23). God's purpose is not simply to get people into heaven. His plan has always been to display his glory throughout the world in and through Jesus (Ephesians 1:9–10). Heaven, the new creation, and our salvation are all results of God's plan to bring everything together in Jesus the Messiah.

So, as we move forward into this study about the end times, we must, as Hebrews 12:2 says, keep our eyes fixed squarely on Jesus, the one who begins and completes our faith.

Finding Common Ground

Before we start sifting through the different end-times views, it's important to pause and consider the common ground among Christians. Here are three truths about the end times that Christians throughout history have always believed.

1. Jesus is returning.

Christians agree that Jesus will return to earth in bodily form at some point in the future, though they hold different views about the sequence of

events surrounding his arrival. Some believe that Christ's return will be one single event *after* a time of tribulation. Others believe that God will remove his followers *before* a time of tribulation, and then Christ will return to reign after the tribulation has passed.

- At Christ's ascension into heaven, two angels said to the disciples, "Why do you stand here looking into the sky? 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" (Acts 1:10–11).
- Paul taught that "the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

2. Jesus will judge humanity.

Christians agree that Jesus will judge all humanity. Some expect Jesus to judge Christians at the "judgment seat of Christ" and nonbelievers at the "great white throne," while others expect the judgment of all humanity to happen at once, believers and nonbelievers together.

- Paul wrote that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).
- In the book of Revelation, John described this fascinating scene: "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it.... And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.... Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:11–15).

3. God will resurrect all people.

Christians agree that God will physically resurrect all humanity at some point in the future. Believers differ about whether the resurrection will occur all at once at the end of time, or if some people will be

resurrected before the great tribulation and some afterward, with the remainder resurrected after a thousand-year reign of Jesus on earth.

- Paul wrote about the resurrection of the dead, saying, "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable ... it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:42–44).
- John wrote about a first resurrection and a second death: "Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6).

Throughout time and throughout the world, Christians have agreed on the three essential truths listed above—but the agreement doesn't stop there. In the opening verses of the book of Revelation, John reminds his Christian readers that he, too, shares in the experiences of their daily lives:

> *I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus....* (Revelation 1:9)

Despite the distance and differences that separated John from his readers, he was a "brother and companion" with them when it came to suffering (or tribulation), kingdom, and patient endurance.

Two thousand years later, when looking at the end times, these same themes should continue to resonate with followers of Jesus. One person may take a different view on the Antichrist or the millennium than another in their church, but when it comes to kingdom, tribulation, and patient endurance, there is far more that draws believers together than pulls them apart. Regardless of their differences, every believer in Jesus participates in God's eternal kingdom, faces times of trouble, and patiently awaits Jesus's return.

The Glory of the Kingdom

The kingdom of God consists of God's people living in God's domain under God's rule.[1] Christians in a multitude of times and places have agreed that God inaugurated a kingdom through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. From the very beginning of his earthly ministry, the gospel of Jesus was the good news of the kingdom of God (Matthew 3:2; 4:17, *23*; 24:14). This kingdom will not be fully realized until King Jesus returns to earth, but that doesn't make the kingdom of God any less true or real.

The Reality of Tribulation

Because this Christ-inaugurated kingdom is not yet fully realized on earth, God's people still endure times of tribulation even as they rejoice in the truth of God's eternal kingdom—and this should not surprise us.

Jesus clearly predicted tribulation for his followers: "In the world you will have trouble," he said, "but take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Until the return of Jesus Christ, God's people will experience persecution, suffering, and distress. Although many of us haven't experienced severe persecution firsthand, Christians around the world today suffer terrible persecution and martyrdom for the sake of Christ.

Throughout this long period of waiting for God's kingdom to fully come and make everything new, all creation "groans together" with God's children in expectation of a revelation that will mark the end of all suffering (Romans 8:22–23).

The Responsibility to Endure Patiently

What are Christians called to do while awaiting this revelation? Every believer in Jesus Christ is a partner with other believers, not only in kingdom and tribulation, but also in patient endurance. Until God's kingdom is fully realized, Christians wait patiently (Romans 8:25).

But this kind of patient endurance is very different from laziness or passivity. For believers in Jesus, it means working together to expand the kingdom of Christ into the lives of people around them while finding contentment in the goodness of God's

providential care in each present moment. It means never ceasing to pray as Jesus taught, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in the heavens" (Matthew 6:10).

The Christian life is not only about the future, the end times, or even just making it to heaven. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus—no matter what you think about the precise timing or sequence of events in the last days—these three themes of kingdom, tribulation, and patient endurance are not simply theoretical aspects of your future life. Kingdom, tribulation, and patient endurance are woven into every moment of your life here and now.

With these truths in our minds and our eyes fixed on Jesus, let's forge ahead and examine the four main Christians views about the end times.