

WHAT ARE THE LAST DAYS & WHY SHOULD YOU CARE? ACTS 2:16-21; 2 PETER 3:3-9; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

Let's do a little unofficial poll this morning. How many of you believe we are living in the last days? How many of you believe that the last days have yet to start? How many of you really don't know? How many of you really don't care? A Gallup poll way back in 1998 asked Americans whether they thought the world would come to an end either because of Judgment Day arriving or another religious event occurring in this new century that is now 15 years old. 23% said it was very likely. 16% thought it was somewhat likely. An equal percentage – 16% - considered it somewhat unlikely. 41% thought it was very unlikely and 4% had no opinion.

Today, I begin a brand new message series. It's entitled "In The Last Days: What Does The Bible Say About The End Times?" It deals with a branch of theology referred to as "eschatology." What's that? The Greek word "eschaton" means "the end times" and "ology" means "the study of" something. So, eschatology is the study of the end times. It has to do with what the Bible indicates God will do in the future or what God has yet to accomplish. Part of me is excited about this study because I've never done a whole series of messages on this subject. But part of me is a bit nervous, too. Why's that? Quite frankly, eschatology is a very controversial subject among Christian people who love the Bible and honor God equally. I'm acutely aware that what you hear from me over these ten messages will probably be different than what you have heard preached and proclaimed over the years both in this church and in other settings. That's because evangelical Christianity in North America – and our church is part of that subset of the Christian faith – has been largely dominated by one, specific kind of eschatology for the last 100 years. You'll discover soon enough that I have major differences with that viewpoint. More about all that later in this series. So, I'm going to ask you to have an open mind and a receptive spirit toward what I present over these ten messages. You may agree with me, but it's perfectly OK to disagree with me, too. Let's begin by asking and trying to answer two important questions. Here's the first one....

WHAT ARE THE LAST DAYS?

To my knowledge, the phrase "the end times" doesn't appear in the Bible, but the phrase "the last days" shows up in several places. In the Old Testament, the last days referred to a future time when God would finally and decisively intervene in the history of the Jewish people and also in the history of the world. Here's a couple of examples: "In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it." (Is 2:2 NIV) "Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to his blessings in the last days." (Hosea 3:5 NIV) The last days in the Old Testament were in the future and hadn't started yet.

It's very important to realize that all changes in the New Testament. The very first followers of Jesus assumed that the last days began with Jesus' coming into the world, His three year ministry, and then particularly what was achieved in and through His

death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. In other words, we are already living in the last days and have been for some 2,000 years. Sometimes you will hear preachers or prophecy specialists refer to the last days or the end times as something that will begin in the future with certain events. I respectfully disagree. Biblically speaking, the last days have already begun and the end times are a present reality.

Let's look at several passages in the New Testament that make that assumption. (Acts 2:16-21) This is the Day of Pentecost and Peter is giving a speech about the significance of what has just happened. He quotes the Old Testament prophet Joel and says that what Joel was referring to back then hundreds of years earlier was now being fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. Peter assumes that the beginning of the last days involved the coming of Jesus, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and the offer of salvation to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. These were the last days because God was beginning to fulfill His promises. We can see that same assumption in a general letter that Peter wrote later on his ministry, "He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. (1 Pt 1:20-21 NIV)

In his letter to the Roman Christians, the great Christian leader, Paul, writes "And do this, understanding the present time: 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." (Rom 13:11-12 NIV) Paul clearly believed that Jesus's second coming was the next major event in God's plan. Paul was convinced he himself was living in the last days and that the end times had begun. We're not certain who wrote the letter to the Hebrews, but listen to what the author says in the very first two verses of his letter. "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe." (Heb 1:1-2 NIV) When did the last days begin according to the author of Hebrews? Clearly, it was in the first coming of Jesus not in some future time.

Next, I want you to hear an assumption made by another Christian leader, James, in his letter. "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.... Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! (Jam 5:1-3, 7-9 NIV) James was objecting to wealthy people who had piled up money and possessions as if they would live forever not realizing that they were, in fact, living in the last days. The time to repent and put their wealth to good use was running out! You also see in those verses how convinced the first Christians were that Jesus' second coming was near.

There's one other passage I want us to read together that underlines the fact that we're already living in the last days. (1 Peter 3:3-9) The scoffers and mockers that Peter mentioned in v. 3 were already there in his day and time! In fact, their presence was one sign that the last days had already begun. But I wanted us to look at that passage for another reason. Someone here today might say, "But, Rick, the last days, then, have been stretched out over nearly 2,000 years. Can the last days really last for that long? Isn't that just too long a time to expect Jesus' to return? If the end times began way back in the first century A.D., why are we still waiting for the end to come?"

The passage we just read provides three answers to those questions. First, Peter says don't doubt God's reliability. He says that you can be quite sure that the same God who created the world and destroyed it in a flood, will also one day bring about the great day of judgment part of which involves Jesus' second coming. Second, God doesn't relate to the passing of time in the same way we do. "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." That reminds me of a story about an economist who read this passage was quite amazed and talked to God about it. "Lord, is it true that a thousand years for us is like one minute to you?" The Lord said yes. The economist said, "Then a million dollars to us must be like one penny to you." The Lord said, "Well, yes." The economist said, "Will you give me one of those pennies?" The Lord said, "All right, I will. But wait here just a minute." There's also a third answer. The delay in Jesus' return – if you can even call it a "delay" – isn't because God is negligent about keeping His promises, but instead because God is patient. He wants as many people as possible to put their faith and trust in Jesus, to repent of their sins and find forgiveness through Jesus, and to receive the gift of eternal life. Now, here's a second question that's important to ask and try to answer...

WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT THE LAST DAYS?

Why does any of this matter? What relevance does it have to how you and I live out our lives today or tomorrow? What importance does it have to being a follower of Jesus? Well, I can point to four reasons why you should care about the last days. First, the last days reveal God's ultimate and overall plan. As I mentioned, eschatology is the study of end times. But, it's also a study of everything we long and hope for as followers of Jesus. Why did God create the world and human beings? Why did He send His Son, Jesus, into this world? What's He doing or going to do about all the terrible, unjust and ungodly things we see happening in this world? Where is all this headed? What's the goal of your salvation and mine? Studying what the Bible says about the last days helps to answer those questions.

The last days gets us into biblical prophecy which is a very important and significant emphasis in the Bible. When Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus and His ministry, it underlined for the first Christians that God is reliable and trustworthy. What God says He will do, He does. Learning about the last days will increase your faith in God's sovereignty over everything that happens on this planet. We get shocked and discouraged every day by the things we see happening around the world and in our own

country. It makes us wonder if God really is in control. Well, God is still on the throne and studying what the Bible says about the last days will strengthen your faith. You begin to see that, yes, the Bible is the story of how we as human beings lost paradise. But it's also the story of how God intervened in the person of His Son, Jesus, and how He is steadily, methodically, and triumphantly restoring that lost paradise.

Here's a second reason why you should care about the last days. The last days will help you learn how to interpret the Bible more accurately. Here's a few words to chew on. Students of the Bible learn about something called "exegesis." What's that? Exegesis means to "read out of". It's the method you use to uncover what an author intended his or her original audience to understand. When that word is applied to the Bible, it means trying to understand what Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or Paul, or John wanted his original audience to understand. Unfortunately, what can sometimes happen – and this is probably most true when the subject is about the last days – is "eisegesis." What's that? Eisegesis is reading into a Bible passages something that the author never intended to convey. But beyond that is something called "hermeneutics." In Greek mythology, the god Hermes had the task of interpreting the will of the other Greek gods. From Hermes comes hermeneutics which is the art and science of interpreting and applying the Bible. When you become aware that certain rules and principles apply, it will help you interpret more accurately what the Bible teaches about eschatology and everything else. Right now, we're in the midst of helping to create a discipleship and disciple-making culture in our church. Well, the word "disciple" means "learner." Learning more about the last days should also help you and me to become more humble and gracious. We begin to consider other interpretations of Bible passages and concede that differing views might just have a point.

That leads right into a third reason why you should care about the last days. Learning about the last days will help you discern the difference between central and secondary Bible teachings. Christians have a bad habit of excluding each other sometimes over the most secondary, unimportant issues. That reminds me of a story comedian Emo Philips used to tell: "In conversation with a person I had recently met, I asked, 'Are you Protestant or Catholic?' My new acquaintance replied, 'Protestant.' I said, 'Me too! What franchise?' He answered, 'Baptist.' 'Me too!' I said. 'Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?' 'Northern Baptist,' he replied. 'Me too!' I shouted. We continued to go back and forth. Finally I asked, 'Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879 or Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?' He replied, 'Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912.' I said, 'Die, heretic!'"

What are central Bible teachings? The fact that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. The fact that Jesus was born of a virgin. The Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – God is three Persons in one. The inspiration and authority of the Bible itself. When it comes to the subject of the last days, I would have to say that the second coming of Jesus, the day of judgment and the creation of the new Heaven and the new Earth are central teachings. In other words, followers of Jesus need to believe and hold onto them. What are secondary Bible teachings? These are issues of less importance

upon which people that love God and the Bible just disagree. In my humble opinion, good Christians can disagree on how and when water baptism should be administered, or whether human beings are body, soul, and spirit, or just body and spirit. When it comes to the subject of the last days, I have to say that a literal, great tribulation, the identity of an Antichrist, or when and what the millennium might look like are secondary. It's fine to have an opinion on such matters, but let's not divide from or exclude other followers of Jesus on matters of secondary importance. It's foolish and arrogant to insist that your position on these minor issues represents absolute truth.

In my estimation, the fourth reason why you should care about the last days might be the most important one of all. Knowing about the last days will encourage you to keep on following Jesus expectantly. Jesus and the authors of the New Testament made it pretty clear that human history will continue to be tragic, chaotic and filled with all kinds of terrible human suffering until Jesus returns. They also made it very clear – regardless of how some prophecy specialists today try to wiggle around it – that no one knows or is able to predict when Jesus will return. Speaking about His return, Jesus said, “However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.” (Mt 24:36 NLT) True followers of Jesus refuse to waste time and energy trying to calculate how near we might be to that event. Instead, they try to figure out what it means to live expectantly, to be ready, because Jesus coming will be unexpected and sudden. What does it mean to be ready? How can we live each day with a sense of expectation that Jesus might return at any moment? What does that look like and how it does change how we live? Those are questions I want to come back to often during this message series. So what? What difference does it make? And over and over again, that is what the writers of the New Testament emphasize.

Let me take you to one, final passage this morning that underlines that very fact. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11) Knowing more about the last days gives us even more reason to go out and simply be and do what Jesus calls us to be and do. To make disciples, to share the good news about Jesus, to work for justice and meet the needs of the poor, the hungry, and the sick as God enables us. Knowing more about the last days will give us even more incentive to go out and do the work that Jesus has called us to do as His disciples. Knowing more about the last days will remind us that how we live our everyday lives before and in Jesus has consequences – both in this world and in the world to come.

Robby Robins was an Air Force pilot during the first Iraq war. After his 300th mission, he was surprised to be given permission to immediately pull his crew together and fly his plane home. They flew across the ocean to Massachusetts and then had a long drive to western Pennsylvania. They drove all night, and when his buddies dropped him off at his driveway just after sun-up, there was a big banner across the garage— "Welcome Home Dad!" How did they know? No one had called, and the crew themselves hadn't expected to leave so quickly. Robins relates, "When I walked into the house, the kids, about half dressed for school, screamed, 'Daddy!' Susan, my wife, came running down the hall—she looked terrific—hair fixed, make-up on, and a crisp

yellow dress. 'How did you know?' I asked. I didn't,' she answered through tears of joy. 'Once we knew the war was over, we knew you'd be home one of these days. We knew you'd try to surprise us, so we were ready every day.'"

That's it right there. "We were ready every day." If you and I can come out of this message series with a greater sense of what it means to be ready and actually living before God with a greater expectancy every day, these messages will have accomplished a great deal. We are living in the last days right now. Jesus could return at any moment. He said His return will be sudden and unexpected. Are you ready? Are you ready every day?