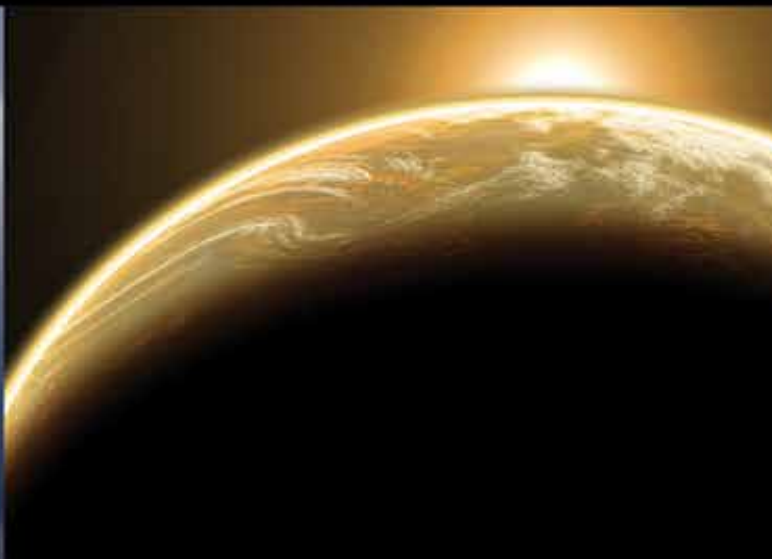


ROSE GUIDE TO

# END-TIMES PROPHECY



# What Christians Agree About When It Comes to the End of the World

## THREE ESSENTIAL TRUTHS THAT CHRISTIANS HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED, AND THREE KEY THEMES THAT BRING BELIEVERS TOGETHER

A Christian philosopher was debating a Jewish rabbi who wasn't convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. The philosopher and the rabbi wrangled over whether the ancient prophets had really predicted the coming of Jesus, whether the Old Testament manuscripts were reliable, and precisely how the angels revolted against God. Then, their discussion turned to Jerusalem and the end of time.

"Do you really think that Jerusalem is going to be rebuilt?" the rabbi asked. "And do you really expect your people to be gathered with the Messiah and the patriarchs?"

"I and others that are right-minded Christians do indeed expect that there will be a thousand years in Jerusalem," the philosopher responded, then he added: "But many who belong to the pure and pious faith and who are truly Christians think otherwise."<sup>21</sup>

The Christian philosopher's beliefs about the end times were clear—but he knew that many faithful Christians disagreed with him about the specifics.

Now, when do you suppose this dialogue took place?

Maybe in the latter decades of the twentieth century, sometime between *The Late*

### MESSIAH

(from Hebrew *Mashiakh*, "Anointed One")

Savior-king anticipated throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis 3:15; Deuteronomy 18:15; Isaiah 53; 61). Also known as "Christ" (from Greek *Christos*, "Anointed One").

*Great Planet Earth and Left Behind?* Or maybe a little earlier, in 1948, around the founding of the modern nation of Israel?

Perhaps in the nineteenth century, when politicians began to discuss the possibility of establishing a Jewish homeland?<sup>22</sup>

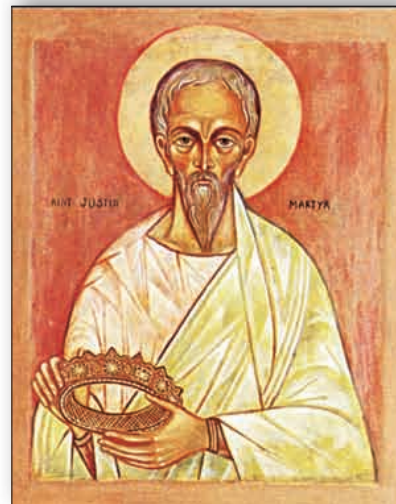
Or what about the years approaching 1666, when a rabbi known as Menasseh Ben Israel told the British Parliament that the Jews would soon be returning to their native land?<sup>23</sup>

Not even close.

This dialogue took place in the middle of the second century, only a generation or two after John wrote the book of Revelation. The philosopher was Justin, one of the most famous Christian thinkers of his day. The rabbi was Tarphon, a prominent interpreter of Jewish law and tradition.

So what do we learn from this dialogue between Justin and Tarphon?

*As early as the mid-second century AD, faithful Christians already disagreed about the details of how time would end.*



Justin Martyr, AD 103–165

In some ways, this is encouraging. It means that you aren't the first person to struggle with these issues! At the same time, it can also be discouraging. After all, if Christians in the second century couldn't agree on what would happen before the end of time, how can twenty-first-century Christians possibly reach consensus on these issues?

If all of this does seem a bit discouraging to you, stop for a few moments before slumping into the slough of eschatological despondency! There are two important truths that you could be missing:

1. Complete consensus among all Christians is not the most important goal when exploring the end times! The goal of God's work and the church's fellowship is to glorify Jesus, the "beginning and the end" of God's plan (Revelation 22:13).

2. And so, the question shouldn't be, "What needs to happen for all Christians to agree?" Instead, what we should be asking is, "How can our knowledge of the end times reveal more of the splendor of Jesus and the wonder of his gospel?"

Believers today can still practice a pattern that Christians followed even in the first generations of Christian faith: *Learn to distinguish between essential and nonessential beliefs*. Whenever a biblical truth is clear and held dear by Christians throughout the ages, the church must lovingly discipline anyone who denies or dilutes this truth. But what about the times when Scripture is not explicit on a particular detail? Christians should be able to disagree agreeably. A century

### DISTINGUISHING THE ESSENTIAL FROM THE NON-ESSENTIAL

To help Christians to distinguish between essential and nonessential beliefs, theologian Albert Mohler has suggested a "theological triage" with three orders of theological issues:<sup>24</sup>

**First-order issues:** Doctrines that are essential to the Christian faith, such as the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, justification by faith, the authority of Scripture, and the bodily return of Jesus. "First-order doctrines represent the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith, and a denial of these doctrines represents nothing less than an eventual denial of Christianity itself."

**Second-order issues:** Doctrines on which believing Christians may disagree but which will result in significant boundaries between congregations. Whether to baptize infants or believers is a second-order issue. The question of whether women should be ordained as church leaders also belongs to the second order.

**Third-order issues:** Nonessential issues over which Christians should learn to disagree agreeably. "Christians who affirm the bodily, historical, and victorious return of the Lord Jesus Christ may differ over timetable and sequence without rupturing the fellowship of the church. Christians may find themselves in disagreement over any number of issues related to the interpretation of difficult texts or the understanding of matters of common disagreement. Nevertheless, standing together on issues of more urgent importance, believers are able to accept one another without compromise when third-order issues are in question."

before Justin's debate with the rabbi, the apostle Paul pointed out the importance of this principle to the church in Rome. Paul's specific prescription for dealing with these points of disagreement was "without quarreling over disputable matters" and that people "should be fully convinced in their own mind" (Romans 14:1, 5). Notice that Paul did not forbid the formation of biblically based beliefs about nonessential issues—otherwise, the Roman Christians couldn't have been "fully convinced" in their own minds! Yet Paul reminded them to hold these beliefs with humility and gentleness, because "we will all stand before God's judgment seat" (Romans 14:10).

## THREE ESSENTIAL TRUTHS ABOUT THE END TIMES THAT CHRISTIANS HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED



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This pattern of learning to distinguish between essential and nonessential beliefs persisted far past the pages of the New Testament. As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries AD, deviant forms of faith developed in some areas. People who held these deviant beliefs claimed to be Christians. Yet these same persons denied essential truths that the apostles had taught in the churches.

Some false teachers, for example, claimed that the physical world was completely evil; thus, they rejected the physical resurrection and return of Jesus. Others of these false teachers claimed that the God who created the world and the God revealed in Jesus were two different deities. A few even butchered their Bibles

to match their false beliefs, cutting out the entire Old Testament and much of New Testament until only Paul's epistles and Luke's Gospel remained. Then, they doctored Luke's Gospel to remove references to the physical birth and resurrection of Jesus!

To protect congregations from these false teachings, a summary of essential beliefs that could be traced back to the apostles emerged very early in the church's history. This summary became known as the "Rule of Faith."

Beginning in the second century AD, new believers memorized the truths found in the Rule before they were baptized. Although the precise wording of the Rule of Faith varied slightly from church to church, the same essential truths could be found in each variation.

So what did the Rule of Faith have to say about eschatology, the study of the end times? When it comes to the end times, Rule of Faith clearly affirmed three essential truths:

1. Against those who claimed that Jesus would not return to earth in bodily form, the Rule of Faith declared that Jesus "sat at the Father's right hand and will come again."
2. Against those who claimed that Christians would not be resurrected physically, the Rule of Faith confessed a belief in "the resurrection of the flesh."
3. Against those who denied a future judgment, the Rule of Faith affirmed that Jesus would "judge the living and the dead."<sup>25</sup>



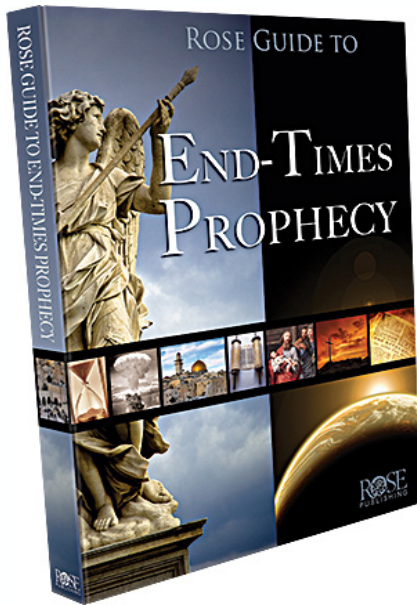
In the early centuries of Christian faith, many churches required new converts to affirm the Rule of Faith before being baptized. "Wade in the Water." Postcard of a river baptism in New Bern, North Carolina, around 1900.

## THREE ESSENTIAL TRUTHS

Essential truth about the end of time	What Scripture says
<p><b>Jesus will return to earth in bodily form at some point in the future</b></p>	<p>“The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matthew 24:36–44; Mark 13:32–37).</p> <p>“Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).</p> <p>“We wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).</p> <p>“Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28).</p> <p>“ ... continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming” (1 John 2:28).</p>
<p><b>Jesus will judge all humanity</b></p>	<p>“He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31; see also 10:42).</p> <p>“We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:10).</p> <p>“Christ Jesus ... is to judge the living and the dead” (2 Timothy 4:1).</p>
<p><b>God will physically resurrect all humanity at some point in the future</b></p>	<p>“The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.... And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne.... The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done” (Revelation 20:5, 12–13).</p>

What early Christians said	Nonessential details about this essential truth
<p>“This prophecy [Isaiah 33:13–19] is about the bread that the Messiah gave us to eat ... and the cup that he gave us to drink; ... this prophecy proves that we shall behold this very same King in glory.”<sup>26</sup></p> <p>“The church believes in ... the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Messiah Jesus our Lord, and in his revelation from heaven in the Father’s glory to gather all things into one.”<sup>27</sup></p> <p>“He sat at the Father’s right hand ... and will return in splendor.”<sup>28</sup></p>	<p>Whether the return of Jesus will be one single event after a time of tribulation, or if Jesus will return to remove his church before the great tribulation and then return to reign after the time of tribulation.</p>
<p>“John prophesied ... the eternal resurrection and judgment of all.”<sup>29</sup></p> <p>“He shall execute righteous judgment toward all, so that he may send spiritual wickednesses and the angels who transgressed and became apostates together with the ungodly, unrighteous, wicked, and profane into eternal fire. He will by his grace confer immortality on the righteous, holy, and those who have kept his commands and persevered in his love—some from the beginning and others from their repentance—and will surround them with eternal glory” (Irenaeus).</p> <p>Jesus will “take the holy ones to the enjoyment of eternal life and of the heavenly promises, and he will condemn the wicked to eternal fire” (Tertullian).</p>	<p>Whether Jesus will judge all humanity at the same time or if he will judge Christians at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10) and non-believers at the great white throne (Revelation 20:11–15).</p>
<p>“If you have fallen in with some so-called Christians but ... who say there is no resurrection of the dead, ... do not imagine that they are Christians.”<sup>30</sup></p> <p>Jesus will “raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race” (Irenaeus).</p> <p>Judgment will occur “after the resurrection of both these groups, ... with the restoration of their flesh” (Tertullian).</p>	<p>Whether the resurrection will occur all at once at the end of time, or if some will be resurrected before the great tribulation, some after the great tribulation, and the remainder after a thousand-year reign of Jesus on earth.</p>



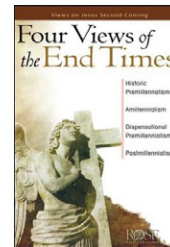


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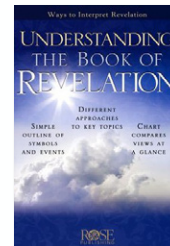


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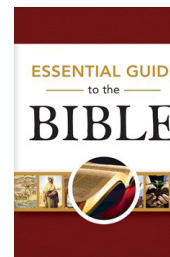


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