

When ‘Near’ Means ‘Not Near’ and ‘Near’

by Gary DeMar

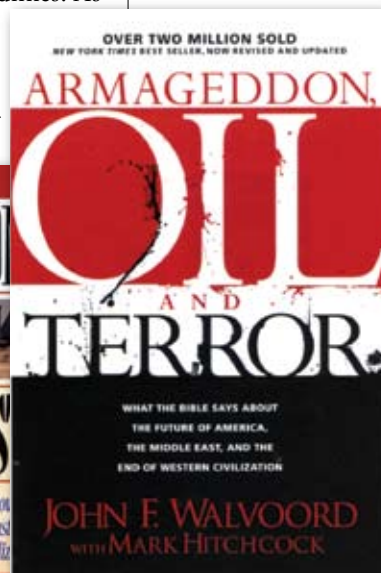
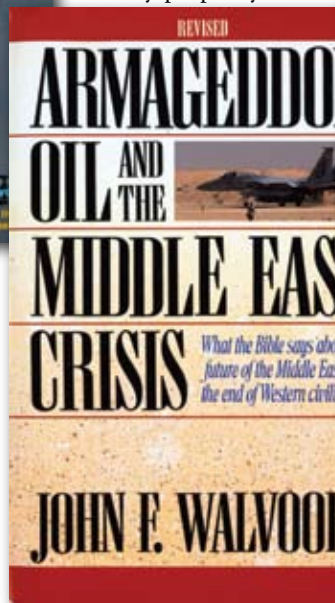
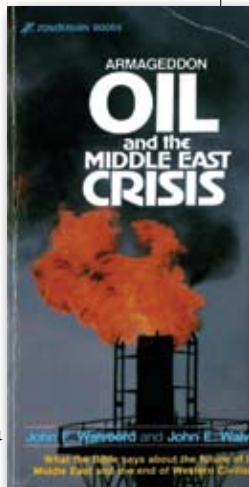
The message of Revelation was written primarily to Christians living in the first century. When this fact is forgotten or ignored, confusion is inevitable.

IF YOU'RE CONFUSED BY THE TITLE of this article, you should be. How can the word "near" mean "not near" in some contexts but "near" in others? Welcome to the world of end-time speculation for fun and profit. If you want to sell a truckload of books on prophecy, speculate that the time when the rapture will take place, the antichrist will show himself, or the battle of Armageddon will be fought is near or coming soon.¹ You don't have to set a definitive date; you only need to suggest that the time is near or fast approaching. If you do this, you are almost guaranteed a prophetic blockbuster. And it doesn't matter that earlier claims of prophetic speculation have been discredited by the passage of time. People have short memories, and there's always some new prophetic claim that can be exploited.

If you want to know when prophetic events in the Bible are to happen, look for time indicators. Some of them are very specific: after three days, in 40 days, after 40 years, at the completion of 70 years. There are less specific time indicators like "near," "shortly," "quickly," and "at hand" that have a definitive meaning. These time words are at the heart of the debate between those who claim that certain prophetic events have *already* taken place and those who maintain they are yet *to be* fulfilled. The division between these two views is deep and wide, and yet the implications for interpretive accuracy are fundamental if the Bible is to be interpreted faithfully. If prophetic events described in the Bible are said to be "near," and "near" is interpreted in a fluid way so that it has no specificity in terms of time, then how is it ever possible to nail down the fulfillment of prophetic events?

Armageddon, Oil, and Terror

Modern-day prophetic speculators live and breathe off the promise that eschatological events are always near. They take prophecies that the Bible says were soon to be fulfilled for first-century readers and reshape them to fit contemporary headlines. As a result, we are always living on the precipice of some near end-time event. This is why modern-day prophecy books



sell by the millions. Few people want to know what happened prophetically two thousand years ago, but they do want to know what's going to happen in the next few years. And it doesn't seem to matter that prophecy books are revised every ten years or so to fit the latest headlines. A recent example is the revision of John Walvoord's *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis*. Even though Walvoord died in 2002, his book has been given new life with a slightly revised title by its new co-author Mark Hitchcock. The title of the new edition is *Armageddon, Oil, and Terror*.

The first edition of Walvoord's book was published in 1974 in an attempt to explain the latest in "prophetic events," the OPEC oil crisis. Walvoord wrote, "Each day's headlines raise new questions concerning what the future holds."² The book was reprinted in 1976 and then sank without a trace until a revised edition appeared in late 1990 when the six-month build-up for the Gulf War was in its final stages. The new edition reflected changing world events:

The world today is like a stage being set for a great drama. The major actors are already in the wings waiting for their moment in history. The main stage props

are already in place. The prophetic play is about to begin. . . . Our present world is well prepared for the beginning of the prophetic drama that will lead to Armageddon. Since the stage is set for this dramatic climax of the age, it must mean that Christ's coming for his own is very near.³

What did Walvoord mean by "near"? Does anyone believe that the events he described in 1990 might not take place for two millennia? Walvoord's use of "near" was intentional. People eagerly bought copies because they understood "near" to mean "soon to take place," maybe in their own lifetime. The promotion material for the second revised edition assures readers that its content "is as current as today's news... and every prediction rings true." Where have we heard this before? That's right. More than 30 years ago in the first edition

of the book! Why does a prophecy book have to be revised? Why didn't Walvoord see today's events in 1976?⁴

Walvoord claimed in 1990 that "Christ's coming for his own is *very near*." The New Testament, written nearly 2000 years ago, said that Christ's coming in judgment was "near" (James 5:8–9; Rev. 1:3). In his September 16, 2001 *International Intelligence Briefing Report*, aired on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, Hal Lindsey told viewers: "Tuesday, September 11, 2001, the end began. . . . The events, even of this week, show us that we're *very near* the end. The whole predicted scenario is fulfilled right before our eyes. All the pieces of that predicted puzzle that would indicate Christ's coming was *just around the corner* are in place. . . . I believe that, right now, we need to focus on the great hope that we have that Jesus Christ is *soon* coming and [is] going to translate [rapture] us from mortal to immortal." This is the same Hal Lindsey who assured his readers in the 1970 edition of *Late Great Planet Earth* that Jesus would rapture His church before 1988. He's the same "prophecy expert" who claimed in his *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* that "*The decade of the 1980's could very well be the last decade of history as we know it.*" You would think that these errors in predicting these future events would have been enough for Christians to rethink the basic tenets of dispensationalism.

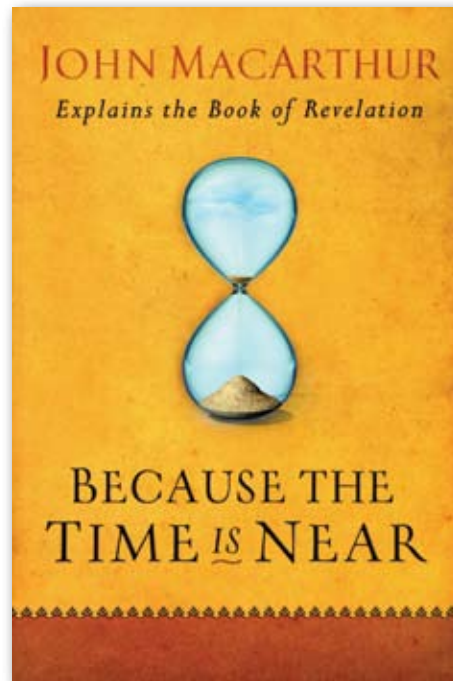
Notice how Lindsey, like Walvoord, uses the time words "near," "around the corner," and "soon" to describe events that will take place shortly. Every person who reads their choice of time words knows exactly what "near," "soon," and "just around the corner" mean. Yet when these same time words are used in the Bible, all of a sudden they take on a mystical, non-literal meaning. John writes "for the time is near" (Rev. 1:3). Why didn't John's use of "near" have the same meaning of Walvoord and Lindsey's use of "near"? Why didn't the use of "the Judge is standing right at the door" (James 5:8–9) mean the same as Lindsey's "just around the corner" to those who first read James' letter?

Because the Time is Near

Popular prophecy writer John MacArthur has written *Because the Time is Near*. He writes in the Introduction:

As noted on page 332, the book of Revelation deserves immediate proclamation because *the end is near*. As the angel told John in the final chapter of Revelation, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book for *the time is near*." (22:10). And so we study Christ's future return—a return Jesus Himself says is imminent (22:7, 12, 20).⁵

Does MacArthur's "near" mean the same as the Bible's "near"? Remember that John received the Revelation in the first century. What did Revelation's first readers understand by "near" when they first read the word? MacArthur writes that "the coming of Christ has been imminent for every generation from John's day until the



present."⁶ Where does the Bible say this? It doesn't! First, the Bible never uses the word "imminent" (as in "any moment") to describe Jesus' coming. It's always "near" or "at hand." Second, when these time words are used in other contexts, they always mean an event or events on the prophetic horizon not some time in the distant future or "any moment in time" spread out over 2000 years! Don't believe me? Search through your concordance and check out these time words for yourself. That's why it's surprising that MacArthur can write, "If the plain, normal understanding of the words of Revelation does not convey the meaning God intended its readers to grasp, then those words *are* sealed."⁷ I assume that this applies to the

time words like "shortly" (Rev. 1:1), "near" (1:3), and "quickly" (22:12). What was "the plain, normal understanding" of these words when they were revealed and written down by John and read by Christians in the first century? Following MacArthur's interpretation, these time words were sealed for them since "near" didn't mean "near" to them but "near" to us.

Approaching Armageddon

Ed Hindson admits that the events of Revelation are said to happen "quickly" or "shortly," as some translations have it (1:1), but like MacArthur, he puts a futurist twist on the word's meaning. Revelation 22 uses similar terminology to designate time:

- "And behold, I am coming **quickly**. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of his book" (22:7).
- "And the [angel] said to [John], 'Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is **near**'" (22:10).
- "Behold, I am coming **quickly**, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done" (22:12).
- "Yes, I am coming **quickly**" (22:20).

Anyone reading these passages for the first time would rightly conclude that whatever is being described in these verses, the event is on the horizon for those who first read the Revelation. In fact, it takes lengthy reprogramming to get people to believe time is not being discussed but only speed. Following the new end-time hermeneutic, Revelation 22:20 should read, "Yes, when I come, it will be **quick**."

Hindson's commentary on Revelation, *Approaching Armageddon*, offers the following comment on Revelation 1:3. But as we will see, he doesn't follow his own comments:

"The time is at hand" (1:3). There are no dates set in the Revelation! No matter what anyone tries to read into the text of this prophecy, there are no specific time indicators of when it will be fulfilled. The only indication of time is the phrase "the time is at hand" (Greek, *kairos en-gus*). This may be translated "near" or "soon." Taken with the phrase "come to pass shortly" (Greek, *enta-chei*, "soon") in verse 1, the reader is

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left expecting the imminent return of Christ.⁸

Keep in mind that Revelation was first written to Christians living in the first century. We need to ask how they would have understood what was revealed to and written down by John. Let's rework Hindson's last sentence using his own arguments: "Taken with the phrase 'come to pass shortly' ...in verse 1, the [first-century] reader is left expecting the return of Christ to 'come to pass shortly.'" Those reading Revelation today, if near and shortly mean what they mean elsewhere in the New Testament, should understand that those first-century readers were expecting the return of Christ "to come to pass shortly." If the return of Christ did not come to pass shortly, then why did God tell John "the time is near"?

The Bible does not say anywhere that the events described in Revelation 1:1 and 3 are imminent, that is, that they could come at any moment whether near or far in terms of time, but that the events are "near" in time to those who first read Revelation. Hindson and other dispensationalists have created the idea of imminence as a substitute for what the Bible actually says because they don't like the implications of these time words for their futurist eschatology. The proper understanding of "near" and "shortly" must come from the Bible itself. In each and every case, "near" and "shortly" mean what they mean in everyday speech.

Soon or Sudden?

John Walvoord follows the same line of argument in his comments on the meaning of "shortly" in his commentary on Revelation: "The idea is not that the event may occur soon, but that when it does, it will be sudden (cf. Luke 18:8; Acts 12:7; 22:18; 25:4; Rom. 16:20)."⁹ Of course, that's not what Revelation 1:1 says, and neither do the verses Walvoord cites for support. In fact, fellow dispensational author Robert Thomas writes, "but in at least two of these passages [that Walvoord uses] the conclusion is debatable (cf. Luke 18:8; Rom. 16:20)."¹⁰ This does not mean that Thomas disagrees with Walvoord's conclusion. "The strongest support for [the futurist] view," Thomas argues, "is by way of an objection to the other alternative, that the phrase means 'soon' and has

reference to nearness of fulfillment of the events predicted. The objection is that such an alternative is impossible because a futurist approach to the book would require the events to have taken place close to John's lifetime."¹¹

So while Revelation 1:1 and 1:3 indicate that the predicted events are to have taken place in John's lifetime, don't believe it, because it would mean that dispensationalism isn't true. So how does Thomas get around his claim that he interprets the Bible literally? "[T]ime in the Apocalypse is computed either relatively to the divine apprehension as here and in 22:10¹² (cf. 1:3; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20) or absolutely in itself as long or short (cf. 8:1; 20:2)." What does this mean? He goes on: "When measuring time, Scripture has a different standard from ours (cf. 1 John 2:18)." This is question begging in the extreme. Thomas assumes what he must prove, and it violates the "plain sense" methodology that dispensationalists claim is the basis of their interpretive method.

Consider his proof text of 1 John 2:18: "Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour." John tells his readers that it *is* the last hour. If it wasn't, the Bible is totally mixed up, confusing, and means the opposite of what it actually says. And what is the evidence that it was the last hour for John and the recipients of his letter?: that "even *now* many antichrists *have arisen*." "From this," the fact that even now many antichrists have arisen, "we know that it *is* the last hour." John's "we" are those who received his letter. It was the "last hour" for them.

When or How?

Thomas Ice writes that "the terms 'quickly' and 'near' are more properly interpreted as *qualitative indicators* describing how Christ will return. *How* will He return? He will come back 'quickly' or 'suddenly.'"¹³ The problem with Ice's analysis is that "quickly" does not anticipate a delay in any of the verses where the word is used (e.g., Matt. 5:25; 28:7; Luke 15:22; 16:6; John 11:29, 31; 13:27; Acts 22:18). With "quickly" the action happens soon after. In fact, Ice uses Acts 22:18 as "descriptive of the manner in which the action takes place: 'I saw Him saying to

me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem *quickly*, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.'"¹⁴ If we apply Ice's understanding of "quickly" to this verse, it would read this way: "When you decide to get out of Jerusalem, do it *quickly*." But this makes no sense since Jesus' words were a warning for Paul to "make haste" in leaving the city, that is, to do it "quickly" because he had enemies in the city. If he waited and only acted speedily when he decided to leave, then Jesus' warning was inconsequential.

Ice contrasts Acts 22:18 with 1 Timothy 3:14, a verse he describes as a "timing passage": "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you *before long* [*en tachei*]." If 1 Timothy 3:14 is a timing passage, then so is Revelation 1:1 since both use the same Greek word (*en tachei*). The Greek construction is identical in all three verses (Acts 22:18; 1 Tim. 3:14; Rev. 1:1). So let's use "before long" in Revelation 1:1 and see how it reads: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must take place *before long* [*en tachei*]." "Before long" does not have the meaning of unspecified time going on for centuries!

At the Door

In Revelation 1:1, John was shown "the things which must shortly take place." Why must they "shortly take place?" Because the reader is told that "the time is near" (1:3). Jesus defines "near" to mean "at the door" (Matt. 24:33). James writes that "the coming of the Lord is at hand," and he defines "at hand" to mean "right at the door" (James 5:8, 9). If the purpose of Revelation was to demonstrate that the events of the book were a prophetic certainty that could occur at any time, John could have been told to write, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His bond-servants the things which *must* take place." This wording would have had the effect of expressing necessity without committing to any time parameters, the very thing dispensationalists claim the Bible teaches. Revelation uses this construction in several places (4:1; 10:11:5; 17:10; 20:3). But by adding "shortly," Jesus is telling Revelation's first

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readers that not only are these coming events a certainty, they will happen quickly because “the time is near.” Let’s let Milton Terry, the author of *Biblical Hermeneutics*, put the debate over time words into perspective:

When a writer says that an event will shortly and speedily come to pass, or is about to take place,

it is contrary to all propriety to declare that his statements allow us to believe the event is in the far future. It is a reprehensible abuse of language to say that the words *immediately*, or *near at hand*, mean *ages hence*, or *after a long time*. Such a treatment of the language

of Scripture is even worse than the theory of a double sense.¹⁴

Terry is a good judge in this matter since he is respected by futurists and those who believe that the majority of events described in Revelation have already been fulfilled. He is to the point—“near” means “near” all the time! 

Notes

1. Dave Hunt, *How Close are We?: Compelling Evidence for the Soon Return of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1993). A new edition appeared in 2003 with a title that asked a question: *When Will Jesus Come?* The subtitle remained the same.
2. John F. Walvoord and John E. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 7.
3. John W. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 228.
4. My book *Last Days Madness* is in its fourth edition. Most of the revisions are the result of having to respond to the revisions of prophetic speculators.
5. John MacArthur, *Because the Time is Near: John MacArthur Explains the Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2007), 14.
6. MacArthur, *Because the Time is Near*, 332.
7. MacArthur, *Because the Time is Near*, 332.
8. Ed Hindson, *Approaching Armageddon: The World Prepares for War With God* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997).
9. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 35.
10. Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 55.
11. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 55.
12. Notice what John is told in this passage: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.” Compare Revelation 22:10 with Daniel 12:4.
13. Thomas Ice, “Preterist ‘Time Texts,’” *The End Times Controversy: The Second Coming Under Attack*, eds. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), 102. “Suddenly” is a completely different word in Greek (Mark. 13:36; Luke 2:13; 9:39). Another Greek word expresses a similar idea (Luke 21:34; 1 Thess. 5:3).
14. Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1883), 495–496.