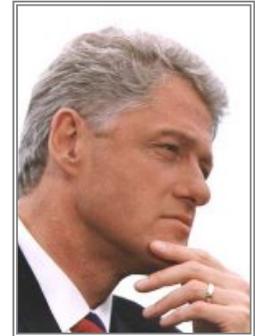


# "It Depends on What the Meaning of 'Is' Is"

By [Charles Coty](#)

When it comes to Holy Scripture, does [time](#) matter? Is it relevant? Is it consistent? Are references to it to be taken literally and uniformly? Does "soon" really mean "soon"? If something was "at hand" in one verse and "at hand" in another, can each infer drastically distinct interpretations? Is it possible for the first to mean "soon" while the latter insinuate a gap of thousands of years? Should we expect word interpretation consistency? Is there indication that Jesus or any of the [inspired](#) NT authors ever attempted to lead their readers to believe that time was elastic to the point that it could not be faithfully relied upon?

Bill Clinton's famous quote, "*It depends on what the meaning of 'is' is*", seems eerily similar to the manner in which many of the popular modern day Bible interpreters play fast and loose with Scriptural integrity and inspiration.



We know that to an infinite God, who has no beginning or end, time is of no consequence. To Creator God, a thousand earthly years is but a mere day and a day is as a thousand years. ([2Pet 3:8](#)) To God timelines are of no value because in His economy time is without limits.

But let me ask you a question. To whom was the Bible written? I don't mean to sound facetious, but God didn't write the Scriptures to and for Himself did He? The Bible communicates His redemptive plan to His fallen finite *time-bound* creation. Wouldn't it stand to reason that God would use language that His creatures could comprehend? And should we not also assume that God wouldn't intentionally attempt to confuse or mislead His most intimate first century followers? If time indicators were not reliable then why were they employed? Why would Jesus have placed time constraints on His coming ([parousia](#)) if they only stood to mislead His disciples? ([Matt 10:23](#); [16:27-28](#); [24:34](#))

So what does the Bible tell us about time? (*After reading this article, return to watch the linked video, "[Knowing the Time of the Parousia](#)" by [William Bell](#)", to help flesh out that which we are considering here*)

📖 Genesis 1:5 (ESV) *God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

The infinite triune God created "*the first day*". Why would God, being eternal, concern Himself with the creation of this finite system? In His immeasurable wisdom He knew that finite man would require this sun/moon time sequence to create a sense of order. From the beginning, time was consequential, and as we shall see, time mattered a great deal to God because it was part of man's temporal economy. There's a sense of time consistency throughout Scripture that many of today's most God-fearing men and women appear to doubt. Why? Possibly because the bias of their presuppositional worldview does not allow them to treat time literally.

Many of us choose to interpret Biblical [apocalyptic language](#) (stars falling from Heaven and moon turning into blood) literally and by contrast, the literal time statements (at hand, soon, shortly) figuratively—all seemingly in an attempt to justify our position. None of us intentionally believe things that are untrue so we are quick to employ justifications for the things that cause angst and confusion. How often do we pull out the [2Peter 3:8](#) card when God says something was supposed to be "soon" or "at hand" in the first century, that we insist was still thousands of years future to "them"?

The status quo is a very safe place to rest. No one likes to be in the minority especially when truth may force us to stand alone for a season or possibly longer. Some of us willingly throw [audience relevance](#) (the Scriptures were relevant to the audience at hand) out the window just to accommodate the way we think things are supposed to be. Presupposition and empiricism appear to rule the day. So instead of choosing to become effective [Bereans](#) (testing all things) we retreat in fear attempting to find adequate justification for neutering the meanings of these very menacing texts. Challenging a deep-seated paradigm can be a rather terrifying and intensely disorienting endeavor.

I apologize for being so intrusive but let me ask you another probing question. Is it intellectually honest to distort time to mean whatever we desire, simply to prove our paradigm? We have crafted an entire system of *timeless ambiguity* from just one out-of-context Second Peter verse. We have been asked to believe that every time referent written before or after Peter's Second Epistle has been neutered of its imminence. Has [2Pet 3:8](#) really given us license to distort time?

First, it should be noted that [2Pet 3:8](#) (written in approx AD 67) actually proves the opposite of what many assume this verse implies. It had been approx. 37 years since Jesus' "[this generation](#)" proclamation (AD 30) and the "*last days scoffers*" were out in full force, questioning the very time issues Peter is purported to be trivializing. Was Jesus ever going to return? Peter's response? "*The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness.*" Even though some thought Jesus was late to the point of being unfaithful to His promise, Peter was assuring his readers that Jesus was right on schedule. (And as is known today, Peter's statements were issued merely three years prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in [AD 70](#)—which marked [the end of the Jewish age](#))

And think about this. Is it even plausible that the same author who less than a year earlier wrote, "*the end of all things is near*" ([1Pet 4:7](#)), would in one swipe of the pen erase *time* from the history books? Is the Bible the only historical book ever written where time is supposed to be inconsequential? And if it is, who informed the direct recipients that the things they were being told were misleading and untruthful?

If by "*Truly, I say to you, [this generation will not pass away until all these things take place](#)*" ([Matt 24:34](#)), Jesus is presumed to be talking about a distant generation (which would have been "that generation") 2,000 years removed, who told His disciples that Jesus wasn't really speaking to them?

Let's give a fair-minded look at the following statements and remember to keep "audience relevance" in your mind's eye as you think about the impact these things would have had on the recipients.

They were exhorted to have patience "*for the coming of the Lord is at hand ... the judge is standing at the door*" ([James 5:8-9](#)). Challenged to be self-controlled because, "*The end of all things is near*" ([1Peter 4:7](#)) Encouraged to endure the horrific persecution knowing that, "*In a very little while He who is coming will come and will not delay*". ([Heb 10:36-37](#)) Cautioned to stay as they were, free from added anxieties because, "*the time is short...the form of this world is passing away*". ([1Cor 7:29-31](#)) Warned to be vigilant because of the ever-present antichrists proving that "*it is the last hour*" ([1John 2:18](#)). And when they received their edition of John's Revelation they were heartened to know that these were "*things that are to take place shortly...for the time is near*"? ([Revelation 1:1,3](#))

What kind of impact would these promises have had upon the heavily persecuted Christ-followers? Today, many a theologian unwittingly asks us to assume that the inspired writers of the NT deliberately mislead the faithful. Why? In order to create a multi-generational expectancy? Is this method of deception and misdirection truly consistent with God's character?

Can you imagine what disastrous consequences would have ensued had these promises not been fulfilled in real time? Did Jesus and the inspired writer's of the NT, promise short term vindication to the heavily persecuted early Church with no intention of being faithful to those promises?

📖 *This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. <sup>6</sup> For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, <sup>7</sup> and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, <sup>8</sup> dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (2 Thessalonians 1:5-8)*

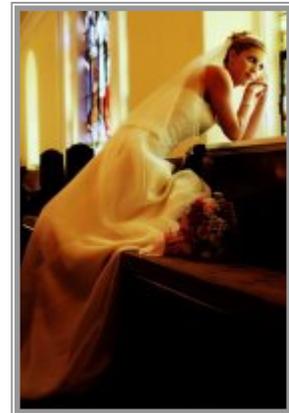
Has anyone ever promised you something that you realized they never had an intention of fulfilling? How did that make you feel? How did that affect your trust level and your reception to their future promises?

Consider for a moment the psychological impact of failed promises in the following wedding parable. (Thanks to my daughter for graciously allowing me to use her wedding photo)

*A women's lifetime of dreams is upon her. Other than her commitment to Christ many years earlier, the most magnificent day has finally arrived. She is about to wed the love of her life. As she readies herself in the bride's quarters, she can hardly wait to walk those few glorious steps down the aisle to meet her man.*

*As she waits patiently she's given word that the groom has not yet arrived. Of all days to be late! But there's no cause for alarm since there's still time. She knows in her heart that he'll be along any minute so she tries as best she can to relax. As her mind runs wild, she begins to wonder if something's gone awry—her groom has always been abundantly faithful.*

*The bride's spirit is quieted somewhat as she's given word that he will "soon" appear at the altar awaiting his beautiful bride. Minutes pass and the bride continues to sit without her beloved as tensions begin to rise. Another word from the groom's best man is such heartening news—he is now said to be arriving "shortly". The anticipation grows with these more imminent words but still no groom as the clock keeps ticking and the guests grow impatient, evidenced by their ensuing chatter.*



*A note of certainty has sprung from the groom's entourage and the maid of honor whispers the good news to the bride saying, "It'll be a very little while". He must be right outside the church she surmises. She's hardly able to contain her eager anticipation. Her hopes continue to heighten. The rush is coming. Her heart begins pounding wildly. Another encouraging report saying, "it's the last hour", his coming is "at hand". Her enthusiasm crescendos to a new pinnacle. She can hardly stand still. Her Groom is about to appear. She can feel his presence!*

*Now hours have passed and no Groom is in sight. All the guests but the parents have returned to their respective homes. The bride, sobbing and downtrodden, experiences untold sorrow. "But he was on his way. Why didn't he come? And why did they continue to tell us that he'd be here soon?" She felt the epitome of rejection, telling her maid of honor that it would have been better to have never loved than to go through this tortuously agonizing trial.*

*Days pass and still no Groom as the bride grew increasingly despondent. Weeks and still no sign of him. Not even a Word from his parents. Years are now in the books and although the bride was clearly grief stricken, she had moved on. Her faith was irreparably shattered, no longer able or willing to trust her Groom even if He did one day return.*

If Jesus (the Groom) was unfaithful to those (the Bride of Christ) that received these many imminent promises, then what effect would that have had on the early church? I believe the implications of failed expectations would have been catastrophic. Would the Gospel have proliferated so significantly into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century if the Christ-followers believed they had been duped? You may be shocked at the following excerpt from C.S. Lewis', [\*The World's Last Night\*](#), written the same year (1952) as [\*Mere Christianity\*](#):

*"Say what you like," we shall be told, "the apocalyptic beliefs of the first Christians have been proved to be false. It is clear from the New Testament that they all expected the Second Coming in their own lifetime. And, worse still, they had a reason, and one which you will find very embarrassing. Their Master had told them so. He shared, and indeed created, their delusion. He said in so many words, 'this generation shall not pass till all these things be done.' And he was wrong. He clearly knew no more about the end of the world than anyone else." It is certainly the most embarrassing verse in the Bible.*

Unlike C.S. Lewis, I was not able to successfully assimilate this view that Jesus "*created their delusion*". Was Jesus wrong? Was He engaged in situational ethics where the end (creating a generational expectancy) justified the means (intentionally using false promises)? I don't believe that Jesus was 2,000 years late. Listen to this rather poignant song, "[2,000 years and counting](#)" (by Jeff Reulbach).

Unfortunately for C.S. Lewis, he was, to my knowledge, never given a consistently Biblical solution to the expected imminency of Christ's return. Apparently no one shared with Him that Jesus was in fact totally faithful to meet the time expectations He set forth in the Olivet. For good reason He told His disciples to flee to the mountains. They would soon encounter perilous times for which He was preparing them. He told them that they would be severely persecuted to the point of death. When would these things take place? Jesus said, "*...all these things will come upon this generation*". (Not "that generation")

The Olivet wasn't written in a vacuum. It was the natural outgrowth of the thrashing Jesus gave the religious elite (which Matthew records in the prior chapter). Be one of the disciples as you sit on a nearby rock. Listen and consider the impact of Jesus' verbal flogging of these self-righteous vipers. Is there any doubt who Jesus is speaking to? Is there any confusion as to the *destiny* of these Christ-killers or the *time* in which these hypocrites would experience the vengeful wrath of God?

📖 *"So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. <sup>32</sup> Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. <sup>33</sup> You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? <sup>34</sup> Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, <sup>35</sup> so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. <sup>36</sup> Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. (Matthew 23:31-36)*

And this came to pass exactly as it was predicted. God did avenge His faithful followers. Praise be to God that he was not slow to fulfill His promises!

We know that the Gospel flourished after the destruction of [Jerusalem in AD 70](#). The believers that received these many assurances passed on this magnificent Gospel without interruption. This ought to be [divine proof](#) in the timely execution of the many time sensitive promises where "*shortly*" always meant "*shortly*" and "*is*", is what it "*is*".