

Apocalypse Now?
A World in Chaos
September 12, 2021

Good morning everyone!

As Shannon said, today we're beginning a brand-new series called "*Apocalypse Now?*" – with a question mark.

And we're calling it that because the number one question that comes up pertaining to "The Apocalypse" (or the "end times") is ...

Is it happening (or about to happen) *right now*, at this point in history?

Do the events we're seeing and experiencing in our world point to the reality that "the end is near"?

Of course, because I'm a pastor and this is a

sermon series, I think it's obvious that "The Apocalypse" I'm talking about is ...

- The one that *Jesus of Nazareth* talked about ...
- And the same Apocalypse which was written about by biblical authors over hundreds of years.

However, I think it needs to be said that Christians aren't the only ones thinking about the end of the world these days.

More than a few people believe that all of humanity (if not the earth itself) will soon be destroyed by things like ...

- Climate change
- Overpopulation

- Nuclear war
- Biological war (that results in pandemics much worse than COVID 19)ⁱ
- Artificial intelligence (where computers take over the world and stick us all in tubes like in movie classic, *The Matrix*).
- “Invasion by aliens” is a potential end-of-the-world scenario according to Steven Hawking (who without a doubt is a lot smarter than all of us).ⁱⁱ

Now, I point this out especially for anyone here or watching online who *is not a Christian* as well as for anyone who *is* a Christian but unfamiliar with the biblical “end times” ...

I point this out because you’ve heard again and again that people who wonder about and talk about and preach about the *biblical* end

times (as I'm going to do for the next five weeks) ...

You've heard that people like that are, at best, "a little bit off" and, at worst, downright crazy.

But thinking about, wondering about, worrying about, obsessing about and even warning about "the end of days" is clearly *not* limited to the domain of "religious wackos" and fundamentalists.

What's even more interesting is that *the common element* across all of these diverse flavors of apocalyptic concern (whether it's political, sociological, or spiritual) ...

The driver behind the thinking and wondering and worrying and obsessing about *any* vision of "the end times" ...

... is "a world in chaos" – a world in which

things seem to be spiraling out of control; in which things seem to be getting worse instead of better.

For example, those who are concerned about the environment look at what's happening to the planet, and they say, "this can't go on for very much longer. The end is near."

Those who are concerned about the vast number of nuclear weapons currently in existence (as well as the potential for new ones in Iran and North Korea) say "this can't go on for very much longer. The end is near."

So, if you're a Christian and you're looking at the world around you right now and you're wondering or worrying if "the end is near," I want to encourage you.

- You're not "a little bit off"
- And you're not crazy.

- And you're not a "religious wacko."

And if you're *not* a Christian and you have Christian friends and family who believe that "the end is near," I need to tell you that they're not "off" or "crazy" or "religious wackos."

Well, maybe they are ... but not just because they're wondering if the Apocalypse is now!

They *wonder* that – they may *believe* that – because Jesus and His very first followers, the Apostles, *taught* that there would be chaos before "the end."

And just to be clear, when Jesus and the Apostles talked and wrote about "the end," they weren't making an offhand comment or a casual statement here or there.

"The end" was – and is – a very big deal,

which is why ...

- There are 318 references to it in the New Testament.
- And it's addressed in all but four of the 27 books and letters of the New Testament.ⁱⁱⁱ

Chaos Predicted

Now, for a split second, I thought about reading all 318 passages to you today.

But I want to make sure we're all home in time to see the Chiefs beat the Browns.

So, I'm going to give you just two examples because I want you to have a sense of the kinds of things Jesus and the Apostles taught and the imagery that is in the minds of most Christians.

Of course, as we say all the time around here, the reason we care about what Jesus said and his followers wrote (let alone *believe* it) isn't because "it's in the Bible."

The reason we care (and, quite frankly, the reason we even *have* a Bible) is because of what Jesus *did*.

Specifically, when a guy predicts his own death and resurrection and then actually pulls it off, it only makes sense ...

- To *write down* what he said and did (which the first Christians did)
- And then, if you weren't there (like us) ... to *read it* and try to *understand it* and *follow it* ...

... which is why, over past 2,000 years,

Christians all over the world have looked at their world with this teaching and imagery in mind.

In chapter 24 of Matthew's story of Jesus it says ...

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately.

"Tell us," they said, "... what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many.

"You will hear of wars and rumors of wars but see to it that you are not alarmed.

*Such things must happen, but
the end is still to come.*

*“Nation will rise against
nation, and kingdom against
kingdom. There will be
famines and earthquakes in
various places.*

Luke’s version of this event tells us that Jesus adds that there will be pestilences or plagues in various places^{iv} ...

... and that “nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”^v

*“All these are the beginning of
birth pains.*

*“Then you will be handed
over to be persecuted and put
to death, and you will be*

hated by all nations because of me.

"At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.

"Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

Matthew 24:3-14 (NIV)

Then Jesus concludes:

"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its

*twigs get tender and its leaves
come out, you know that
summer is near.*

*"When you see all these
things, you know that it is
near, right at the door."*

Matthew 24:32-33 (NIV)

That's the first example – and there's obviously a lot going on in it ... and we'll actually look at it again next week.

But I want to give you another example – this one from the Apostle Paul.

Now, the thing to remember about Paul is that he is not one of Jesus original disciples. He didn't walk the countryside for three and a half years with Jesus like the other guys did.

Most likely he was living in another city when Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem.

In fact, when Paul (or Saul of Tarsus as he was originally known) ... when Paul first heard about Jesus, he felt it was his duty to persecute Christians and have them beaten, thrown into jail and, in some cases, killed.

In his mind, they were committing blasphemy by worshiping a man instead of God.

But then the risen Jesus appeared to him and, in a huge twist of irony, told him that he was going to become Christianity's number one evangelist to the non-Jewish world.

It was irony because Paul at the time was a Pharisee – an ultra-conservative Jewish scholar – and they didn't have anything whatsoever to do with non-Jewish people (or Gentiles as they were called).

Anyway, Paul joined up with the original Apostles where he learned ...

- More about what Jesus had done and said ...
- As well as what Jesus taught about “the end” ...

... which he then passed on to the Gentiles who were becoming followers of Jesus.

Fortunately, for us, we have some of what Paul passed on in his letters, including one that he wrote to Timothy (a young church planter who Paul had mentored).

This is from chapter 3 of his second letter.

Mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.

People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents,

ungrateful, unholy ...

... without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited ...

... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. 2 Timothy 3:1-5 (NIV)

A few paragraphs later, Paul continues on the theme:

The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine.

Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

*They will turn their ears away
from the truth and turn aside
to myths. 2 Timothy 4:3-4
(NIV)*

Our World Today

Now again, the point of all of that – at least for our purposes today – is to illustrate a bit of why many Christians might be thinking “this is it, we’re in the end times.”

We look around and we see “a world in chaos” – a world in which things seem to be spiraling out of control; in which things seem to be getting worse instead of better.

For example, part of the list that Jesus gives looks like it could have been the script of your favorite cable news channel or this morning’s Twitter feed.

- International conflicts? Check
- Natural disasters (hurricanes, fires, tornadoes, earthquakes, COVID)?
Check
- Persecution of Christians in places like Afghanistan, China and North Korea?
Check

And then, of course, here in the United States, there's no doubt we're experiencing ...

- A turning away from the faith.
- And an increase of wickedness.
- And, most vividly, a loss of love.

Those of you who are younger won't remember this but, 20 years ago after the horrific events of 9/11, it seemed like there

was going to be a huge civic and spiritual revival in this country.

In fact, one Christian commentator wrote at the time that, "A massive shift in perspective happened to our country on September 11."^{vi}

The sense that everything had changed in a single morning "made us look at our land, our society, and ourselves in a new way."

It made us "live in conscious awareness of death," made us notice that "many of us fill our lives with trivialities," and forced us to "turn to our spiritual roots."

And, for a few weeks after 9/11, all of that was true.

Talk of unity was everywhere. In a 2001 speech, President George W. Bush praised Americans for our decency, kindness, and

commitment to one another.

And people all over the country *did* pack the pews – including at this church.

Since then, however ...

- Our political divisions have become more embittered than ever.
- The demonization of “the other side” is non-stop.
- The polarization is worse than I’ve seen in my lifetime and probably beyond repair.
- Sometimes I even find myself wondering if this is how the Civil War started.

And despite the initial “re-awakening” it soon became apparent there was *not* a profound

change in America's religious character.

One research organization which regularly tracks 19 dimensions of spirituality and beliefs found that "none of those indicators [were] statistically different" five years after 9/11.^{vii}

In other words, the attacks of that day didn't put Americans on a trajectory toward more orthodox beliefs or more consistent habits of prayer, church attendance, or Scripture reading.

"Spiritually speaking," said one researcher, "it's as if nothing significant ever happened."^{viii}

Actually, when you look at Paul's list of the *moral and spiritual* chaos associated with the "end times," it's clear that things *have* happened but in the other direction.

Remember, he wrote that people will be ...

*Lovers of themselves, lovers
of money, lovers of pleasure
rather than lovers of God, not
lovers of the good ...*

*Boastful, proud, abusive,
disobedient to their parents,
ungrateful, unholy ...*

Call me crazy but that sounds a lot like our cultural icons these days – the people and institutions who are held up (especially to younger people) as examples to emulate.

As one commentator recently put it:

“The money, power, and prestige of the mainstream media, big time sports, big business, big tech, and almost all the institutions of education and entertainment are invested in making sin look normal.”^{ix}

Again, call me crazy but, to me, I'd say it's working.

What was widely thought of *just 20 years ago* as being sinful or, at least, not in the best interest of individuals and society as a whole, is now accepted without question.

And if you *do* question, most people today are more upset with your questioning than the possibility that what you are questioning *might actually be* wrong or, at least, not in anyone's best interest.

Paul said that people will be ...

*Without love, unforgiving,
slandorous, without self-
control, brutal, treacherous,
rash, conceited ...*

I can't think of a better way to describe what

so much of unsocial media is like these days – to say nothing of how our national media and politicians speak of one another and treat one another.

But greater than all of those is Paul's assertion that, in the last days, people will ...

... gather a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear ...

... turning away from the truth and, instead, embracing foolishness and mythical thinking, i.e. stuff that everyone *knows* isn't true.

And if I went into detail on that, some of you would probably think I was making a political statement – which is something we don't do here at NHCC.

So, I won't, other than to ask a few honest questions that ought to be considered by

people who really do want to live in the truth:

- Is what is currently being taught and promoted about gender and human sexuality based in biological reality? And if it isn't, what's the motive?
- Does the social justice philosophy being taught and promoted – a philosophy that labels groups of people as “oppressors” and “oppressed” based on arbitrary characteristics ...

... does that philosophy truly produce the kind of world we all say we want?

- Can a church or religion that never calls “sin” a sin – one that's unwilling to teach that certain attitudes and behaviors fall short of the glory for which God intended us ...

... can that kind of church or religion truly offer anything to people who are *racked* by sin and its consequences?

- Can Christians who blow off their involvement in church, never read the Bible, never pray for God's Kingdom to come in their lives (let alone in the world)

...

... can they actually be the light of the world that Jesus calls them to be?

And the list could go on of the ways that our culture – and I don't mean just *non-Christian* culture ...

The list could go on of the ways that we constantly look for and find "teachers" who will say *with great authority* whatever we want to hear ... whatever we need to hear to justify our god-less philosophy and resultant

behavior.

Is This It?

Now, again, the point of all this is to try and illustrate why many Christians – who take the words of Jesus and Paul and the other apostles seriously ...

Why they – why we – might be thinking “we’re living in the last days.”

But the question is ... are they – are we – correct?

Is the prophesied Apocalypse happening now or about to happen very soon?

I’m going to tell you what I think but first, I want to give you a few observations that will hopefully provide a little bit of context.

1. Since the beginning of Christianity, there have been Christians who interpret current events as “the end” ... and they have always been wrong.

Obviously. We're still here.

When you look at all those things on Jesus' list and Paul's list, every generation has been able to look at their world and say, “see, it's happening” ... because it has been!

For instance ...

- When has it *not* been true that “nation rises against nation, and kingdom against kingdom?”
- When has it *not* been true that famines and earthquakes and natural disasters have happened in various places?

I mean ...

- Many people believed that Adolf Hitler was the Anti-Christ.
- Many people who lived during the time of the Spanish Flu in 1918 thought it was a sign that the end was near.^x

Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not trying to minimize what Jesus or Paul taught.

I'm just saying that it's always been possible to "see" those things in human culture and the world because *that's how people are* and *that's how the world is* because of the curse of sin.

The point Jesus and his Apostles were making is that in "the last days" those characteristics would be so severe and extreme *everywhere* as to be undeniable ...

... which leads to my second observation.

2. It could be a lot worse than it is.

For example, people have *always* denied God and persecuted his followers. Again, that's just human nature.

... which means that rebelling against God and then persecuting *those who do not* is the number one sign – *not* that the Apocalypse is near – but that we're sinners; that we're fallen from what we're intended to be.

And that fallenness and persecution could be *a lot worse* than it currently is, especially in this culture.

I mean, there is no doubt that Christians and Christianity are increasingly perceived as being part of "the problem" these days and

that hostility is growing.

But we have not had to suffer anything like what's going on in other parts of the world where Christianity is illegal, and Christians sometimes pay for their faith with their lives.

Let's watch.

Video Clip – Christian Persecution 2021

That's part of a longer video produced by Open Doors, which is an international ministry dedicated to helping victims of religious persecution worldwide.^{xi}

Now, I don't doubt that for a minute that we're heading in that direction as a nation but, reality is, we're not yet there. It could be a lot worse than it is.

Ok, one more observation and then I'll get to

the point I'm trying to make in all of this.

3. When a people collectively reject their spiritual foundation, chaos eventually ensues.

This is the clear pattern you see in the biblical nation of Israel.

If you read the history books of the Old Testament ...

- 1st and 2nd Samuel
- The Book of Judges
- 1st and 2nd Kings
- 1st and 2nd Chronicles

... you see it happening again and again:

- A king leads the people to turn away from God
- They reject God's commandments and

start doing things their own way

- And it gets really, really bad – and sometimes for many generations if not centuries.

But that phenomenon isn't limited just to Israel. That's how it works for *all* nations.

Proverbs 14:34 says that ...

*Righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin condemns any people.*

Proverbs 14:34 (NIV)

And that's not talking about eternal judgment.

It's saying that turning away from the ways of God will bring reproach and disgrace in the here and now. And *chaos* and destruction will eventually follow.

Or, to put it another way, *that culture – that nation – will experience it last days.*

Now, I realize that there is a movement these days which claims that our country was founded primarily to propagate the evil of slavery.

I'm not enough of a historian to argue that this claim is completely false. It might have been true for at least some of our founders.

But I *do* know enough history to know ...

- That many of our founders were serious Christians
- And that our system of government in its original design was based on the idea of acknowledging the hand of God and honoring the Ten Commandments.

And to be clear, that's not the same thing as being "a Christian nation" as some will

argue.

Christianity was never our “state religion” because the founders went to great lengths to keep government out of religion.

But, again, there’s little question that the idea that we, as a people, should acknowledge God and honor his commandments has almost completely vanished.

And that, friends, is why if you’re a Christian and you look around and see “chaos” in our country and it concerns you ...

It might not be THE chaos *of the Apocalypse* that you’re seeing.

Instead, it might simply be the last days *of our culture*. It might just be the last days of our country as we know it.

And again, I'm not arguing for a second that this is a perfect country – far from it. I'm just saying that we're following a very familiar pattern that leads to a very predictable place.

And my point is this: that the last days of our culture are not necessarily THE last days.

They might be. I don't know for sure.

But that's OK because even Jesus didn't – and doesn't – know the exact timing of the coming Apocalypse.

"About that day or hour," he said, "no one knows – not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Matthew 24:36 (NIV)

What Now?

Now, I know that my point isn't all that satisfying.

"So, you're saying, Rick, that we might be in the last days, but we might not be. What good is that?"

Well, one "good" is that we know that, in spite of whatever chaos there is and however bad it might get, history is going somewhere. *God has a plan.*

And in week three and four of this series, we're going to talk about what that plan is ... so you don't want to miss it.

Next week, by the way, we're going to talk about the Book of Revelation and how *that* fits into this whole thing ... so you don't want to miss that either.

But as we close out this particular message, I

want to talk for just a few minutes about how to deal with the increasing level of chaos that surrounds us ...

... whether that chaos is because we're in the end times of our country or the end times of the Apocalypse.

1. Don't stand up for your "rights" as a *Christian*. Do it as a *citizen* (and do it whenever *anyone's* rights are violated).

We follow a leader whose pattern was to give up his rights, not demand them.

2. Limit media consumption (social and otherwise).

Have you heard that the Chinese government has recently declared that kids can only play online games a max of three hours a week?

Such a stringent social intervention was necessary, it said, in order to pull the plug on

a growing addiction to what it described as “spiritual opium.”

“Teenagers are the future of our motherland,” a spokesperson said.

“Protecting the physical and mental health of minors is related to the people’s vital interests, and relates to the cultivation of the younger generation in the era of national rejuvenation.”^{xii}

When I heard that I was like, “wow.”

And then I wondered what would happen if we did that – not with gaming and not with kids (although it might not be a bad idea) and not by government order – but voluntarily with social and news media?

More and more, psychologists are finding that our addiction to all things digital

constantly adds fuel to the fire of fear. It magnifies the issues and blows them out of proportion.

20 years ago ... never would have seen scenes from Afghanistan (and other places)

Not saying it's better to not know but that all of us knowing all things everywhere all the time puts us individually in the place of God. Social media makes us, for all practical purposes omniscient and omnipresent.

The only problem is that we're not built for that kind of knowledge 24/7. It's destructive. It's "spiritual opium" so to speak.

The final suggestion I would make on dealing with the chaos of our world really isn't *my* suggestion. It's the suggestion – actually the command of Jesus ...

... which means if you're a Christian this applies to you. You have to take this seriously.

3. Keep watch and stand firm.

*"The one who stands firm to the end will be saved."
Matthew 24:13 (NIV)*

"Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." Matthew 24:42 (NIV)

The point is, if you're a Christian, don't give up and don't give in. Keeping doing what God wants you to do.

And pay attention to what's going on in the world ...

- Not to the point of fear
- And not so that you can have "secret

knowledge“ no one else has ...

... but so that you can serve the Lord in this time by being a light to those who do not yet know Him.

And let me pray for you to that end.

Endnotes

ⁱ First four are mentioned at <https://www.vox.com/2015/2/19/8069533/end-of-the-world>

ⁱⁱ The last two on the list are from <https://www.livescience.com/49952-stephen-hawking-warnings-to-humanity.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.preceptaustin.org/the_second_coming_of_christ

^{iv} Luke 21:19

^v Luke 21:25-26

^{vi} <https://philipyancey.com/features/reflections-on-911>

^{vii} <https://www.barna.com/research/five-years-later-911-attacks-show-no-lasting-influence-on-americans-faith/>

^{viii} <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/september-web-only/september-11-why-911-brought-neither-unity-nor-revival.html>

^{ix} <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-world-is-catechizing-us-whether-we-realize-it-or-not/>

^x <https://www.rug.nl/research/centre-for-religious-studies/religion-conflict-globalization/blog/coping-with-covid-19-in-dutch-christianity-comparison-with-the-1918-spanish-flu-pandemic-24-04-2020?lang=en>

^{xi} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kr_UxZ_tEGI

^{xii} <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-rolls-out-new-rules-minors-online-gaming-xinhua-2021-08-30/>