

# The NT Perspective: Living in the End-times

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It is impossible to study the New Testament without at the same time studying about the “end-times” or “last things.” For, in a sense, that is what the New Testament is all about. Christian believers are those “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (I Cor. 10:11) because in Christ, God’s purposes for his people are fulfilled and the new age of salvation has already begun (II Cor. 5:17). In fact, the whole point of the New Testament is to show how God’s purposes for his people and creation are brought to fulfillment in, and through, Christ. As R.J. Bauckham states,

In contrast to cyclical conceptions of history, the biblical writings understand history as a linear movement toward a goal. God is driving history towards the ultimate fulfillment of his purposes for his creation. So biblical eschatology is not limited to the destiny of the individual; it concerns the consummation of the whole history of the world, towards which all God’s redemptive acts in history are directed (“Eschatology”, New Bible Dictionary, p. 342, Eerdmans).

Biblically, of course, the final resolution of history takes place with the return of Christ, the last judgment and the final establishment of God’s kingdom in a renewed and glorious earth (I Cor. 15:20-28). However, the unique perspective of the New Testament is that “the last days” or “the end” actually began with Christ’s death, resurrection and giving of the Spirit on Pentecost. Therefore, like it or not, we already live in “the last days” and our lives should be conducted in that light.

For Christians this should be cause for joy since with every passing day Christ’s return is closer and so “now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). In short, every generation of Christian believers, including the first century church, lives in the last days and in the light of Christ’s return. This makes for a simple deduction: to study the first century church, as recorded in the NT, is to study an example of how we – or any generation of Christians – should live in “the last days.” Our responsibilities as Christians are *always*

*the same*. They can be broken down into two broad responsibilities, which *never change*:

(1). Christians in every generation are responsible to live Christ-like lives of love and service to others as encapsulated in Gal. 6:10: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

(2). Christians in every generation are responsible to help in proclaiming the good news of “God’s salvation to the ends of the earth.” This is made crystal clear in Acts 1:6: “So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

As the Book of Acts shows, these responsibilities do not change even in the midst of persecution, economic depression, or tribulations or hardships of any kind. These Christian responsibilities are simply part and parcel of what it means to be ambassadors for Christ in a world that is under the corrupting influence of Satan’s kingdom – while, at the same time, having our true citizenship, and hope, in heaven.

As with most students of the Bible, my present beliefs about end-times haven’t come easily. They are the result of much study and many experiences with many Christian groups and individuals from childhood until today. Along the way I’ve learned that sensationalism, special “revelatory” insight, or “scoops” on current events are almost always wrong. By far, I’ve learned the most through my own personal reading and study of the Bible, history, etc. as well as from the works of recognized biblical scholars from a wide variety of denominations throughout the world. Amongst such scholars there is actually a wide consensus of agreement on most matters about eschatology. Disagreements that do occur among such scholars are primarily over details that do not affect the big picture. The following list presents principles for studying and living in the “end-times”, i.e., for any generation of Christians, that I’ve drawn from my own studies and from the works of scholars whose expertise far surpass my own. I recommend them and present them for your consideration:

1. The “end-time” began with Christ’s first coming. Specifically, the life, death and resurrection of Christ were the most important eschatological events in God’s plan of salvation. Through what he achieved, salvation is now available to all who will accept him; and, his resurrection and glorification are the prototype for all who are to follow.
2. Christ will return, raise, gather together and transform all his people, and then reign in life with them forever in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Before that time we must be willing to continue in the faith and to endure the sufferings of this age, because it is only through much tribulation that we will enter into the kingdom of God.
3. Passages such as Acts 1:6-11; 3:18-21; 14:21-23; Rom. 8:16-25; I Cor. 15; Eph. 1:9-10; Phil. 3:20-21; I Thess. 4:13-18; II Thess. 1-2; I John 3:1-3; I Peter 1:3-9; II Peter 3:1-13; Rev. 21:ff.; etc., which are clear and easy to understand, form the basis of my understanding. These truths are confirmed over and over throughout the NT and by every NT writer. No passage of scripture should be allowed to break the truth of their consistent witness.
4. The fulfillment of OT prophecies must be understood in accordance with the interpretation of the NT writers. Normally, this fulfillment was understood in the light of progressive revelation and in typological terms (rather than either a strictly literal, or else, allegorical way).
5. Sections of Scripture such as the Olivet Discourse in Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; and Luke 21 are clear in what they teach in broad terms. However, the details should not be pressed since it is notoriously difficult to be sure of what pertains, for example, to the first century destruction of Jerusalem, etc. and what might pertain to a time immediately preceding Christ’s return. By the same token, the Book of Revelation is loaded with symbolism, etc. and it is not always possible to be sure of the precise interpretation of individual passages. In all such cases, believers should focus on that which is clear throughout the rest of the NT. Those who claim “special” or “revelatory” insight about biblical passages, or current events, or date setting in regards to the last days – beyond what

the scriptures clearly teach - should be rebuked and shunned.

6. The first century church as recorded in the pages of the New Testament should be our prime example as to how to live in the end-time. The primary Christian responsibilities of living a Christ-like life of love and service towards others, and of bearing witness to Christ to the ends of the earth, never change no matter what the circumstances may be. They should be the primary focus of action for every generation of Christians.

After many years of dealing with this subject it is my conclusion that “simpler is better.” In short, it is better to focus on the simplicity of what Christ has already accomplished, the certainty of his future return, and how to live in the light of this as a child in God’s family. What may or may not happen in-between is of comparatively little significance in the overall scheme of things. A pre-occupation with possible end-time scenarios seems more often than not to cause believers to miss the mark in regards to their Christian responsibilities and often cause hurt and divisions. Below, is a recommended list of works on biblical eschatology by first class biblical scholars for those who are interested in more information:

1. The article “Eschatology” by R.J. Bauckham in the *New Bible Dictionary*. This is a first-class article and a good place to begin, as well as to use as a constant reference. It defines, frames and explains all aspects of the biblical topic of eschatology .

2. The works of George Eldon Ladd including: *The Gospel of the Kingdom*; *The Presence of the Future* and *A Theology of the NT* (Eerdmans). Ladd has a thoroughly biblical grasp of all the issues of eschatology. He is always clear in his presentations and his godly and irenic manner always makes him a joy to read.