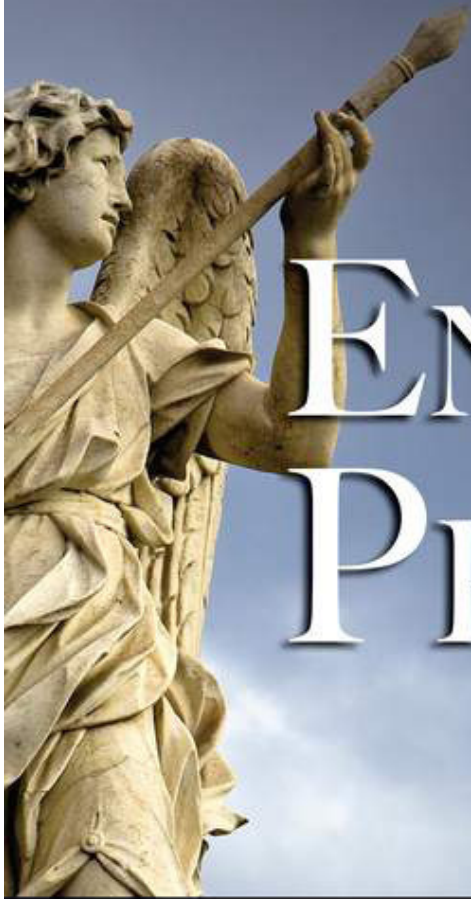


ROSE GUIDE TO

END-TIMES PROPHECY



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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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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.

UNVEILING THROUGH VISIONS: THE CONTENT OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Ancient texts in the apocalyptic genre claimed to unveil divine truths that could not be discovered through human effort. This unveiling typically occurred through visions. In the Old and the New Testaments, these visions are divinely-inspired masterpieces that elaborately depict the workings of God in human history. Daniel's visionary descriptions ranged from a series of fantastic beasts with wings and horns to God himself on a fiery throne, from a ram and a goat and a manlike angel to people rising from the dead (Daniel 7, 8, 10, 12). Through these visions, God demonstrated to Daniel that God had not lost control of his

WHY AREN'T ALL THOSE OTHER APOCALYPSES IN THE BIBLE?

At least a dozen apocalypses circulated among ancient Jews and Christians—and two of these texts are quoted in the New Testament book of Jude! Why, then, aren't these apocalypses included in the Bible? Here's why:

- It was recognized even by the Jewish people living between the Old and New Testaments that the time of God-inspired prophets had ended until the Messiah arrived. This recognition is preserved in a Jewish historical text known as 1 Maccabees (9:27; 14:41). So the apocalyptic texts written after the Old Testament but before the coming of Jesus should not be considered part of Holy Scripture.
- The primary standard for whether texts written after the time of Jesus were authoritative for Christians was, "Can this text be clearly connected with an apostolic eyewitness of the risen Lord Jesus or a close associate of an eyewitness?" With the exception of the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John, none of the apocalypses of the Christian era could be clearly traced back to an apostle. Apocalypse of Peter did not come from Peter, and the Shepherd of Hermas was written after the apostolic era had ended. Around AD 160, some Christians in Rome wanted to include Shepherd of Hermas in their lists of authoritative books. A leader in the Roman church responded with these words: "Hermas composed 'the Shepherd' quite recently—in our own times, in the city of Rome.... While it should indeed be read, it cannot be publicly read for the people of the church. It is counted neither among the Prophets (for their number has been completed) nor among the Apostles (for it is after their time)."¹⁷

world; God had a plan to bring new life to his people and to destroy their oppressors. The book of Revelation presents similar visions that use extravagant language and cryptic numbers to point to transcendent realities. Like Daniel, John used these visions to assure his readers that God had not lost control of his world.

In one sense, the visions of Revelation are, however, quite different from other apocalyptic writings: What is revealed in Revelation is not merely a plan but a plan centered in one particular person, Jesus Christ. Over and over in Revelation, Jesus stands at the center of John's

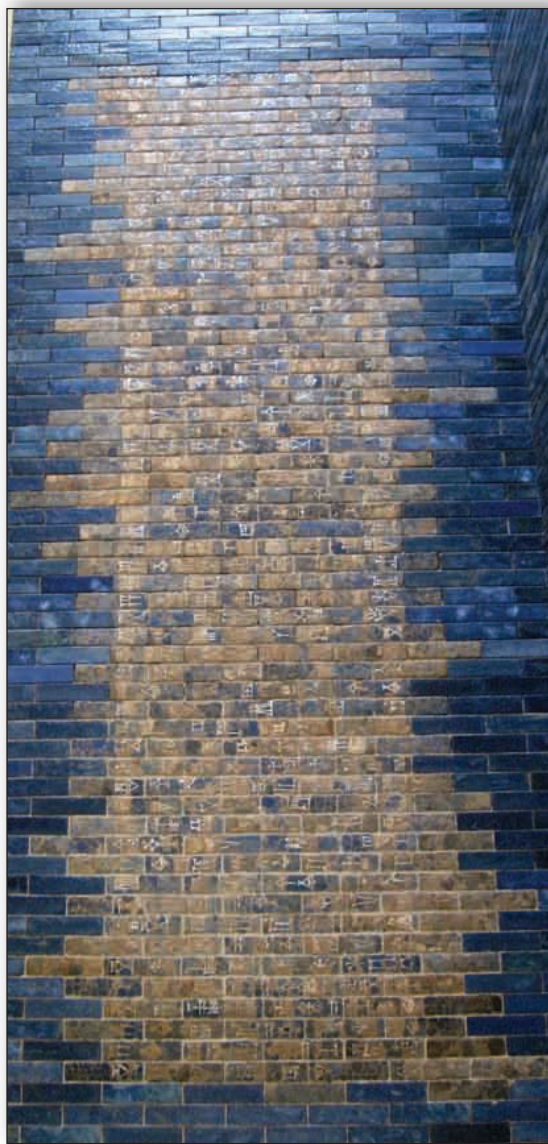


The Adoration of the Lamb by Beringarius (c. 870)

visions. Jesus is the Lion and Lamb who breaks the Seven Seals (Revelation 5–8). It is he who takes his stand on Mount Zion (14:1) and he who embraces his people as his beloved bride (19:7). In the end, Jesus is the conquering King of kings, the Lord of lords, and the light who illumines his people's lives forevermore (17:14; 21:23; 22:3). From the very first sentence, the book of Revelation is a revelation “of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1).¹⁸

ENCOURAGEMENT DURING PERSECUTION: THE CONTEXT OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Apocalyptic writings developed during times of exile and persecution. In some cases, the apocalyptic literary style concealed elements of the author's message that the dominant political powers might have perceived as subversive. During the decades that Daniel preserved his visions for his people, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem and hauled away captives four times—first in 605, then again in 597 and in 586 when he destroyed the Jewish temple, and one last time in 581 or 580 BC. Another prophet graphically described the oppression in Daniel's hometown during these years: "Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners.... Our skin is hot as an oven, feverish from hunger. Women have been violated in Zion, and virgins in the towns of Judah. Princes are hung up by their hands; elders are shown no respect.... Mount Zion ... lies desolate, with jackals prowling over it" (Lamentations 5:2–18). Daniel seems to have been taken captive in 605, after Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians at the Battle of Carchemish. He and his fellow Israelites were marched nearly 500 miles to Babylon under heavy guard.¹⁹



Building inscription of King Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 BC)

And what about the New Testament apocalypse known as Revelation? It's uncertain whether John wrote Revelation during Emperor Nero's reign in the AD 60s or in the AD 90s when Emperor Domitian ruled the Roman Empire. Either way, persecution and exile were definite threats for Christians in Asia Minor and Rome. That's clear even in the first verses of Revelation. There, John described himself as "your brother and companion in the suffering and the kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus ... on the island of Patmos



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because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). John's statement regarding exile on Patmos is historically credible: The Roman historian Tacitus repeatedly reported how persons suspected of being potential political threats to the peace of Rome were exiled to islands in the Aegean Sea.²⁰

ASSURANCE OF GOD'S GOODNESS: THE PURPOSE OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

When people today read apocalyptic literature, the first question they often ask is, "What will be the precise order and timing of events between now and the end of time?" When apocalyptic writings first circulated, however, that probably wasn't the primary question that the saints were asking. What readers then were likely asking was not what or how but who: "Who's really in charge of history?"

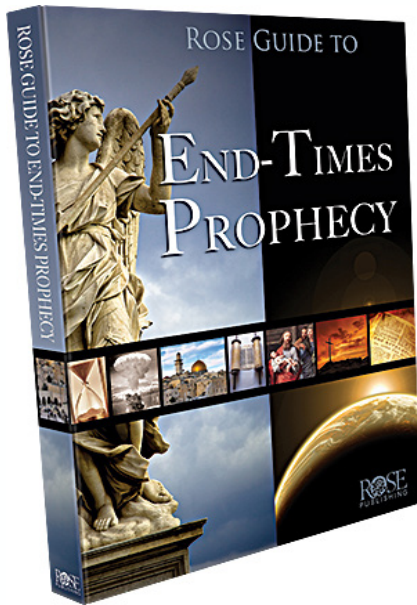
When Daniel proclaimed his prophecies, for example, it seemed like the Babylonians, Medes, and Persians controlled the world. To many Israelites, it looked as if God was no longer working for the good of his people. Through divinely disclosed visions, Daniel made it clear that God's kingdom was "an everlasting kingdom" and that Israel's oppressors would one day be condemned to "everlasting contempt" (Daniel 2:44; 4:3, 34; 12:2). What God provided through Daniel's prophecies was an eschatological hope—an assurance that God was working in a definite direction and, in the end, God would make all things good, right, and new.

When John wrote Revelation, the Roman Empire ruled the known world. Christians seem to have been losing their positions, their property, and even their lives because they refused to offer sacrifices on the emperor's behalf. The Jewish faith remained legal—albeit unpopular—in the Roman Empire. As a result, some Christians may have downplayed their trust in Jesus and tried to blend in at local synagogues (see Revelation 2:9; 3:9).

In this context, John proclaimed that the rightful king of the world was not the emperor in Rome; Jesus was the “King of kings,” and his power extended far beyond the heavens to encompass every kingdom on earth (11:15; 21:23). Like Daniel, John offered his readers eschatological assurance and hope: Not only was God working even in times of persecution; someday, God would consign his foes to eternal punishment, recreate the fallen cosmos, and cleanse every tear from his people's eyes (20:12–21:8). Through visions of spiritual realities that transcended present circumstances, apocalyptic writings pointed persecuted people toward hope that is greater than any human eye can see.



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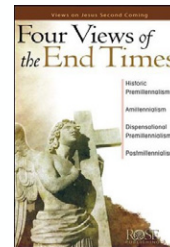


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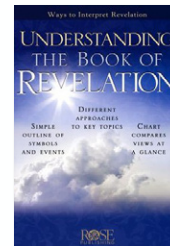


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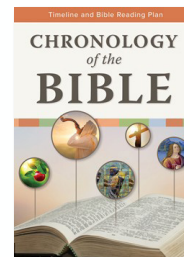


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