

“Is the World Coming to an End?”

Editor’s Note: Sometimes Old Testament prophets, like Obadiah and Jonah, spoke of the end of life as their listeners knew it. In our own time, various religious groups have confused people with claims that the world would end on a certain day. What does the Bible say on this matter?

IS THIS THE END?

When peace and prosperity are the order of the day, when we are feeling encouraged and optimistic about human nature, thoughts about the end of the world seldom cross our minds. However, when financial markets crash, terrorists strike, war breaks out, or human depravity threatens the safety of our homes and our children, discussions about the end seem to be heard everywhere.

Recent years have brought many reasons for people to think about the end of the world. In addition to uncertainty about life in general, religious fiction has popularized such ideas as the Antichrist, Armageddon, the Millennium, the Rapture, and the Great Tribulation. Book sales indicate that both Christians and non-Christians are fascinated by stories relating to the end of the world. Alarming weather phenomena have caused people to question what is happening to the earth.

More and more people are asking, “What does the Bible say about the end of time? Are we living in the last days? Do terrorist attacks and wars signal a coming destruction of our planet? Is the world coming to an end?” With these concerns on our minds, we open our Bibles and search for what the Scriptures say about the end of the world.

THE END IS COMING!

The Bible teaches that time is moving toward a definite conclusion. The ascension and the second coming of Jesus form the time brackets within which we live. During the final week of

Jesus’ life, He taught,

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31, 32).

Luke later recorded the following encounter, which took place on the day when Jesus ascended into heaven:

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “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; NIV; emphasis mine).

Since that time, all Christians have been waiting for the return of Jesus. Paul encouraged new Christians “*to wait for His Son from heaven*, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:10; emphasis mine).

The Scriptures teach that the return of Jesus will bring about the destruction of the world and the final judgment. Peter wrote,

... the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless (2 Peter 3:12–14).

That is the way the world will end—but when will it happen? What does the Bible say? What can we know about this great event?

WHEN WILL IT HAPPEN?

During the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry, He and His disciples were walking away from the temple, when the disciples called Jesus' attention to the magnificence of that structure. Jesus responded, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down" (Matthew 24:2).

Later, in a private conversation, the disciples asked Jesus, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). The disciples thought they were asking one question, assuming that the temple would be destroyed at the end of the age. However, Jesus separated their question into two parts, answering one at a time.

Concerning the destruction of the temple, something that occurred when the Roman army destroyed the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, *this generation* will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away" (Matthew 24:34, 35; emphasis mine).

However, in that same discussion, Jesus also spoke of the end of the age, saying, "But of *that day and hour* no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matthew 24:36; emphasis mine).

Years later, when the apostle Paul spoke to a group of philosophers in Athens, he mentioned that coming day of judgment:

... *He has fixed a day* in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:31; emphasis mine).

Christians indeed believe that judgment day is coming. However, *when* that day will be is a secret that is hidden in the heart of God. Anyone who claims to know when Jesus will return, based on an interpretation of particular biblical prophecies, is professing to know something that Jesus clearly said was concealed even from His eyes.

In the interim, between now and the time when Jesus returns, His followers are to live in a constant state of readiness.

Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. . . . For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour *when you do not think He will* (Matthew 24:42–44; emphasis mine).

Our concern is not to determine the time when Jesus will return; it is to be ready when that time comes.

GOOD NEWS!

I remember hearing, as I was growing up, sermons about the return of Jesus and the day of judgment. All of my memories of that kind of preaching are wrapped in fear. The coming of the Lord was a very terrifying prospect, a virtual spiritual nightmare. It was several years before I realized that the return of Jesus at the end of time is something that biblical writers spoke of with a sense of longing. For them it was a happy thought. The second coming was good news! Jesus' return will be a time when troubles are over, injustice is wiped away, and communion with God will be complete. Paul spoke of "*awaiting eagerly* the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7, 8; emphasis mine) and of looking forward to "the day of God" and the home "in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:11–13). He told the Christians of Thessalonica to "comfort one another" with the words about "the coming of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18).

BACK TO WHERE WE STARTED

The answer to our original question, "Is the world coming to an end?" is "Yes!" Someday, Jesus will return to judge the world, and the earth will be no more. On that day we will all "appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:10). For Christians, that will be a day of unparalleled joy; for non-Christians it will be a day of punishment. When will that day be? We simply do not know. Because of that, we must live every day as if it were the last, anxiously awaiting the second coming of Christ.

The final part of the Bible speaks wistfully about that great day when Jesus will return: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20b).

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