

QUESTION 1

When Do the End Times Begin?

The apostles were convinced that they were living in the last days. In the Old Testament, the expression “the last days” refers to the future time of God’s final intervention in Israel’s history and in the history of the world.¹ The earliest Christians dated the beginning of the end times to the coming of Jesus, particularly his death and resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit, a complex of events that constitutes the fulfillment of God’s promises of Israel’s restoration and humanity’s salvation.

The End Times Have Begun with Jesus’ Coming: Acts 2:16–21

One important passage in the New Testament teaching that the end times began with Jesus’ coming is found in Peter’s speech given on the day of Pentecost. After clarifying for the Jews who had gathered from around the world that the speaking in unlearned languages by Jesus’ followers is not the result of drunkenness (Acts 2:15), Peter asserts that the audiovisual phenomena of the sound from heaven, the tongues of fire, and the speaking in unlearned languages (Acts 2:1–4) constitutes the fulfillment of prophecy. He provides a long quotation from the prophet Joel that begins with the assertion, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28). The rest of the Joel quotation and Peter’s explanation shows that Peter links the beginning of the last days not merely with the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost but with the entire ministry of Jesus, which includes the giving of the Spirit and the proclamation of salvation for all those who call on the name of the Lord (Acts 2:21, quoting Joel 2:32). The content of Joel 2:30–32,

1. See Isaiah 2:2; Jeremiah 23:20; Ezekiel 38:16; Daniel 11:20; Hosea 3:5; Micah 4:1. See KJV, NASB, NIV, NLT, and other versions. The NRSV translated the relevant Hebrew phrase “in the latter days” or “in the days to come.”

which Peter regards as fulfilled, is used to explain more than just the Pentecost phenomena. It should be noted that the phrase “in the last days” (*en tais eschatais hēmerais*) in Acts 2:17 is an addition to the text of Joel, who begins this particular prophecy with the phrase “and afterward.” Peter clarifies that what follows in Joel’s prophecy relates to the last days of God’s history of salvation: the end times as the new age that was ushered in by Jesus.

Joel’s prophecy of “wonders and signs” was fulfilled in the miracles that Jesus performed, which were signs of the coming of the kingdom of God and of his role in this kingdom. Joel’s prophecy was fulfilled in the events of Jesus’ death, notably in the darkening of the sun, mentioned in Acts 2:20. The sequence of “wonders” in the sky followed by “signs” on earth corresponds to Luke’s account of the darkening of the sun at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion (Luke 23:45a), a “wonder” in the sky, followed by the rending of the curtain in the temple (v. 45b), a sign that took place on earth.² The earthquake that Matthew 27:51 reports for the day of Jesus’ crucifixion—a sign on the earth—is not mentioned by Luke in Acts 2, but it would have been remembered by the people living in Jerusalem.

Joel’s prophecy mentioning “blood and fire” and the turning of the “moon to blood” is more difficult to interpret. The description cannot easily be linked with Jesus’ ministry or death. In Luke 22:20, we have a reference to Jesus’ blood that is shed and that inaugurates the new covenant; other references to Jesus’ blood in Acts occur in 5:28 and 20:28. However, none of these references link Jesus’ blood with fire or smoke, or other signs on earth. Still, some scholars suggest that “there may be some typology in Jesus’ death, as Luke 22:20 combined with the descriptions of Jesus’ death might suggest.”³ The suggestion that Acts 2:19 refers to a lunar eclipse during which the moon assumes a dull, red color, which was visible in Jerusalem at Passover in A.D. 33,⁴ is intriguing; however, it requires a later date for Jesus’ crucifixion, which is more plausibly dated in the year A.D. 30. Joel’s prophecy of “wonders in the sky” can be seen as having been fulfilled in the ascension of Jesus, who ascended in a cloud into heaven (Acts 1:9, 11).

The prophecy of “wonders in the sky” can also be linked with the manifestations on Pentecost that descended “from heaven” (Acts 2:2) and that Peter is in the process of explaining. The reference to “fire” can be linked with the visual phenomenon of the “tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them” (v. 3 NIV). The “cloud of smoke” could refer to the cloud

2. In Matthew 27:51 and Mark 15:38, the rending of the curtain comes after the darkening of the sun and after Jesus’ death.

3. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 116.

4. Colin J. Humphreys and W. Graeme Waddington, “The Jewish Calendar, a Lunar Eclipse and the Date of Christ’s Crucifixion,” *TynBul* 43 (1992): 331–51.

behind which Jesus disappeared when he ascended to the Father (Acts 1:9).⁵ Or it could refer to the “tongues,” which looked like fire, appearing in the room in which the believers had assembled. Since Luke’s description of the manifestations on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:2–4 contains allusions to God’s theophany on Mount Sinai, Joel’s prophecy of a “cloud of smoke” may be taken to describe God’s theophany at Pentecost with language reminiscent of God’s appearance on Mount Sinai. Since the Jews celebrated the giving of the Law on Sinai during the Feast of Pentecost, this interpretation, while not explicitly indicated by the text, is certainly a possibility.

Peter ends his quotation from Joel’s prophecy with the line, “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21, quoting Joel 2:32). Joel’s prophecy of salvation is interpreted by Peter in the sense that “Lord” refers to Jesus (as his following explanations demonstrate) and that “everyone” refers to the Jews living in Jerusalem, the diaspora Jews who have returned to Jerusalem, the Jews who continue to live in the regions whose languages the apostles had spoken, and “all those who are far away” (Acts 2:39), that is, to all human beings, whether they are male or female, young or old, slaves or free (Acts 2:17–18). Joel’s comment “for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape” (Joel 2:32) is omitted by Peter since the salvation that God offers through Jesus, Israel’s Messiah and Lord, moves beyond Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

In sum, Joel’s reference to “wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below” (Acts 2:19 NASB) does not introduce a comment on the last day of judgment (whose arrival is described with similar language in several passages) separate from the present fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. The day of judgment was, for Peter, a future event that was not “fulfilled” in his day. Peter links all of Joel 2:28–32, quoted in Acts 2:17–21, with the assertion in Acts 2:16 that “this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel.” The view that Peter regards Joel 2:28–29 as fulfilled, but not Joel 2:30–32, is hardly convincing; if Peter only wanted to quote a prophecy that he believed was fulfilled by the phenomena that he wants to explain to the crowd, he would not have needed Joel 2:30–32; Luke can quote Scripture with omissions, if necessary. Peter (and Luke) understood the “wonders and signs” performed by Jesus, as well as the events associated with Jesus’ crucifixion and ascension and the events of Pentecost as representing varying degrees of fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy: Joel speaks of the last days that have begun with Jesus and that will culminate in God’s judgment. The connections of the “wonders” and “signs” of Joel’s prophecy with Jesus’ ministry and death provide the basis for Peter’s subsequent arguments concerning the status and the significance of Jesus. The reference to the “last days” establishes how Peter reads the prophets: God has begun to fulfill his promises; the last days have arrived

5. It should be noted that Luke uses a different word for “cloud” in Acts 1:9 (*nephelē*) than in Acts 2:19 (*atmis*, denoting “moist vapor, steam”).

with Jesus' ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, and his bestowal of the Spirit.⁶

The Hour to Wake Up: Romans 13:11–12

In Romans 13:11–12, Paul appeals to the Christians in the city of Rome to understand “the present time” and explains that “the hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light” (NIV). The “night” is the present evil age (see Gal. 1:4); “the day” is the day of the Lord. Paul’s assertion that “the day is almost here” (Rom. 13:12 NIV) means that the day when God will bring to an end human history as we know it is fast approaching. Paul is convinced that Jesus might return within a very short period of time. Paul does not seek to narrow down the time frame within which Jesus will return, nor does he base his exhortation on the assumption that Jesus’ return would take place very soon. But he clearly believes that Jesus’ return is the next event in God’s plan. And this means that he is convinced that he lives in the last days and that the end times have begun.

The End Times and the Last Days

Hebrews 1:1–2; 9:26

The author to the Hebrews begins his homily with the assertion that God’s revelation has taken a major turn in the recent past: while he had spoken to the Israelites and the Jewish people in the past through prophets “at many times and in various ways,” he has now been speaking to his people through his Son (Heb. 1:1 NIV). The author dates God’s speaking through Jesus his Son as having happened “in these last days” (*ep’ eschatou tōn hēmerōn*, Heb. 1:2). The demonstrative pronoun (*toutōn*, “these”) indicates that the last days have begun: “in these days which are the last days.”⁷ The entire period between Jesus’ first coming and the future consummation of God’s purposes constitutes “the last days.” When the author asserts that Jesus Christ, our High Priest, did not have to suffer many times but appeared once for all “to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26 NIV), he relates Jesus’ appearance both to the “foundation the world,” emphasizing the universal scope of Christ’s work, and to “the end of the age” (*synteleia tōn aiōnōn*; lit. “the end of the ages”), emphasizing that Jesus’ death had inaugurated the last days. The coming of the Messiah, and in particular his salvific death, marks the beginning of the end.

6. Contrary to some popular interpretations, the “last days” is not, for Peter, a period immediately before the final judgment (and thus still in the future). Rather, the expression “the last days” describes the time period that was inaugurated with Jesus’ ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension.

7. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 93; for Hebrews 9:26, see *ibid.*, 484.

The time that extends from Jesus' coming into the present (of the author) is the end time.

James 5:7–9

James' prophetic indictment of wealthy landowners (James 5:1–6) includes the charge that they "have hoarded wealth in the last days" (*en eschatais hēmerais*; v. 3 NIV). The statement is ironic: these wealthy people have piled up wealth as if they would live forever, not realizing that they live in the last days in which there may not be many more opportunities to repent and put their wealth to good use. They are "especially foolish because they ignore the many signs of the rapidly approaching judgment."⁸ James exhorts the believers to patiently endure the trials of the present (James 5:7–11) "until the Lord's coming" (v. 7 NIV), that is, until Jesus' second coming. He grounds his exhortation in the statement that the Lord's "coming" (*hē parousia*) is "near" and that Jesus the Judge is "standing at the door!" (vv. 8–9 NIV). Both the verb "near" (*ēggiken*) and the image of a person standing at the door about to knock emphasize the nearness of Jesus' coming. Again, we see that the first Christians were convinced that the last days had arrived.

1 Peter 1:20

Peter asserts that Jesus was "destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake" (1 Peter 1:20). The phrase "at the end of the ages" (*ep' eschatou tōn chronōn*) reflects the early Christian conviction that the last period of history has been inaugurated. In Old Testament and Jewish texts about the end, the resurrection of the dead and a time of affliction are mentioned as anticipated events, among other expectations. Peter emphasizes both of these themes in the context of his assertion that the "revelation" of Jesus the Messiah (i.e., his coming) took place at the end of the ages: God raised Jesus from the dead (1 Peter 1:3, 21) and both Jesus and his followers suffer (vv. 2, 7, 11, 17, 19). The end times have begun with Jesus' suffering and resurrection, and they continue as God's people are suffering.

2 Peter 3:3; Jude 18

In 2 Peter 3:1–18, Peter insists that the "coming" (*parousia*) of the Lord Jesus (i.e., his second coming) will indeed happen despite scoffers who doubt

8. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 215. He refers to the translation in the REB: "you have piled up wealth in an age that is near its close." The interpretation that the wealthy store up wrath against future judgment misses the meaning of the plural "last days," which refers to the end times (so James Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 185, with reference to Romans 2:5; thus also the NLT: "This treasure you have accumulated will stand as evidence against you on the day of judgment").

that there will be a major, climactic intervention of the Lord in history. He asserts that the arrival of such scoffers was prophesied: “First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts” (2 Peter 3:3). The expression “in the last days” (*ep’ eschatōn tōn hēmerōn*) describes the time when these false teachers have appeared, which is the present of Peter’s own time. He makes the rather ironic point that the skepticism of the mockers concerning Jesus’ second coming is precisely a sign that the last days have arrived and that the end is imminent.⁹

In a similar description of false teachers, Jude reminds his readers of a prophecy of the apostles who said, “In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts” (Jude 18). Again, the phrase “in the last time” (*ep’ eschatou tou chronou*) characterizes the present time of the Christian author in the first century. The end times are not a period in the (distant) future but a present reality since the (first) coming of Jesus.

1 John 2:18

John connects the enemies of the gospel, troublemakers and heretics who have left the Christian community (1 John 2:19), with the prophecy that the “antichrist [*antichristos*] is coming,” which probably refers to Jesus’ announcement that “false messiahs [*pseudochristoi*] and false prophets [*pseudoprophētai*]” will be coming (Matt. 24:24).¹⁰ John asserts that since “it is the last hour” (NIV) many antichrists have come, which is how we know that “it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). In other words, the appearance of antichrists, false teachers who cause trouble for Jesus’ followers, proves that the “last hour” (*eschatē hōra*) is a present reality. The time of John’s ministry in Asia Minor in the first century is the “end time.”

How Does One Explain the Two-Thousand-Year (and Counting) Duration of the End Times?

If the apostles believed that the end times—the last days—began with Jesus’ first coming, it seems difficult to understand that two thousand years later we are still waiting for Jesus’ promised second coming. If “the end times” began in the first century A.D., why are we still waiting for the end? Can “the last days” really last for so long? The delay of Jesus’ second coming was already perceived as a problem by some whom Peter calls “scoffers”—people who gleefully provoked the faithful Christians with the words, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!” (2 Peter 3:4). Peter answers that these people ignore three facts. First, they forget that God, who created the world and then sent the great flood, will one day bring about the day of

9. Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC 37 (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 371 with n. 16.

10. On Matthew 24, see question 3; on the Antichrist, see questions 17–21.

judgment when the present heavens and earth will be destroyed along with the godless (3:5–7). Second, they forget that for God, “one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day” (v. 8). This means that God’s time is unlike our human time, the latter being rather limited. Third, they forget that the delay of Jesus’ second coming is due not to God being somehow negligent in fulfilling his promises but to God being patient. God does not want sinners to perish “but all to come to repentance” (v. 9). Then Peter reminds his readers that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed” (v. 10). The delay of Jesus’ second coming—a delay of now two thousand years—must not diminish our watchfulness. Christians must be ready for Jesus’ second coming, whenever it will happen.

Summary

The end times are a present reality since the first coming of Jesus. This is the conviction of Peter, Paul, John, Jude, and the author of the epistle to the Hebrews. The conviction that the present time is the “end time” derives from the belief of the apostles that Jesus is Israel’s promised Messiah in whose person, ministry, death, and resurrection God has fulfilled his promises of salvation. As the earliest Christians were all Jewish believers who knew the prophecies of the Scriptures and who were familiar with Jewish texts that spoke of the end, they linked the appearance of the Messiah with the last days. The coming of Jesus, Israel’s Messiah and Savior of humankind, inaugurated the end times. This is the reason why the early Christians prayed earnestly and regularly for the return of Jesus, with the prayer call *marana tha*, “Our Lord, come!” (1 Cor. 16:22; cf. Rev. 22:20). End-time “specialists” who describe the last days or the end times as a future period misunderstand the structure of New Testament eschatology. Jesus and the apostles taught that the end (*eschatos*) is near, the last days have begun, and the end times are now a present reality. As some of the passages have shown, this conviction was not a source of speculation about the nearness of the “last day” or the period of “last days.” Rather, it was the cause of great concern that Christians make sure that their everyday lives conform to the truth of the gospel and to the holiness of God so that they are ready to hear the knock of the Lord who is standing at the door.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What has been your understanding of the “end time”?
2. How is the idea of the end times connected with Jesus’ first coming?

3. What are some of the consequences of the apostles' conviction regarding the end times for us today?
4. How does the conviction that the end times is a present reality impact Christian living?
5. How does the conviction that the end times is a present reality challenge speculations about the imminence of Jesus' second coming?