

This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'What is the apocalypse?'.
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What is the apocalypse? Dr Alastair Lockhart, Faculty of Divinity

Nowadays, we often hear the word 'apocalypse' used in everyday speech, on TV and in films and computer games. And in reports about current events the word is sometimes used to refer to a large-scale catastrophe or disaster.

Newspapers have recently reported fears about a 'viral apocalypse' or a 'climate apocalypse'. There are lots of films and computer games set in a world that's fallen apart after a disaster as people struggle to survive in a 'zombie apocalypse'.

The use of 'apocalypse' in this way is a relatively new way of using the word that started out as a religious or theological way of talking.

My name is Alastair Lockhart. I'm a member of the Faculty of Divinity in Cambridge and a Fellow of Hughes Hall, and the Academic Director at the Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements.

One way to begin thinking about this is to look at ideas about the end of the world or the end-point of history in Christianity. The most common prayer said by Christians is the Lord's Prayer, also known as the 'Our Father'. It is a special one for Christians because the Gospels say that Jesus taught the words to his followers himself.

The usual version of the prayer begins with the words:

"Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name;
Thy kingdom come;
Thy will be done;
on Earth as it is in Heaven."

The kingdom referred to in this prayer has been understood as part of what people think of as Jesus's 'end times' teaching: the idea that sometime soon there would be a great social, political, physical, and, in the end, spiritual upheaval and transformation in the world when God would rule the Earth and this is thought of as far more than just a change of

government, the change is so big that it is something like the end of the world.

Now it is said that these kinds of teachings were not unusual in the places and during the times that Jesus lived. One Professor of the Hebrew Bible says: there were many kinds of people in Palestine in the first century, or around the turn of that era, who expected some big upheaval, who expected some massive change.

And in fact, the same might be true today. What is more, it is not only Christians who have ideas about the end of time and the rule of God: Judaism and Islam and other religions have ideas like this in their doctrines as well.

But for now I'd like focus mainly on Christian ideas about these 'end times'. For many people, the idea of the end time and the establishment of Divine Rule by God on Earth is referred to as 'The Apocalypse' - and the word 'apocalypse' itself, in fact, just means 'revealing' or 'uncovering'.

In the first place it was used to refer to the last book of the Christian Bible which is known as the Book of Revelation, or 'The Apocalypse'. And that describes an amazing divine revelation. So it reflects the fact that the writer was writing down a vision that had been revealed to him including things to do with the 'end times' and the triumph of the divine all over the earth.

In more recent history, the word has begun to be used to refer to great disasters and the destruction of the existing world, rather than just to 'revealing' in the religious sense - probably because there are plenty of images of upheaval and violence in the Book of Revelation, and those were the of descriptions it became known for.

Of course, it doesn't look like the great change people were expecting around the time of Jesus 2,000 years ago did actually happen during or soon after his lifetime. So, over time the ways this aspect of Jesus's teachings has been understood has evolved and developed, and all of these rely to some extent on the idea that Jesus's words about the end times, in the Lord's Prayer, the images and symbols of the Book of Revelation, and other accounts of the end of the world from Biblical sources need to be interpreted in the right kinds of ways.

The question that people don't agree on is just what the 'right kinds of ways' are. There are many kinds of Christians in the world today and they have many different views about the right interpretation.

For some groups, the dramatic and catastrophic way of understanding apocalypse has become linked to their ideas about the Kingdom of God. So, some groups believe that sin and suffering will mount up so much that eventually God will return and, amid a worldwide catastrophe, punish sinners and reward good people and the best thing people can do, they say, is get ready for it and follow the teachings of Jesus as well as you can while you wait for it.

An idea that has grown in popularity in recent years has been called "the Rapture" – the idea that Christians with the right beliefs will be swept up to heaven physically and kept safe while everyone left on the world goes through periods of suffering and judgment.

Some people believe that groups with strong apocalyptic beliefs are so extreme that they are more likely to become involved in violence of different kinds – but there's disagreement about that about whether it's the case, and if it is, why that might be the case.

But, for many Christians however, the end times do not have to happen quickly and dramatically any day now. Some have argued that the Kingdom of God has steadily been developing on Earth for its entire history, from the Garden of Eden to the present day in religious terms. To this way of thinking, Jesus was really starting a new and important phase.

Others believe that the Kingdom of God has been developing on Earth since the time of Jesus, so that Jesus brought it in and it has begun to spread through the world. This is the way that many traditional Christians understand the arrival of God's Kingdom. Under this interpretation each individual person contributes to making the peaceful rule of God become a reality on Earth.

They might think the world as we know it will end at some point, perhaps in some kind of catastrophe with divine intervention, but the important thing for them is that God will judge them in the end.

From this point-of-view, if you think you're going to be judged by God one day it is probably less important to worry about when and how it's going to happen in the world around you, than it is to think about how you might be judged as an individual.

So, looked at literally, the word 'apocalypse' may just mean 'revealing', but it also has many deeper layers of meaning for Christians after 2,000 years of thinking about it and discussing it.

The revealing isn't just to do with what will happen to the world at the end of time, and what is happening behind the scenes in the religious structure of the universe, but it might also be to do with revealing what is inside each person's deepest thoughts and actions.