

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

A TRAVELER'S GUIDE THROUGH
THE END OF THIS AGE

MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

What Happens Next

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ISBN 978-1-4002-6002-7 (audiobook)

ISBN 978-1-4002-6001-0 (eBook)

ISBN 978-1-4002-6003-4 (IE)

ISBN 978-1-4002-6000-3 (HC)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lucado, Max, author.

Title: What happens next : a traveler's guide through the end of this age / Max Lucado.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee : Thomas Nelson, [2024] | Summary: "Are we living in the end times? If so, what does that mean for me? Max Lucado's optimistic, accessible, and non-sensational guide to what the Bible says about heaven's timeline will empower readers to face the future with faith"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024011237 (print) | LCCN 2024011238 (ebook) | ISBN 9781400260003 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781400260010 (epub) | ISBN 9781400260027 (audiobook)

Subjects: LCSH: End of the world. | Eschatology.

Classification: LCC BT877 .L83 2024 (print) | LCC BT877 (ebook) | DDC 236/9--dc23/eng/20240323

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024011237>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024011238>

Printed in the United States of America

§PrintCode

Denalyn and I would like to dedicate this volume to our wonderful friends at HarperCollins Christian Publishing. For decades we have been the beneficiaries of their kindness, professionalism, and commitment to quality. We are honored to know them and celebrate their great work.

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Acknowledgments

AN EXTRAORDINARY COLLECTION of friends and colleagues contributed to this book. They offered advice, answered questions, corrected my misdirections, and gave ample words of encouragement. Let me introduce them to you.

My editorial assistant, Karen Hill—we've worked together for over three decades. She's heard more Lucado lessons and read more Lucado chapters than any person on the planet. She is a saint and I'm forever grateful.

My editor, Sam O'Neal—unflappable, calming, and capable. If this book brings clarity, it is largely due to Sam's innate ability to help a writer stay on task and avoid rabbit trails. Thank you, Sam.

Steve and Cheryl Green manage my publishing, broadcasting, online ministry . . . they manage me! And they manage everything with joy!

A cohort of colleagues from the church where I serve met with me each week for several months. They read each chapter in advance. Together we prayed, pored over passages, and pursued biblical truth. A loud thank-you to Travis Eades, Jeremy Jennings, Pat Hile, Matt Moore, and Rick Nicosia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Three scholars were kind enough to review this manuscript and offer their thoughts: Mark Hitchcock, Matt Queen, and David Drury. These friends were generous with their time, honest with their input. When we disagreed, they were gracious; when we agreed, they were affirming. I deeply appreciate each of you.

O. S. Hawkins, Jimmy Evans, and David Jeremiah were always a call or text away. Each one a serious student of the Bible. Each one a cheerleader and friend.

Special gratitude to my longtime copy editor Carol Bartley, with highest admiration.

Great appreciation to Rhonda Lowry for checking and double checking sources, and to Phil Newman, Kelsey Mitchener, and Kristin Spann for proofreading the manuscript. Thank you for cleaning up after me. Elena de Medina translated this book into Spanish, and, in doing so, made valuable suggestions. Gracias!

Jana Muntsinger and Pamela McClure—peerless publicists. I'm grateful.

The team at HarperCollins Christian Publishing is the gold standard. I'm indebted to Mark Schoenwald, Don Jacobson, Andrew Stoddard, Mark Glesne, Bria Woods, Janene MacIvor, Laura Minchew, Doug Lockhart, Mark Weising, and Dave Schroeder.

A special thanks to creative artists Emily Ghattas and Curt Diepenhorst for designing this book, and to Layne Pittman and David Feagan for producing the audiobook.

Greg, Susan, and Daniel Ligon have the extraordinary capacity to spin innumerable plates and corral a herd of stallions. I'm in awe of you.

Here is a standing ovation for Caroline Green, overseer of the *Encouraging Word Podcast* and all-around brilliant associate.

Margaret Mechinus and Janie Padilla keep their wings hidden away, but don't be fooled. They are angels on loan from heaven.

Years ago, I began inviting David Treat, an elder from our church, to the final editing session. He gives up two or three days each year to sit in the corner of the room and pray while we work. A picture of a servant.

Brett, Jenna, Rosie, Max, Rob, Andrea, Rio, Jeff, Sara, and June. Our family keeps growing and so does my love.

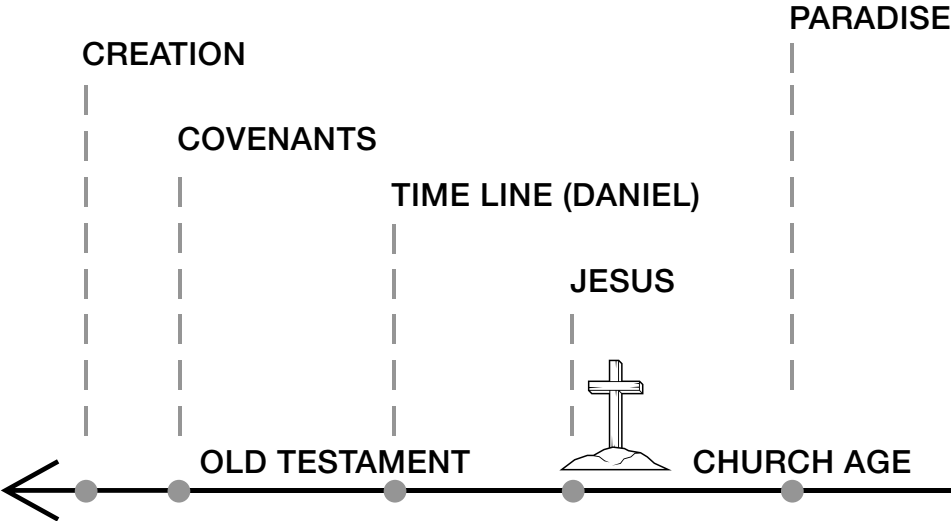
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Denalyn, my bride. You're everything I ever want to do and be. I love you.

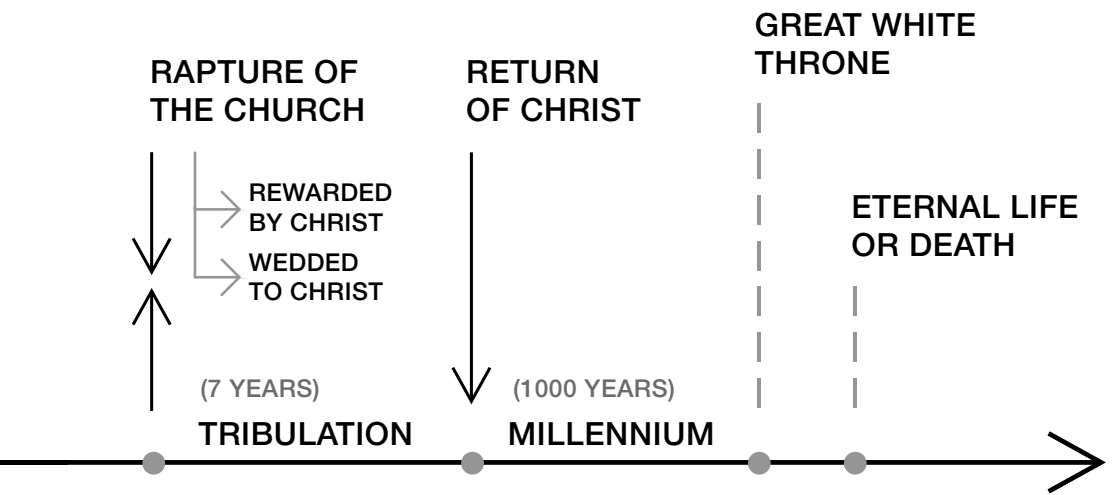
And you, dear reader. Thank you. May God bless you on this exploration of what happens next. The topic is so exciting and invigorating. I offer a prayer for you.

One final word. I have a reserved seat at the PWPOET Café in heaven—**P**astors **W**ho **P**reached **O**n **E**nd **T**imes. We will celebrate what we understood correctly, chuckle at what we missed entirely. Mostly, we will honor the one Teacher who stands above us all, Jesus Christ.

HEAVEN'S TIME LINE



NOT TO SCALE



Good to Go

YOU'VE SELECTED YOUR CLOTHING. You've checked the weather and chosen your jacket. Toiletries are packed. Suitcase is fastened. Hotel is confirmed. Your boarding pass is downloaded. Your ride to the airport is waiting. Before you walk out the door, you pause to inventory your list.

Water bottle? Got it.

Spending money? Got it.

Smartphone? Book to read? Journal and pen? Check. Check. Check.

You are good to go.

There may be surprises along the way. Unexpected eventualities. Interruptions here. Changes there. Delays, disruptions, detours. You can't know everything that will happen. But you've done all you can do to prepare. You've made your plans, reviewed the itinerary, and anticipated the journey. You are equipped. You are ready.

You're good to go.

Wouldn't it be foolish not to be?

I've done my share of travel through the decades. I've trudged through dozens of airports. Slept in too many hotels to count. I've worn out the

wheels of a roller bag. In the process, I've spoken to hundreds of travelers. I consider myself a bit of an expert in airport repartee. It typically consists of one question.

"Where are you headed?"

There you have it. You are hereby equipped for travel chitchat. That question is for a traveler what a spoon is for a chef. I use it often.

I've heard hundreds of answers. "Toledo." "Rio." "Tokyo." "Kokomo." But I've never, ever heard this reply: "I don't know."

Not once has someone said, "I have no clue."

Travelers know their destination, right? Travel 101 instructs, "Know where you go."

Wouldn't Life 101 say the same?

We are all headed somewhere. Each day brings us closer to a final breath, a final heartbeat, a final sigh. No one is getting younger. Death comes to the young, the old, the rich, the poor, the decent, the decadent, the king, and the commoner. Shouldn't our destination be an obsession?

The Bible certainly suggests as much. It makes almost five hundred references to heaven.¹ The New Testament mentions the return of Jesus more than three hundred times—one out of every thirty verses! Twenty-three of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament describe Jesus' second coming, and on some fifty occasions we are told to be ready.²

If quantity equates to priority, then life after this life is a crucial issue to God.

Canvass the Scripture's teaching about the future, and two themes repeatedly surface.

It's All About Hope

On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus told his followers what was going to happen the following day. He would be abandoned by his friends and killed by his enemies. Denial, betrayal, broken promises, and death.

What news could be worse for them? Their rabbi, dead. The apostles, alone. Their dreams, ended. Questions rose in their minds like waves on a stormy sea.

“How can this be?”

“What does he mean?”

“Where shall we go?”

Yet before they could voice their fears, Jesus calmed them.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:1–3).

Note what Jesus did. He lifted their eyes; he shifted their thoughts. He spoke of his Father’s house, a prepared place, and his promised return. In essence he said, “Think less about your present fears. Think much about your eternal home.” What would Jesus say to this troubled generation of ours?

Hope is an endangered species. We are more troubled than we’ve been in nearly fifty years. Only 14 percent of respondents check the “very happy” box on the survey questionnaire. We are less optimistic about the future than we’ve been in three decades. “Nearly one in four people—which translates to a billion people—feels very or fairly lonely.”³ Happiness is down. Loneliness is up. And optimism has taken a right hook to the chin.

Most alarming is the absence of peace among our youth. Research from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is showing an epidemic of mental health problems among eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in the United States.

- One out of four shows symptoms of anxiety disorder.⁴
- One in eight young adults (13 percent) has experienced serious suicidal thoughts.⁵
- One in seven young adults deals with a substance-use disorder, including drugs or alcohol.⁶
- Overall, half of college-aged individuals indicate they regularly experience anxiety, depression, fear, or suicidal thoughts.⁷
- Today’s young adults—tomorrow’s generation of leaders—are struggling to find meaning and purpose in their lives.⁸
- The suicide rate is the highest it has been since World War II.⁹

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

You can relate. Your heart has been broken. Your dreams have been shattered. Your body has battled disease and aging. And maybe you've wondered, really wondered, if this life is worth living.

God's therapy for our trepidation reads like this:

For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever. (2 Cor. 4:17–18 NLT)

Face the problems of this life by focusing on the promises of the next.

Face the problems of this life by focusing on the promises of the next. The future is not as frightening if you know the future. And you can know the future when you know who controls it.

It's All About Him

On the day Jesus ascended into heaven, two angels appeared and asked the watching followers this question: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11 NASB).

Jesus will come! Not "may come," "might come," or "possibly could come." Jesus will come! His promised return is not a nebulous, vapid, cross-your-fingers aspiration. It is a concrete, guaranteed appearance of our Savior.

Jesus validated his return by vacating his tomb. This was the conviction of the apostle Paul:

If there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. . . . If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot. But the truth is that Christ *has* been

raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries. (1 Cor. 15:14, 19–20 MSG)

Is the tomb of Jesus empty? Did he defang death? Did Christ discard his shrouds like a bad habit and march out of the tomb?

The women who came to the tomb would say, “Yes! We saw him!” (John 20:11–17; Matt. 28:9–10).

His disciples who gathered in the Upper Room would say, “Yes! We saw him!” (John 20:19–29).

Five hundred followers would say, “Yes! We saw him!” (1 Cor. 15:6).

“Line them up!” invites the New Testament. “Ask the followers if Jesus rose from the dead.”

The resounding answer is “Yes.” His tomb floor has the prints of pierced feet. Those feet were nailed to a cross on Friday and lifeless in the grave on Saturday. But on Sunday the hope of Easter called them to stand, step, and walk out of the grave.

When Jesus vacated the tomb, he populated the heart of humanity with hope. Since his grave is empty, our confidence in his return is not.

Peter spent most of his remaining years living in Jerusalem. How many times did he take the brief walk to the Mount of Olives and reflect on the words of the angel? “He will come back.” Did he search the clouds? Contemplate the heavens? Reflect on the angel’s promise? “Jesus . . . will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go.”

Three decades later he urged his readers to do so. “Set your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13 NASB).

The Christian lives life on tiptoe, ever searching the skies. We awaken with the thought *Perhaps today!* Our hope is centered on the bodily return of Christ. We are looking to a new age in which Jesus will be crowned as the rightful King and we will serve as his grateful servants. All of history is headed to the great day that will inaugurate an endless era of justice, joy, and glory.

In one of his earliest sermons, Peter declared: “The Lord will . . . send Jesus, the One he chose to be the Christ. But Jesus must stay in heaven until the time comes when all things will be made right again” (Acts 3:19–21 NCV).

Things will be made right again. Does that assurance not speak to the heavy heart? Weary of racism? *Things will be made right.* Weary of child abuse? *Things will be made right.* Weary of terrorists wreaking terror? Rulers pillaging the poor? Scandal infecting the church? *Things . . . will . . . be . . . made . . . right.*

This is our hope. *He* is our hope. “Christ Jesus . . . is our hope” (1 Tim. 1:1 NASB). Follow the counsel of Paul: “Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:2 NKJV). I disagree with the person who says, “We can be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good.” Hogwash. “If you read history,” C. S. Lewis wrote, “you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.” He added: “The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven.”¹⁰

I told a friend that I was writing a book about the end times. He responded with cynicism. “Why think about the future? I’m a *carpe diem* sort of dude. I’d rather focus on the here and now.” Valid point. We have bills to pay, kids to raise, deadlines to meet. Why occupy our thoughts with the “not yet” when we need strength to face the “right now”?

Simple. Understanding the future empowers us to face the present. That was Paul’s opinion: “I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us” (Phil. 3:13–14 NLT).

Look at those phrases: “looking forward to what lies ahead,” “end of the race,” “heavenly prize.” The best of life is yet to be. Got challenges in this life? Then ponder the next. Be a future-facing follower of Christ.

Besides, don’t we yearn to know about the future? I do.

I’m genuinely curious about what happens next. Maybe because I’m getting older. My next birthday cake will require room for seventy candles. I’ll need a fire extinguisher to blow them out. My hair is grayer, and my bald spot is larger. My hourglass has much more sand on the bottom than on the top. Consequently, eschatology (the study of end times) has become a fascination for me. Odd, I know. Some people take up gardening or painting as

they get older; I've taken up questions about the rapture, the Antichrist, and Armageddon. I really, really want to know what's around the corner.

I'm curious about the future.

I'm also concerned about the present. Who wouldn't be? As I write these words, the United States lives under the threat of conflict with Iran or China or Russia or all three. Israel is at war with Hamas, and Hezbollah is rattling sabers against Israel. We could add a cluster of other concerns: shifting weather patterns, pandemics, and famine. Our fragile condition has prompted a group to monitor the possibility of global catastrophe. Their latest estimate? We are "ninety seconds to midnight."¹¹

Quite a mess, right? It's no wonder four in ten Americans believe we are living in end times.¹² We are looking at a very severe future. Yet, Jesus told us to anticipate choppy waters.

According to him, the final days will be marked by escalating events of . . .

- deception
- signs in the heavens
- economic turmoil
- seismic activity
- persecution of Christians
- political conflict
- famines
- pestilence
- commotions
- ethnic conflicts
- false prophets
- waning faith
- fearful sights
- wars and rumors of wars
- diseases (Matt. 24:4–14; Mark 13:5–13; Luke 21:11)

Sounds like the daily news. Jesus said, "All these events are the beginning of the labor pains" (Matt. 24:8 CSB).

I have it on good authority that labor pains increase in frequency and intensity as the delivery draws near. Jesus was speaking of a day in which

the same will happen in the world. There will be a generation in which danger and depravity escalate at an increasing rate.

Are we living in that era? In other words . . .

Is This the Fourth Quarter?

I believe it is. Something happened on Friday, May 14, 1948, that differentiates this era from any other in human history.

On that day two men sat in a quiet corner of the F Street Club in Washington, DC, and worked out the wording of a statement soon to be released by the White House. One of the men was Harry Truman. He had become president of the United States when Franklin Roosevelt died early in his fourth term. The next few years led Truman into one of the most tumultuous chapters of American history. Under his leadership World War II came to an end, the United Nations was formed, the US military was desegregated, and the Marshall Plan was born. He was president during the surrenders of Germany and Japan. He witnessed the fall of the Iron Curtain over Eastern Europe and the Bamboo Curtain over China and parts of East Asia.

Yet, of all Truman's decisions, none more hearkened into the past or bore more implications for the eternal future than the one he and his special counsel Clark Clifford had met to discuss. At issue was the confirmation of a Jewish state. Though much of his administration, including his secretary of state, opposed such a step, Truman was resolved. Himself a Christian, he had sought the counsel of prominent pastor J. Frank Norris of Fort Worth, Texas.¹³

Norris reminded the president of God's promise to Isaac: "Live here as a foreigner in this land, and I will be with you and bless you. I hereby confirm that I will give all these lands to you and your descendants, just as I solemnly promised Abraham, your father" (Gen. 26:3 NLT).

Truman sent Pastor Norris a thank-you note. Shortly thereafter he made his decision.

Having hammered out the best wording for the statement, Clifford put through a hurried call to Elihu Epstein, an official at the Jewish agency in Washington, to tell him that recognition would occur later that day. "The New Jewish state—the first Jewish state in nearly 2,000 years—was

declared on schedule at midnight in Jerusalem, 6:00 p.m. in Washington. Eleven minutes later at the White House, Charlie Ross announced *de facto* recognition by the United States.”¹⁴

The president signed a two-paragraph proclamation that read: “This government has been informed that a Jewish state has been proclaimed in Palestine, and recognition has been requested by the provisional government thereof. The United States recognizes the provisional government as the *de facto* authority of the new state of Israel.”

The name “state of Israel” was handwritten because the name of the nation was not chosen until the last minute.

What other nation has been promised land by God, been removed from the land, and then returned to it? The answer: none. Yet, this reinstatement was promised in Scripture.

From Ezekiel, 650 years before Christ: “For I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land” (Ezek. 36:24 *NLV*).

From Isaiah, 740 years before Christ: “He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth” (Isa. 11:12).¹⁵

May 14, 1948, saw a page turn in the calendar of prophetic history. Circumstances changed when the Jews were given their land. As we will discuss in the following pages, almost all the key events of the end times hinge upon the existence of Israel as a nation.

- The book of Daniel prophesies a covenant between the Antichrist and Israel (Dan. 9:27). This can only happen if the nation of Israel exists.
- Scripture prophesies a rebuilding of the temple (Isa. 2:1–4; 2 Thess. 2:4). Again, Israel must exist for this to happen.
- Daniel and Jesus forecast an act of utter sacrilege in the temple (Dan. 12:11; Mark 13:14). No Israel, no temple.
- The war of Armageddon only makes sense if Israel is occupying the land where that particular valley (called Megiddo) is found.

Prior to 1948 a Jewish repopulation of Israel as a state was unthinkable. Jews were dispersed to more than seventy countries for more than twenty

centuries. Yet since 1948 we have seen them return. For the first time since AD 135, there are more Jews living in Israel than in any other place on earth.

This resettlement is often referred to as a “super sign.” The Bible repeatedly presents the regathering of Jewish people as a watershed event that must occur before other end-times events take place (Jer. 30:1–5; Ezek. 34:11–24; Ezek. 37; Zech. 10:6–10). It is akin to the flag wave at a NASCAR race signaling the final lap. Other signs take on heightened importance now that the super sign has occurred. We’ve always had wars, disasters, and deceptions. But now that the milestone moment has happened and Israel is restored, the other signs progressively signal the impending end.

If history is a year, the leaves are autumn gold.

If history is a day, the sun has begun to set.

If history is an hour, the hands of the clock are nearing full circle.

We have entered the last days. So, let us be looking. Let us be declaring: the end is near.

This was my job on the high school football team. I was one of the players who declared the onset of the fourth quarter. There were five of us, maybe six. We were the misfits on the varsity squad. Not bad enough to be cut. By no means good enough to play. In the football dog pound, we were the mongrels.

But we had our moment. And that moment came at the opening of the fourth quarter of each game.

Our assignment, on the coach’s signal, was to run up and down the sideline with four fingers in the air shouting, “Fourth quarter! Fourth quarter!”

Teams tend to grow weary as the game wears on. The minutes take their toll. Players need a wake-up call. *This is the last push before the end. Dig deep! Be alert!*

Someone needed to yell, “Fourth quarter!” So, we did.

Doesn’t the same need to be declared today?

Christ could come at any moment. I believe that with all my heart—not just because of what I read in the Scriptures, but also because of what I read in the news.

To be clear, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels

We have entered the last days.
So, let us be looking. Let us be
declaring: the end is near.

in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matt. 24:36 BSB). The exact time remains hidden. While we cannot know the day or hour, we can know the signs. Wouldn’t you agree that the signs of our day warrant our vigilance?

We have a choice. We can view the future through the eyes of fear or faith. The eyes of fear see little reason for hope and ample reason for anxiety. The eyes of faith see history inching closer and closer to a new era, a heavenly destiny. God tells us what to expect not to scare us, but to prepare us. He is the pilot on the intercom telling the passengers about impending turbulence. A good pilot keeps his travelers informed. Our good Father does the same.

Between now and the end of this age we can expect some severe instability. But we will arrive safely.

Maybe you are a bit leery about this discussion. End-times studies have left you confused, perhaps cynical. I understand. Prophecy is to the Bible what the Serengeti is to Africa—vast, expansive, and intimidating. It’s a world of numbers and symbols, bears and tigers. Most students prefer the domesticated, well-traveled streets of Scripture: the teachings of Jesus, the doctrines of Paul, the biographies of the Patriarchs. Prophecy intimidates many Bible students.

God tells us what to expect not to scare us, but to prepare us.

It infatuates others. If Bible prophecy is the Serengeti, some Christians are big-game hunters. They never leave the bush. They find prophecy on every page, symbolism in every story, and clues in every verse. They can be a great source of help, but they can also be stubbornly opinionated. Prophetic experts tend to be very confident; they walk with a game-hunter swagger. They always seem to know (and enjoy knowing) what others don’t.

Somewhere in between these two positions is a healthy posture. Believers who avoid utter ignorance on one hand and total arrogance on the other. Who seek what God intends: a deep-seated confidence that our tomorrow is in our Lord’s hands. The purpose of prophecy is to empower the saint with a sense of God’s sovereignty. As Paul wrote: “But one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them” (1 Cor. 14:3 NLT). Prophecy prepares us to face the future with faith.

Five hundred years ago sailors feared the horizon. Sail too far and risk falling off the edge, they reasoned. The common wisdom of the ancients warned against the unseen. So did the monument at the Strait of Gibraltar, where Spaniards held dominion over both sides of the strait. At its narrowest margin, where Africa can see Europe, they erected the Pillar of Hercules, a huge marker that bore in its stone the three-word Latin slogan *Ne plus ultra*. No More Beyond.

But then came Columbus and the voyage of 1492. The discovery of the new world swung open the western doors of Spain. They took the Latin phrase “No More Beyond,” removed the first word, and impressed this slogan onto their coins: “More Beyond.”¹⁶

Remove the “no” from your future. Open your heart and open your life to the great assurances. You were made to explore what happens next. It’s all about hope. It’s all about him.

Let’s make sure we are good to go.

Four Big Ideas

THE “FLIGHT TO NOWHERE” sold out in ten minutes. Qantas Airways called it the fastest-selling ticket in the airline’s history. Cheap seats were priced at \$575, and first-class seats sold for \$2,675. What did passengers get for their money? Seven hours of circling over Australia, landing in the same place from where they left.¹

Chalk it up to COVID-19. People were weary of being stuck at home. In response to months of going nowhere, they shelled out hundreds of dollars to—well, go nowhere.

Forgive my bluntness, but I’ll keep my money in my pocket and my feet on the ground. Fly in circles? No, thank you. Fly toward a destination? That’s better. And that’s biblical.

Inherent in the pages of Scripture is this promise: we end up in a better place than where we began. We survive the winter times of life because we believe that a glorious springtime awaits us.

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This promise is buttressed by a quartet of convictions. They surface in the first chapter of the Bible's first book and thread their way through Scripture until the final page of the final book.

- We were made to reign.
- God has made and will keep his promises.
- Heaven has a time line.
- A golden era, the millennium, awaits God's children.

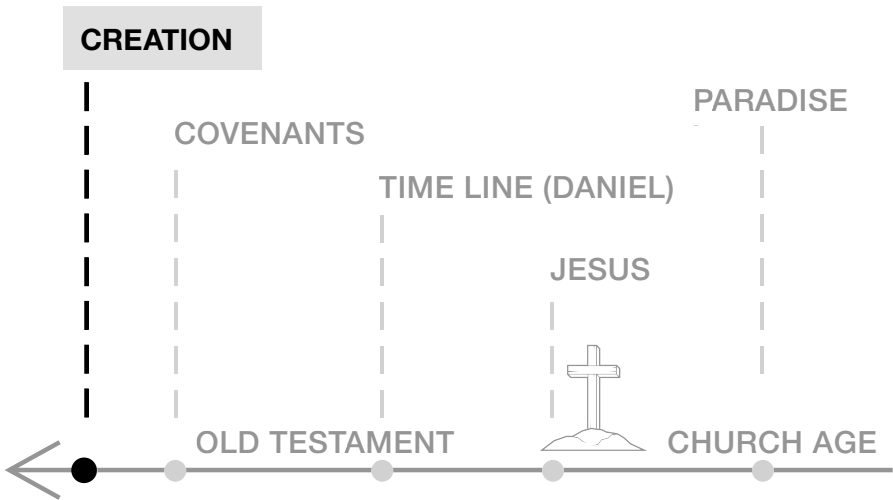
Four big ideas. They serve as pillars in the discussion of what's about to happen. Consider them the big rocks in the end-times jar around which the smaller pebbles settle.

Most of us are familiar with many of those smaller pebbles. When we think about the end times, several specific images and ideas surface in our minds. The seven years of chaos called the tribulation. The cruelty and charisma of the Antichrist. The jaw-dropping spectacle of Armageddon, that final battle long promised and long dreaded. These are the plot points that make end-times discussions so stimulating—scary as a serpent's fang and explosive as the Fourth of July.

We're going to explore those plot points. I promise. We're going to address the big events and answer the big questions.

But let's start with these four ideas—these four pillars. They will give us a solid foundation for understanding God's plans for the future. Flying in circles? No. We are headed to a far better place than where we started.

It Looks Like Reign



NO ONE HAS GREATER DREAMS for you than God does. The most insidious deception in human history is the lie that says, “God is against you.” Nothing could be further from the truth. The one who came up with the very idea of you has plans for your future that are out of this world.

He unveiled them in history’s most famous garden: Eden. Want to

God's designs for you
and me were unveiled in
Scripture's opening pages.

know what's coming next? Then consider what came first. God's designs for you and me were unveiled in Scripture's opening pages. Eschatology, the study of end things, begins with protology, the study of first things.

Your Destiny: Eden Fulfilled

Our story begins like this: "Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground'" (Gen. 1:26 NLT).

By this point God had created much. Stars sparkled at night. Clouds floated during the day. The air was sweet with the fragrance of flowers and the music of birds. Animals roamed the valleys and slept in the trees. But creation, albeit magnificent and mighty, was not made in the image of God.

That privilege was reserved for the likes of you and me. We are made in God's image.

Angels aren't.

Elephants aren't.

Jellyfish aren't.

My dog, Andy, isn't.

Only people are. Want to see how this happened?

"Then the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground" (Gen. 2:7 NLT).

Ladies, you've wondered why we men can be so messy. Simple, we are made from dust! Out of the soil of the garden, God shaped Adam's torso. He then carved out the two legs. He rounded the head and formed a nose. The same hand that flung stars in the heavens and scooped the floor for the ocean sculpted the first person.

Then, in an act that must have caused the angels to gasp, "he breathed the breath of life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living person" (Gen. 2:7 NLT).

God exhaled. Adam inhaled. And for the first of what would be zillions of such occasions, lungs rose and emptied. Adam had life. But he had more than oxygen in him. He had God's breath in him. What a sterling, stunning creation he must have been. Unsullied by greed. Uncorrupted by hate. Untainted by guilt. Unacquainted with fear.

Adam was perfect. So perfect, in fact, that God gave him a job. "The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it" (Gen. 2:15 NLT).

God commissioned Adam to care for creation, and God provided a partner to help him. What a delight to read God's announcement: "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18 NLT).

For the first time God used the phrase "It is not good." When he saw the light, it was good. When he saw the land, it was good. Plants. Trees. Daytime. Nighttime. Good! Good! Good! Good!

But Adam? Alone? No companion? No partner? "Not good." So God brought animals and birds to Adam "to see what [the man] would call them. . . . But still there was no helper just right for him" (Gen. 2:19–20 NLT).

Adam exercised his role as overseer and assigned a name to each creature. He called the hippo a hippo, the rhino a rhino, the mosquito a mosquito. But the man could find no "helper just right for him" (v. 20 NLT).

And, men, aren't we glad? What if he'd chosen a warthog as a helper? But God had a special gift for Adam.

So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While the man slept, the LORD God took out one of the man's ribs and closed up the opening. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib, and he brought her to the man.

"At last!" the man exclaimed.

"This one is bone from my bone,
and flesh from my flesh!
She will be called 'woman,'
because she was taken from 'man.'"

This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. (Gen. 2:21–24 NLT)

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God put Adam to sleep (thereby forever sanctifying the act of a good nap), extracted a rib from Adam's side, and created the perfect partner. Eve, like the bone from which she was made, was created to remain closest to Adam's heart. Life was good.

Then God said, “. . . Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” (Gen. 1:26 ESV)

So many words to be highlighted. Where to begin? Maybe with the pronoun *them*. “Let *them* . . .” (emphasis mine). The man and woman would be partners. Equally cherished by God. Equally made in God's image.

Together they would “have *dominion* over the fish . . . the birds . . . the livestock . . .” (emphasis mine).

They would reign over creation, co-regents with God.

Yet, something happened. Do we oversee the sea? Rule over the livestock? Have dominion over creation? Far from it. We can hardly get fish to bite, much less obey. Some animals would sooner eat us than submit to us. We agree with the New Testament writer who observed, “When God put [Adam and Eve] in charge of everything, nothing was excluded. But we don't see it yet, don't see everything under human jurisdiction” (Heb. 2:8 MSG).

Indeed, we don't. Instead of ruling the world, we feel ruled by the world. We see creation in a state of corruption, eruption, and pollution. Heat waves. Wildfires. Hurricanes. Earthquakes. Famines. “The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom. 8:22). Something is awry. What's more, we don't see male and female behaving as partners, but often as rivals.

What happened?

Sin happened. Rebellion happened. Satan happened. Greed happened. A villain infiltrated the garden. He convinced the couple that the garden, resplendent and abundant, was inadequate. Eden was not enough for the couple. They wanted to be like God. And God, who knows what is best for creation, said, “No.” He temporarily suspended the garden-of-Eden plan. But he did not cancel it. He did not abandon it.

He certainly did not abandon us. Just the opposite.

God's Decision: Eden Reclaimed

God set in motion a plan of redemption that includes promises, prophets, and miracles. He made a covenant with Abraham. He raised up Joseph in Egypt. He gave courage to David and strength to Esther.

But, still, the people sinned. The curse of self-centeredness was inescapable. Adam sinned first. We've each sinned since. It would take a perfect man and a perfect sacrifice to overcome it.

Enter Jesus Christ.

Scripture calls him the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45–49). The two had much in common. Like Adam, Jesus had no earthly father. Like Adam, Jesus was given authority over creation. Like Adam, Jesus was tempted. Unlike Adam, Jesus never sinned.

We can thank the apostle Paul for this concise summary:

Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! One man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right. (Rom. 5:18–19 MSG)

Jesus succeeded where Adam failed. He did for us what rescuers did for a group of children lost in the Amazon jungle.

On May 1, 2023, a small aircraft with seven passengers crashed in one of the most remote parts of the world: the Amazon rainforest. The Cessna was flying from one small village to a slightly larger one, hundreds of miles south of Bogotá, Colombia.

Evidently, the single-engine prop failed in midair, causing a forced meeting with the dense canopy of trees and the jungle's unforgiving floor. All seven passengers were presumed dead. The odds of survival were minimal. The search area was a hundred miles long and twenty miles wide.

It took Colombian special forces more than two weeks, but they eventually located the crash site. When they did, they were saddened to find three of the seven passengers had perished upon impact but surprised to learn the other four—all children, all siblings ranging from ages thirteen

years to eleven months—were nowhere to be found. Not on board and not around the crash site.

Colombia stepped up the rescue efforts. The government dispatched 150 soldiers, 40 volunteers, and several rescue dogs. Tiny clues of hope were found: a baby bottle here, small footprints there, used diapers. The children had been raised near the jungle. The older ones knew which plants and bugs to avoid. Even so, they were just kids. How could they still be alive?

Days turned into weeks, and desperation grew. Rescuers dropped boxes of food, water, even whistles into the jungle, hoping these would help sustain the children. But day after day ended in despair. After more than a month of effort, the search crew began to wonder if the children were purposely dodging their help.

Turns out that was the case.

More than once, rescuers were within fifty feet of the kids. The children didn't know if men had come to hurt or help, so they refused the ones who could save them.¹

Might that story be a parable for humanity?

The overarching message of the Bible is God's relentless pursuit of his family. What he decreed in heaven is declared through creation. He will have his garden. He will share it with his children. Our names have been written into the grand narrative of God.

But what have we done in response? We have resisted the one who came to save us.

Adam and Eve did so. "When they heard the sound of GOD strolling in the garden in the evening breeze, the Man and his Wife hid in the trees of the garden, hid from GOD" (Gen. 3:8 MSG).

They hid from God! We've been hiding ever since. Adam and Eve covered themselves in fig leaves. We cover ourselves in work or status. They ducked into the trees. We hide in the foliage of denial, pride, or shame.

God, never easily put off, sought them out. He asked a question that has rung through the ages.

"God called to the Man: 'Where are you?'" (Gen. 3:9 MSG). This was not a question of geography. God knew their location. This was a question of the heart. "Where are you in relation to me? To my plan for your life?"

The question augured a divine rescue mission. God began sending message after message, miracle after miracle, mercy after mercy. He used

patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets, and preachers. He's not beyond using a whale, a donkey, or a burning bush if that's what it takes to get our attention.

The Colombians displayed similar devotion. They came up with a plan. What could convince the children to come out of hiding? The team got creative. They lowered speakers into the jungle and turned up the volume so that a message could be heard over a mile in any direction. And then, this detail is key, they played an invitation recorded by the siblings' beloved grandmother telling them to "stay in one place, the rescue team is here to help."

On day number forty, all four children—emaciated, insect-bitten, weak, and most of all, afraid—were found. Their grandmother's voice called them out of the shadows.

They just needed a voice they could trust.

We did as well.

So, in heaven's finest act of love, God became human. Jesus Christ entered our jungle of hurt and heartache. He spoke with a voice we could trust and issued a message we dare not resist. *I've come to take you out of here.*

Not only did he talk to us; he died for us. It was necessary that he do so. Remember, God's garden is perfect. Yet God's children are anything but. When Jesus died on the cross, he died our death, paid our price, and took our place. He, the sinless, became a sinner so that we, the sinners, could be regarded as sinless.

God's dream has never changed. Consider his invitation:

"Look! I have been standing at the door, and I am constantly knocking. If anyone hears me calling him and opens the door, I will come in and fellowship with him and he with me. I will let everyone who conquers sit beside me on my throne, just as I took my place with my Father on his throne when I had conquered." (Rev. 3:20–21 TLB)

God's storyline concludes with you, me, all his children living, ruling, dining, and serving with him in a perfect world. In the Bible's final book, these words are said to Jesus:

"You were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God

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persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve
our God,
and they will reign on the earth.”

(Rev. 5:9–10)

That’s you! The final stop in your heavenly itinerary involves not just Eden but a position of authority in the garden. You will hold sway with God over creation.

Our authority in eternity is no small matter in Scripture. It is introduced in Genesis, confirmed in Revelation (22:5), and discussed by many, including Jesus himself! God’s decree that we will reign with him is a fulfillment of his garden of Eden declaration. Jesus will share his dominion with us, his coheirs.

Pause and let that promise sink in. You will reign with Christ. There is so much banter these days about self-image and identity. For want of a good self-image, we drive fast cars, liposuction fat, join gangs, or wear tight (or baggy) jeans.

Yet, what better cure for a rotten self-image than the discovery of our eternal destiny! God is grooming us for a divine assignment. Jesus said, “I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones” (Luke 22:29–30). You mean this much to God! His purpose and plan for you may begin in this life, but it won’t be fully realized until the life to come.

The world can be so hard. We feel marginalized and sidelined. Society makes a big deal out of the rich and beautiful. Many of us are neither. Yet, all feelings of insignificance will melt the moment Jesus, King Jesus, crowns and commissions us. Exactly how will we serve? Where will we serve? And when will this all start?

Let’s unpack those questions in the next few chapters. For now, embrace the big idea. Believe in the God who believes in you!

You aren’t on a dead-end street. Your journey doesn’t end with your final heartbeat. Your worth is not measured by the number of bucks in the bank or diplomas on your wall or followers on your socials or lovers in your bed or gadgets in your garage or tattoos on your skin. You are not here for possessions, power, or prestige.

You aren't on a dead-end
street. Your journey doesn't
end with your final heartbeat.

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The story of Eden is not just the story about the first person but a picture of God's plan for each person. What God did for Adam he did for you. He formed you. He breathed life into you. And he destined you to serve him in a perfect place. Can you hear him? "I see something great in you. Would you accept my destiny for your life?"

Oh, I do pray you will.

If you've never said yes to Jesus, take a moment and do so. It's not complicated. Jesus has done the work. Just say to him something like this:

Jesus,

I am not perfect, for I have sinned.

But I believe in you. Save me, change me, forgive me.

I give you my life.

In Jesus' name I pray, amen.²