

# How will the world end?

And other questions about the last things and the second coming of Christ



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# Why is it all so complicated?



It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel confused.

Where were you when you first realized the world might end? I was a pre-teen, at home, watching television.

I happened upon a program that dramatized what the Bible said would occur in the “end times.” Terrifying images crossed the screen: warfare, natural disasters, and, of course, grainy footage of atomic mushroom clouds. I can't remember what the show taught exactly, but I do remember that it scared me.

My next brush with the apocalypse (end of the world) came as a teenager in a church youth group. We saw a film entitled *A Thief in the Night*. In it an unfortunate young woman ignores her family and friends who urge her to follow Jesus. Suddenly the true believers are



whisked away in a secret “rapture” up to heaven, leaving her to face the horrific global tribulation (period of suffering) of the last days. On the one hand, the film stoked my curiosity. *What would it be like if millions of people disappeared all at once?* But the film also made me nervous. *Would I be one of the people who gets beamed up by Jesus before the world goes to pieces, or would I be left behind?*

And then there was my youth leader. During a Sunday-school class he explained the biblical teaching about the end of the world using a time line. Actually, it looked more like an electrical-wiring diagram. There were arrows and boxes and symbols all mapping out a complex cascade of final events, like the rapture, the seven-year tribulation, the millennium and the white-throne judgment.

He introduced me to characters from the book of Revelation like the beast and his sidekick, the false prophet, both of whom would serve the dragon by presiding over a one-world government that somehow featured Europe, Russia and China quite prominently. This was after the beast was assassinated and then miraculously revived three-and-a-half years into the tribulation, of course.

Like *A Thief in the Night*, that teaching had a contradictory effect on me. At one level, it intrigued me. It was like learning a top-secret code that suggested I could decipher the true meaning of current events. But the explanations and charts also confused me with their sheer complexity. Furthermore, how exactly did my youth leader see those things in the Bible? The book of Rev-



elation mystified me, but somehow he could make perfectly good sense of its apocalyptic visions. And on top of it all, that sense of dread and foreboding still seemed to haunt any discussion of the world's grand finale.

## **Two common reactions**

In talking with followers of Jesus about the end of the world, I have found that many suffer from this same jumble of reactions that I experienced: fascination mixed with confusion tinged by fear. As a result, Christians tend to react in one of two ways to the question: *how will the world end?*

Some (a minority it seems) respond by plunging head first into the deep end of the last-days swimming pool. They try to decode the Bible's strange visions, crunch the mysterious numbers, and draw the charts.

These end-time experts understand the differences between terms like pre-tribulational and post-tribulational. They know which "trib" is correct and which Bible verses prove it. They track world events closely, especially events in the Middle East, and they can effortlessly relate those events back to specific Bible prophecies.

But in my experience, far more Christians react to end-of-the-world talk by lurching in the opposite direction. They mostly avoid the topic. They occasionally take off their shoes, roll up their jeans and tentatively dip a toe in the shallow end of apocalyptic speculation. Perhaps they read one of the *Left Behind* books, or sit through a Sunday-school class on the Old Testament book of Daniel. But that's as far as they'll go. Once the



conversation starts getting a little deep, they hop out of the pool.

If you ask one of these types if he is a pre-millennialist or a post-millennialist, he might spout the old quip: "I'm a pan-millennialist. It will all pan out in the end!" Or he might give you a two-word interpretation of the book of Revelation: "God wins!" End of discussion.

Why do Bible-believing Christians avoid these parts of their Bibles? Why don't they study more about the end of the world? There are probably several reasons:

- **The end of the world is disputed.** Very smart, devout Christians disagree about end-times stuff. Bible-believing scholars hold widely differing interpretations. If those guys can't agree on what the end-times prophecies mean, how could regular Christians like me possibly sort things out?
- **The end of the world can be divisive.** Even worse, Christians get into arguments about these issues, churches occasionally divide, and in some cases believers doubt the authenticity of one another's faith because of their views. Why risk conflict over something so confusing?
- **The end of the world is uncertain.** We don't know with 100% certainty how every detail will play out until after it happens. So why waste time and energy studying, or fighting about, something so speculative?
- **The end of the world seems irrelevant.** If you believe in Jesus, and you believe that believing in





Jesus is the way to eternal life, then why sweat the details? What if you develop an intricate theory about the end of the world that turns out to be wildly inaccurate? It won't affect your eternal destiny if you trust in Christ. Isn't talking about the end ultimately a distraction from more important truths and from living the Christian life?

Studying the end of the world seems like a lot of work with little payoff. It's just way too complicated, isn't it?

### **Behold, the forest!**

When the details overwhelm you, it's time to step back and see the big picture. Don't lose the forest for the trees. And when it comes to the Bible's teaching about the end of the world, it's easy to study the trees so closely that you get lost in the woods.

This book's primary purpose is to help regular Christians regain that big picture about the end of the world. It's a book about seeing the whole forest once again, not a microscopic study of tree bark. Or switching back to the swimming-pool illustration, this book will not take you on a deep dive to the bottom of the pool to study the tile work around the drain. Rather, this book is intended to help Christians go past their ankles, get wet, and learn to enjoy swimming in the topic without drowning.

I hope this book will help you move from being confused about the end times to having a basic, common-sense understanding. I trust it will free you from fear and anxiety, and enable you to find joy and peace in



thinking about the end of the world. Christians should not dread what the Bible says about the end. They should glory in it.

I doubt everyone will agree with everything in this book. I have my own beliefs about the end of the world, and I will attempt to present other views fairly. But my goal isn't so much to focus on the nitty-gritty questions that divide people as it is to highlight the Bible's central teachings about the end, teachings which should bring Christians together rather than separate them into camps. And who knows? Maybe a few end-time junkies will come up from the bottom of the pool while reading this book and take a much needed breath.

And the key to all this—to seeing the forest and to swimming without drowning—is always staying focused on the central figure at the end of the world.

The key is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

