



Article by David Mathis

Executive Editor, [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)

# Are We Living in the Last Days?

I was driving our twin six-year-old boys to school when one of the guys asked, out of the blue, “Dad, do you know what year Jesus is coming back?”

Typically, I enjoy answering my sons’ questions with firm, confident, black-and-white truths, but this time I had to admit my ignorance.

The Bible does give us some very black-and-white things to say in moments like these, though. I told him that I did not know the year, and that even Jesus himself, when he was on earth, said that he didn’t know the exact time when he would be coming back (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32). I also took the opportunity to emphasize that if anyone says that he knows, that person is false.

Then I added that even though I don’t know what year Jesus is coming back, I do know that his coming is near. And by “near,” I mean what the New Testament means when it tells us, multiple times, that his coming is near.

## **The Next Big Thing**

God calls his church, in every generation, to live in light of this remarkable truth: nothing now stands in the way of Jesus’s

return. After his perfect life, sacrificial death for us, resurrection from the grave, and ascension to heaven to pour out his Spirit on his church, the next major movement in the history of the world is the second coming of Christ.

In the church age, we Christians have no definite unfulfilled list of events which must transpire before his return. What the Bible promises will happen at the end is already happening, in significant measure, around the world today — and has been happening, in some sense, since the earliest days of the church.

**“The next major movement in the history of the world is the second coming of Christ.”**

As long as Jesus tarries, we do indeed have the concrete directives of the church age to continue pursuing, like the evangelization of the nations (Matthew 28:19) and the hastening of his coming through holy living (2 Peter 3:11–12). And yet we have no firm, certain list of unfulfilled conditions about which Jesus could not surprise us. His coming is the next big thing and could happen at any moment. That’s what the New Testament means when it says his return is near.

### **The End Is at Hand**

Four particular texts in the New Testament, from four different human authors, say that the end is “at hand,” or literally, “has drawn near.”

Paul writes in Romans 13:12, “The night is far gone; the day is at hand.” The “times of ignorance” (as he said at Athens, Acts 17:30), the dark season of human history, now has passed with the coming of Christ. The previous statement clarifies the context: “You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (Romans 13:11). The day of Christ’s coming, Paul says, “has drawn near.”

Hebrews has the same nearness in view when he charges Christians in Hebrews 10:24–25 not to neglect “to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourag[e] one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” By this, he does not mean, as is often misunderstood, “Get more serious about Christian fellowship sometime in the future, when you see the signs of the end begin to appear.” Rather, he means that he and his readers already are living in the end times. The signs of the end aren’t off in the future; they are already happening now. “All the more” now because they already see the Day drawing near. As we will see, Hebrews, as plainly as any New Testament author, says that Christians are living “in the last days.”

Peter, then, in 1 Peter 4:7, writes, “The end of all things is at hand.” Some have wondered whether Paul and Hebrews were referring to the coming destruction of Jerusalem (which happened in 70 A.D.) as the “day” that was “the Day drawing near,” but such alternative theories hit the wall here. Peter says, very simply, “The end of all things is near.” Even if Peter wrote his letter only to Jewish converts, it would be special pleading to take “the end of all things” as simply the destruction of Jerusalem.

Finally, James says plainly and unmistakably in James 5:8, “The coming of the Lord is at hand.” Jesus’s return is near. That’s what James, Peter, Hebrews, and Paul believed — and what the faithful church has lived in light of for two thousand years. And what we should believe, and be ready for, today.

How, then, do we square the New Testament’s claim that Christ’s coming is “near” with the fact that here we are, two thousand years later, and he has not yet returned?

## Could Jesus Come Back Today?

I remember a book appearing at our local bookstore in the late 90s, when I was a teenager, with the title *Are We Living in the End Times?* I was intrigued.

Are we? Might Jesus return in my lifetime? My interest was piqued. I wanted to get that book and answer the question for myself whether we are living in the last days.

Well, eventually I did get the book, and I was very disappointed. I remember it being speculative, and concerned with the transient political realities of late 90s. The book wasn't nearly as convincing as I'd hoped it would be. But it wasn't too long until I went to college and became involved with a campus ministry that pointed me to the Bible's clarity about whether we are living in the last days.

**"It's not about shortness of time as we conceive of it, but about nearness in history as God crafts it."**

As early as Acts 2:17, just after Jesus has ascended to heaven and poured out his Spirit on his church, Peter declares that the "last days" prophecy from Joel 2 is being fulfilled in their midst: "In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh."

Then Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:1, "Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty." And the times of difficulty he refers to were already happening for his readers. He was saying, in effect, "Don't be surprised that life is tough; these are the last days, remember?" And 2 Peter 3:3 makes a similar assumption, and gives a similar reminder: "Scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires." For Peter's readers, and for us, the scoffers aren't future; they are here now. We are living in the last days.

James denounces the unbelieving rich by saying, “You have laid up treasure in the last days” (James 5:3). James, his readers, and we today are already in the last days, and those who lay up earthly treasure now do so, tragically, in this final season of history before Jesus returns.

Perhaps most prominent of all, and unmistakable, is the first two verses of Hebrews: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” The first coming of Christ ushered in this final season of world history — these last days — and his second coming is the next major step in history.

### **History of Salvation**

Unlike many other major systems of belief around the world, Jews and Christians view history as linear. History is God’s story, and it is going somewhere. It had a beginning, and it will have an end. There were first days, there were the days of the patriarchs and the many seasons (so many ups and downs!) in the history of Israel, and there were four hundred years of prophetic silence, and then the days Jesus walked the earth.

And since then, we have been living in the last days. We don’t know how long this present season of history will last. It has been almost two thousand years so far. But we do know that this present season of history, which began with the early

church, is the last one until Jesus comes. The next major, literally epoch-making event to come is not some especially great persecution (as if Christians haven’t been persecuted for the last two thousand years and aren’t being persecuted in horrible ways around the world today); and it’s not God intervening to rapture Christians from being persecuted. God has better plans than to keep his people from hard times (Acts 14:22; 2 Timothy 3:12).

**“History is God’s story, and it is going somewhere. It had a beginning, and it will have an end.”**

The next big step is that Jesus is coming back. That's what the New Testament means when it says his return is "near" or "at hand." It's not about shortness of time as we conceive of it, but about nearness in history as God crafts it. And it should make us a people who anticipate it, pray for it, and live in light of it.

The coming of Christ is near. This is what we teach our children, and remind ourselves. We are living in the last days.

David Mathis (@davidcmathis) is executive editor for [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org) and pastor at Cities Church in Minneapolis/St. Paul. He is a husband, father of four, and author of *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines*.