

Discovering the End Times

"Can you really be left behind?" A study guide to what the Bible says about the future

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:16-17

AT A GLANCE

BIG IDEA	God has told us how history ends, not so we can argue about charts, but so we can live ready, stay hopeful, and tell others about Jesus while there is still time.
SCRIPTURE	1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 · 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 · Matthew 13; 24-25 · Daniel 2; 7; 9 · Revelation 6-22 · 2 Peter 1-3
LENGTH	Four to six sessions (terms and tools; the present age; the rapture and tribulation; Revelation's judgments; living ready)
BEST FOR	High school and mature middle schoolers
YOU WILL NEED	Bibles, a whiteboard for a timeline, and a study Bible or Bible dictionary

Start here: can you really be left behind?

Movies and videos make the end times feel like a thriller or a joke. The Bible treats it as neither. Jesus and the apostles talked about the future often, and they always connected it to how we live now. Paul's purpose in describing the rapture was simple: "comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

A WORD FOR THE LEADER

Sincere Christians disagree about the timing of end-time events. This guide teaches the view held by Ron and by Calvary Chapel churches (a pretribulation rapture and a literal millennium), while fairly describing other views. Keep the focus on Jesus, not on predicting dates or naming modern nations or leaders. Jesus said no one knows the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36).

Part 1: Ten terms to know

TERM	MEANING	KEY VERSE
Second Coming	Jesus' visible return to the earth at a future time	John 14:3
Rapture	The sudden "catching up" of all Christians to meet Jesus in the air	1 Thess. 4:16-17
Great Tribulation	A coming period of intense, unprecedented suffering	Mark 13:19
Antichrist	The person who embodies evil and leads Satan's resistance to God in the last days	1 John 2:18-22
Millennium	The thousand-year period when Jesus reigns on earth in righteousness	Revelation 20:1-10
Judgment Seat of Christ	Where Christians receive rewards for how they lived	2 Cor. 5:10
Great White Throne	Where those who rejected God are judged	Revelation 20:11-15
Heaven	The home of all who truly trusted God and gave Him their lives	Acts 1:9-11
Hades (hell)	The temporary holding place of unbelievers until the final judgment	Luke 16:23
Lake of Fire	The final destination of all who did not trust God	Revelation 20:14-15

Part 2: Tools for understanding prophecy

- 1. Some prophecy is literal; some is symbolic.** Micah 5:2 said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, and He literally was. Revelation 6:13 says "the stars of heaven fell to the earth," which is pictured language, since real stars are far bigger than the earth.
- 2. Know your own tendencies.** Personality, upbringing, and education push people toward reading prophecy more literally or more figuratively. Don't jump to conclusions; study carefully.
- 3. Read in context.** "Context" literally means "with the text." There are two kinds:
 - **The words around the text.** "You will not surely die" (Genesis 3:4) sounds encouraging until you see that Satan said it to deceive Eve.
 - **The world around the text.** When Paul says, "Beware of dogs" (Philippians 3:2), he isn't talking about loyal pets. In his world, dogs were wild, dirty scavengers.
- 4. Prophecy comes from God.** The human writers used their own personalities and styles, but "holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Part 3: The big picture and the main views

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 teaches that Jesus will one day, perhaps any day, catch up all Christians to meet Him. Matthew 24-25 and Revelation 6-19 describe a coming time of terrible tribulation. Many understand Daniel 9:27 to describe it as seven years, after which Jesus returns to earth and reigns for a thousand years.

When is the rapture?

1. *Pretribulation*: any day, before a 7-year tribulation
2. *Midtribulation*: halfway through
3. *Posttribulation*: at the end, together with the Second Coming
4. *Figurative*: tribulation is today's suffering; rapture and return happen together

What is the millennium?

1. *Premillennial*: Jesus returns, then rules the world for a literal 1,000 years
2. *Postmillennial*: the church age is a long "millennium" before Jesus returns
3. *Amillennial*: Christ reigns now, in heaven and in believers' hearts

What this guide teaches

A pretribulation rapture and a premillennial return of Christ. Whatever your view, all Bible-believing Christians agree: Jesus is coming back, and we must be ready.

Part 4: The present age

Seven stories Jesus told (Matthew 13)

PARABLE	WHAT IT SHOWS ABOUT THIS AGE
The sower (13:1-9, 18-23)	Many hear God's Word, but only some truly receive it and bear fruit.
Wheat and tares (13:24-30, 36-43)	False believers grow alongside true ones until God separates them at the end.
Mustard seed (13:31-32)	The kingdom grows from a tiny start into something huge.
Leaven (13:33)	Something small works its way through the whole. (Many see yeast as a picture of evil spreading; others, of the kingdom's quiet growth.)
Hidden treasure (13:44)	A treasure bought at great cost. Some teachers see Israel, God's treasured people, whose role is temporarily hidden during the church age.
Pearl of great price (13:45-46)	Jesus gave everything to win a people for Himself.
The dragnet (13:47-50)	At the end of the age, the righteous and the wicked will be separated.

Signs Jesus said would mark this age

False christs (Matthew 24:5); wars and rumors of wars (24:6); famines, pestilences, and earthquakes (24:7); believers persecuted and killed (24:9-10); false prophets (24:11); lawlessness increasing and love growing cold (24:12); and "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all

the world" (24:14). Peter adds a warning about false teachers inside the church who deny Christ, live immorally, and scoff at His return (2 Peter 2:1-3:13). Jesus said these are "the beginning of sorrows" (24:8), like early labor pains.

Part 5: The rapture

"Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." 1 CORINTHIANS 15:51-52

This age will end suddenly. Believers who have died will rise first; then living believers will be caught up, changed in an instant, and will meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Paul ends the chapter, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Part 6: The tribulation

As this guide teaches it, the years after the rapture unfold in stages:

- **Preparation.** Religious people who never truly believed join a worldwide false religion (Revelation 17). Political power gathers into a confederation that Daniel pictured as a revived fourth empire with ten horns (Daniel 2; 7:7-8; Revelation 13).
- **A false peace.** A powerful ruler makes a treaty with Israel, and temple worship resumes (Daniel 9:27). Daniel wrote this centuries before the Romans destroyed the temple in A.D. 70. Ezekiel 38 describes an invasion from "the far north"; teachers differ on who that will be.
- **Persecution.** Halfway through, the ruler breaks the treaty, sets himself up as God (2 Thessalonians 2:4), and persecutes Israel and anyone who follows Jesus. It is called "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7; also Daniel 12:1; Matthew 24:21). He controls the world economy so that no one can buy or sell without his mark (Revelation 13:16-17).

Revelation's three sets of judgments

Seven seals (Rev. 6; 8:1)

1. A conquering ruler
2. War
3. Famine
4. Death
5. Martyrs cry out
6. Upheaval in the sky
7. Silence, then the trumpets

Seven trumpets (Rev. 8-11)

1. Fire on the land
2. Sea turned to blood
3. Rivers made bitter
4. Sun, moon, stars darkened
5. Demonic torment
6. War from the Euphrates
7. "The kingdoms of this world" become Christ's (11:15)

Seven bowls (Rev. 16)

1. Painful sores
2. Sea turns to blood
3. Rivers turn to blood
4. Scorching sun
5. Darkness
6. Euphrates dries up
7. Earthquake and hail: "It is done!"

Revelation is full of symbols: lampstands, four horsemen, a Lamb with a scroll, 144,000 sealed servants, two witnesses, a woman and a dragon, two beasts, and a rider on a white horse. The point of every symbol is the same: God is in control, evil will be judged, and Jesus wins.

Part 7: Living ready

Jesus' main instruction about the future is not "figure it out," but "be ready." "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matthew 24:44). John says everyone who has this hope "purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3). And Peter reminds us why Jesus hasn't come yet: God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Can you be left behind? Only if you have not trusted Jesus. Today is the day to be sure.

Further reading (from Ron's library): *Major Bible Themes* (Lewis Sperry Chafer); *Prophecy: Things to Come* (James Boyer); *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Charles Ryrie); *The New Christian's Handbook* (Max Anders).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Paul said to "comfort one another" with teaching about the rapture?
2. How do the tools of literal vs. symbolic language and context help us avoid strange ideas about prophecy?
3. Which of Jesus' seven stories in Matthew 13 helps you understand our world today? Why?
4. Which signs from Matthew 24 do you see in the news? Why did Jesus call them "the beginning of sorrows"?
5. If Jesus came back today, would you be ready? Who do you know who needs to hear about Him?

TAKE IT HOME

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 John 3:1-3 this week. Ask God to show you one area to "purify" because Jesus is coming, and one friend to pray for and talk to about Him. If you are not sure you are ready, talk to a leader today.

Jesus is coming. Live ready, stay hopeful, and tell others.

From fifty years of youth ministry by **Ron Whittam**. Share freely with your students and leaders. · The Youth Ministry Living Room · qrprogramming.com/livingroom

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