

Clearing Up The “End Times”

There is a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about the topic of the “end times.” Many people today think the end times are imminent or that we already live in them. However- understanding the historical significance of Jesus' ministry is critical to understanding what the Bible says about the “end times,” and failure to do so leads to a lot of misleading ideas.

Let's try to clear that up!

Moses and the Promise/Curse

When the descendants of Jacob came out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses, they were led to the promised land, what we know today as Israel. However- many people do not know that Moses and the people who left Egypt did not actually go into the promised land. That generation was prevented from going into the promised land; for 40 years they wandered and eventually died in the desert because of their refusal to enter the land as God had commanded. The specific event is discussed in Numbers 14.

So, those who entered the Promised Land were the subsequent generation. They actually entered under the leadership of Joshua, which is covered in the book of Joshua.

During the period of time between leaving Egypt and entering the Promised Land, God gave them the Law, also known as the Law of Moses. This is spelled out in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

As the time drew near for the next generation to enter the Promised Land, they gathered and reaffirmed the Law and the promises of God, this is discussed in Deuteronomy 27-30. A good summary is 30:15-20. The basic idea is this: if they would obey the Law they would live in the land under God's blessings. But if they did not obey the law, they would be cursed and destroyed.

Israel entered the Promised Land in the year (roughly)1500 BC, though some scholars place the date closer to 1100 BC.

Through the history of the nation of Israel, there were times when the people were faithful and times when they were not. They would enjoy blessings when faithful, and hardships when unfaithful.

Due to unfaithfulness, the people were eventually exiled to Babylon and then brought back into the promised land. See 2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 36 for a discussion of the exile and Ezra 1 for the return. God was reluctant to punish the people and gave many chances for them to turn things around.

After this period of time, the prophets increasingly spoke about a Servant or Anointed One that would come and save the people and also bring judgment should he be rejected. That would be the Messiah. And this brings us to the time of Jesus.

The Ministry of Jesus with Respect to the Promise and Curse

People generally think that Jesus came to “save everybody,” and they also tend to be unaware of the “Jewish nature” of his ministry.

While the “saving” part is true, neglecting the Jewish nature of his ministry misses the very context of his ministry and its significance in relation to the people of Israel. This is important to understanding most of his actions and teachings, and is of particular interest with respect to the “end times.”

Jesus was sent to the nation of Israel. He was the Messiah that had been spoken of by the Old Testament prophets who would redeem the people. For example, see Isaiah 52-53. There are many complex theological issues here, but we’re focusing on the end times so let’s restrict the discussion accordingly.

One of the things Jesus would do is bring salvation and judgment to the people of Israel. This is in the context of the covenant of the Law in the time of Moses. John the Baptist clearly summarized this in Matthew 3:1-12. The ministry was dual: bringing the “wheat into the barn” (salvation) and “burning the chaff with unquenchable fire” (judgment). This fits exactly with the promise of Israel with respect to the Law.

The gospel of Matthew in particular discusses how the blessings God intended for the world would move from being given through Israel to being given through Christ and the church instead. This is discussed in the Parable of the Tenants, Matthew 21:33-46. Notice in particular Matthew 21:43-46:

43 “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. 44 Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. 46 They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

Then, in Matthew 23 Jesus clearly expresses the condemnation of that generation of Israelites. Not only did they have their own wicked practices and traditions, but they were the heirs to all sorts of wickedness from their ancestors. The time had come; the judgment promised since the time of Moses was going to fall on this very generation (23:36). They would seal their fate by rejecting Jesus.

Impending Judgment During the Church Age

Once we are into the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament, the biblical church age, we see the growth of the gospel and the beginnings of the Christian church spreading throughout the Mediterranean world.

However, we also see references to the impending judgment that was coming. As the salvation and the spread of the Gospel was part of the promise of Jesus’ ministry, so was the judgment.

It starts in Acts 2:40- “be saved from this perverse generation.” It’s the same generation Jesus spoke of in Mt 23:36, Acts 2 happens just a few months after that.

Throughout the early church age (that is, from 30 AD to 70 AD, when the New Testament books were being written), nearly every New Testament letter references an event that will

happen “soon.” It is the ultimate judgment of God against Jerusalem, the end of the Law, and the simultaneous vindication of Jesus and the church.

Jesus predicted it in Matthew 24. Here are some of these references to Jesus' imminent coming in judgment scattered through the rest of the New Testament:

Romans 13:11 The hour to awaken... salvation nearer now than when we first believed
Romans 15:20 The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet
1 Corinthians 7:29 Time is short
1 Corinthians 7:31 The world in its present form is passing away
Philippians 4:5 The Lord is near
James 5:8 The coming is near
1 Peter 4:7 The end of all things is near
Revelation 1:1 Must soon take place
Revelation 1:3 The time is near
Revelation 22:10 The time is near
Revelation 22:12 I am coming quickly

When the Bible speaks of Jesus' “second coming” it is referring to his return to bring salvation/vindication to his followers and to bring judgment to Israel. This happened in 70 AD, when the Romans destroyed the city of Israel. The destruction was so complete, the temple literally had not a single stone on another according to one contemporary historian. What Jesus has predicted in Matthew 24 had literally taken place, even down to such a detail!

What the Destruction of Jerusalem Meant

With the demise of Jerusalem and the temple, Judaism was irrevocably damaged. The thing that had distinguished Israel from all other nations on earth was no more.

Besides the violent deaths of a substantial population of the city and the scattering of those that remained, the destruction of the temple meant no more sacrifices and no more temple worship as prescribed by the Law. The Law and the covenant associated with it, established at the time of Moses, was over.

Israel had been the avenue to instruct mankind about God prior to that time, but now the church was going to carry that banner going forward, just as Jesus has predicted in Matthew 21:43. The church was vindicated by God himself in an unmistakable, incredible act.

What about Revelation?

There are some who think that what is expressed in the biblical book of Revelation is in the distant future of the author and his readers. This would have to be the case if the events in Revelation have not yet taken place.

However, the author clearly says that the things that are expressed there are to happen “soon” (Rev 1:1, 1:3, 22:10, 22:12). Jesus is coming quickly. Simply, there is no way to understand what is written there as being events in the distant future, such as in our time 2000+ years later.

Using various apocalyptic messages (a common means of communication used by many of the Old Testament prophets as well), Revelation explains the demise of the Jewish people,

the temple, and the Law. It then uses the metaphor of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 22 to refer to the church being liberated from co-existing with Judaism. It is the church of today and for the rest of time.

What is “The End Times?”

In any discussion of the “end times” or we need to consider “the end of what?” Commonly, people think of the “end times” as being the end of the planet earth and the physical universe. This idea is the result of conflating different metaphors and ideas in the Bible while ignoring their contexts.

If Jesus and the apostles said he was going to come “soon,” and that they were living in the “end times” or “last times,” then either he came “soon” and something ended, or they have serious credibility questions. We've discussed how this “coming” can be explained as having happened in the first century.

As we saw above, the “end times” were the “end” of the Law and the end of the covenant started in the time of Moses. The end was part of the covenant, as a result of disobedience. It was spoken of by other prophets, by John the Baptist and then Jesus himself. As the time drew near for this to be fulfilled, Bible writers in the New Testament kept speaking of the time being near, of it being the “last hour” and other similar remarks. They all point to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the end of the Law.

Ramifications

There are some pretty exciting ramifications to recognizing that the coming of Jesus spoken of in the New Testament actually happened in the first century.

First, it will change the way you read and understand the New Testament. You will see new insights jump out to you frequently. You will see more clearly how Judaism is the foundation of much of Christianity. You will see how the imminent coming overshadows nearly narrative and doctrine in the New Testament.

Second, it will force you to re-examine some of your beliefs in light of this realization. The first century coming of Jesus enriches the significance and understanding of nearly every church practice and doctrine.

Third, it will change your outlook on the world and the role of Christians in the world today. Those who believe in a future coming of Jesus also tend hold to the idea that the world is going to get worse and worse before that coming, and there is a tendency to just resign oneself to evil in the world. But if you consider that the world and the church are going to around forever, you will start to see the part of the Lord's Prayer “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” as a calling to bring godly righteousness to the world. And you will not be on your own; God himself wants those things for this world! We are the avenue for making the world a better place!

Conclusion

Something this short cannot address all questions and concerns about something so complex as the “end times” spoken of in the Bible. But this is the general outline that provides a clear, reasonable explanation of the Scriptures and events over the period of biblical history in view. Issues or questions that may arise should be investigated accordingly.