

Key Bible Doctrines

Part 8: Future Events

Future Events

This paper describes some of the key events that the Bible tells us will happen in the future. The study of future events is sometimes called “eschatology”, from the Greek word *eschatos*, which means “last”. The study of eschatology, then, is the study of “the last things”.

The study of future events that will happen to individuals is sometimes called “personal eschatology”. These have already been discussed in *Part 5: Death and The Resurrection of the Dead*. But the Bible also talks about certain future events that will affect the whole world. Specifically, it tells about the second coming of Christ, the thousand-years reign of Christ on earth, God’s final judgment, and the new creation. The study of these events is sometimes called “general eschatology” and is the subject of this paper.

The Last Days and the Day of the Lord

When the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples at Pentecost, Peter explained to the onlookers that “this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people.’” (Acts 2:16-17). The prophecy that Peter was referring to is recorded in Joel 2:28-32 and covers a period of time that commenced with Pentecost and will end with “the great and dreadful day of the Lord” (v. 31). Peter calls this period “the last days”. At the end of this period, God “will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The Sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (vv. 30-32). This shows that right up until the very end of the current age there will be an opportunity for the unrighteous to be saved when they call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In regard to the last days, Paul said, “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” (2 Timothy 3:1-4). Peter also warned that “in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this “coming” he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.’” (2 Peter 3:3-4).

Jesus described the end of the age as a time of great tribulation: “For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equalled again. If those days had not been cut short, no-one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:21-22). He goes on to explain that, “Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the Sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ At that time the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (vv. 29-31). After Jesus has gathered his elect, then the day of the Lord’s wrath against those who remain will have come.

The day of the Lord is also described by other prophets using similar language (e.g., Isaiah 13:6-16; Amos 8:8-10; Zephaniah 1:14-18). Joel said that “the day of the Lord ... will come like destruction from the Almighty” (Joel 1:15). It will be “a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness” (Joel 2:2). Isaiah described it as “a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger – to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it” (Isaiah 13:9).

Amos said that it will be a “time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day” (Amos 8:10). Zephaniah described it as “a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness” (Zephaniah 1:15).

In the book of Revelation, the day of the Lord is symbolised by the opening of the sixth of seven seals on a scroll symbolizing God’s plan of redemption for mankind: “I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to the earth, as late figs drop from a fig-tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” (vv. 6:12-17). The day of the Lord is also symbolised in Revelation 16 by the pouring out of “the seven bowls of God’s wrath on the earth” (v. 1). Each bowl contains some terrible plague that will afflict the earth until Christ “has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Corinthians 15:25).

The Return of Christ

Shortly before his death, Jesus told his disciples, “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am” (John 14:2-3). And as he ascended into heaven, two angels appeared to the disciples who were “looking intently up into the sky as he was going” and said to them “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:10-11).

As noted above, when Jesus returns he will “appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Matthew 24:30-31). Paul further explains that “God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever” (1 Thessalonians 4:14-18).¹ The author of Hebrews wrote, “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:27-28).

Jesus warned his disciples to “keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matthew 24:42-44). The owner of the house in this saying is Satan, and the thief is Jesus who will break into Satan’s house to steal from him the children of God. Jesus also compared his return with the days of Noah: “For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away” (vv. 38-39).

¹ The sudden taking away of the saints from the earth is commonly referred to as the *rapture of the church*. The word *rapture* literally means to “snatch away” (cf. Matthew 24:40-41).

These scriptures show that the return of Christ will be unexpected and that no-one, not even Satan, will know exactly when he will return. However, Jesus also described various signs that would indicate his imminent return. These are recorded in Matthew 24:3-41 (cf. Mark 13:4-37; Luke 21:7-36; 17:22-37) and include the following:

- **Increasing occurrences of wars and natural disasters:** “You will hear of wars and rumours 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. All these are the beginning of birth-pains” (vv. 6-8).
- **Increasing persecution of Christians:** “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me” (v. 9).
- **A great apostasy:** “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 he who stands firm to the end will be saved” (vv. 10-13).
- **A global evangelism:** “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” (v. 14).
- **The appearing of the Antichrist and the beginning of a period of great tribulation in the world:** “So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation’, spoken of through the prophet Daniel ... then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ... For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equalled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (vv. 15-22; cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10).²
- **The appearing of false prophets and false messiahs:** “For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible” (v. 24).
- **Signs in the sky:** “Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the Sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’” (v. 29).

The first four of these signs have occurred throughout the Christian age. However, in the imagery that Jesus used, these are “the beginning of birth-pains”, and what marks them as signs of the imminent return of Christ is their increasing frequency and intensity in the same way that birth-pains increase until the child is born. Jesus also used the imagery of a fig tree in bloom to teach his disciples to discern the signs of his imminent return: “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. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door” (vv. 32-33).

On the face of it, there appears to be a contradiction between the scriptures that talk of the sudden and unexpected return of Christ and those which speak of the signs of his appearing. However, other scriptures reveal a simple explanation. Paul taught that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety’, destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled” (1

² This verse shows that the elect of God will go through the great tribulation. However, other scriptures show that they will not experience the final wrath of God in the day of the Lord (e.g., Revelation 14:14-20; cf. Psalm 27:5; Isaiah 26:20-21).

Thessalonians 5:2-6). We can understand from this that those who are watching and waiting for the return of the Lord, and who have kept themselves pure in anticipation of this, will not be caught by surprise. Rather, it will be those who have given up on waiting for him and who have become embroiled in the ways of the world who will fail to discern the signs of his appearing.

This understanding is also demonstrated in Jesus' parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25. In this parable there are ten virgins waiting for the appearing of a bridegroom who is a long time in coming. Five of them are prepared for his eventual arrival, but the other five are not, and because of this they end up missing out on the wedding banquet. This shows that even those who believe in Christ, but are not ready when he comes, will find themselves excluded from the elect of God. This is also evident from his warning to the church at Sardis: "But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you" (Revelation 3:3). And also from his warning to the universal church: "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his cloths with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed" (Revelation 16:15).

The Antichrist and the Great Tribulation

Jesus warned the disciples, "when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation', spoken of through the prophet Daniel ... then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equalled again" (Matthew 24:15, 21). The expression "the abomination that causes desolation" was used by the prophet Daniel to describe the coming of a great ruler whose multinational army will attack Israel and destroy Jerusalem: "The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolation has been decreed. ... And on the wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him" (Daniel 9:26-27; cf. 11:31).

This great ruler is also the "man of lawlessness" and the "son of destruction" described by Paul, "who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, NASB). Paul said, "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved" (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). John called him "the antichrist", the "man who denies that Jesus is the Christ" (1 John 2:18, 22).

The attack of the Antichrist on Israel will be only partially successful, because Jesus himself will intervene to save the Jews from total destruction: "Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel" (Zechariah 14:3-5).

After his unsuccessful attempt to destroy the Jews, the Antichrist will turn his full attention to the Christians: "When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of their offspring – those who obey God's

commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 12:13-17).³

The worldwide persecution of the church is also described in Revelation 7: “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ... These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (vv. 9, 14). The great persecution will end with the return of Christ and the rapture of the surviving saints: “Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” (Zechariah 14:5).

The Spread of the Gospel

It will be during the period of great tribulation that the “gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations” (Matthew 24:14). This is seen in the imagery in Revelation 11 where the church is represented by two witnesses who “will prophesy for 1260 days, clothed in sackcloth” (v. 3). Initially, the two witnesses are given great power and authority (vv. 5-6), but “when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them” (v. 7). However, after they have been dead for just a short time they will be raised to life again: “Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, ‘Come up here.’ And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies look on” (vv. 11-12).

The Salvation of Israel

When Christ returns with his saints, the surviving Jews will recognise their long-awaited Messiah and will repent of their sins: “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son” (Zechariah 12:10). In this way, a remnant of Israel will be saved and, figuratively speaking, will be grafted back into the natural olive tree as explained by Paul in Romans 11. As for the rest of mankind, some will survive the terrible day of God’s wrath to become servant nations to Israel under the rule of Christ and his resurrected saints as discussed below (see *The Thousand Years of Peace*).

Armageddon

After the return of Christ and the rapture of the church, the Antichrist will turn his attention to the rest of mankind in an attempt to destroy as many people as possible before he himself is destroyed by God. This is depicted in Revelation 9 by the sounding of the sixth of seven trumpets which represent God’s warnings to a rebellious world. The sixth trumpet symbolises the release of a mighty army of men under the control of the Antichrist to “kill a third of mankind” (vv. 13-21). The destruction of mankind has been Satan’s goal from the time that he was cast out of heaven and put under God’s curse (Genesis 3:14-15). But Paul explains that Satan has been prevented by the Holy Spirit from doing this until now: “For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming” (2 Thessalonians 2:7).

This great global war will have its climax in one last great battle at a place called Armageddon in Israel. This is pictured in Revelation 16 by the sixth bowl of God’s wrath: “The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and the out of

³ In this passage the dragon represents Satan, the woman Israel, and the male child Christ. The events pictured here correspond to those described in the previous quotation from Zechariah.

the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty. ... Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon” (vv. 12-14, 16).

Armageddon is the same place as the “Valley of Jehoshaphat”⁴ and the “valley of decision” referred to by the prophet Joel: “Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side. Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow – so great is their wickedness! Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The Lord will rule from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel” (vv. 3:12-16).

The Fall of Babylon and the Marriage of the Lamb

After the defeat of the Antichrist, “The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘It is done!’ Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible” (Revelation 16:17-21). Babylon the Great symbolises the nations of the world that have been corrupted by false religion:

Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird. For the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries (Revelation 18:2-3).

When the saints in heaven witness the fall of Babylon the Great they will celebrate and worship God: “After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: ‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belongs to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.’” (Revelation 19:1-3).

At this time the saints will also celebrate their union forever with Christ in a symbolic marriage ceremony:

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. For linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) (Revelation 19:6-8; cf. Matthew 22:2-14; 25:1-13).

The Thousand Years of Peace

After this, the saints will rule with Christ for a thousand years: “I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (The rest of the

⁴ *Jehoshaphat* means “the Lord judges”.

dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4-6).

During this period Satan will be bound in hell: “And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time” (Revelation 20:1-3). The release of Satan at the end of the thousand years will result in another great battle, this time between Satan himself (rather than the Antichrist) and God. At the conclusion of this ultimate battle, Satan will be finally destroyed: “When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth ... to gather them for battle. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Revelation 20:7-10).

This thousand-years reign of Christ is also alluded to in many Old Testament scriptures. For example, in Psalm 22 we read, “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations” (vv. 27-28). Again, in Psalm 37 we read, “For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land. A little while, and the wicked will be no more; for though you look for them, they will not be found. But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace” (vv. 9-11). The peaceful rule of Christ in the coming age is also described in several passages in Isaiah (see 11:1-10; 35:1-10; 65:17-25). The following excerpts show that this will be a time of great peace and joy for all mankind:

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child will put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (vv. 11:6-9).

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away (vv. 35:5-10).

Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long

enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain (vv. 65:20-25).

The thousand-years reign of Christ and his saints is also the time of Israel's exaltation as foretold in a number of Old Testament prophecies (e.g., Isaiah 60; Ezekiel 34:11-31; Hosea 2:14-23; Micah 4:1-13; 7:8-20; Zephaniah 3:14-20; Zechariah 8:1-23; 14:9-21). This is the time that the prophet Isaiah was referring to when he said to the people of Israel, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Isaiah 60:1-3). Speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, God said of Israel that at this time, "They will no longer be plundered by the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid. I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations. Then they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people" (Ezekiel 34:28-30). Also, Micah prophesied:

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig-tree, and no-one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken (Micah 4:1-4).

The Final Judgment

In the previous section we learnt that there are two resurrections from the dead. The first is the resurrection of the saints at the end of the current age, while the second involves the rest of the dead and occurs at the end of the thousand years reign of Christ and the saints on earth. We are told that those who participate in the first resurrection will become "priests of God and of Christ" and that the "second death has no power over them" (Revelation 20:6). For the rest of the dead, however, the second resurrection will be to face the judgment of God:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

Jesus was speaking of the day of judgment when he said: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is

coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:26-29; cf. 3:18). Paul said, “There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil ... but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good” (Romans 2:9-10).

It is clear from Scripture that the believers will not be judged for their sins, because these were removed far from them when Christ died on the cross in their place: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). In this way the promise of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah will be fulfilled: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” (v. 1:18). Micah, as well, said of the Lord, “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (v. 7:19). And David proclaimed: “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (Psalm 103:11-13).

While the believers will not be condemned, they will be judged on the quality of their lives so as to determine their level of reward in the life to come. Paul warned the believers in Rome not judge one another, “For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat” and “each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Romans 14:10, 12; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:10). He also warned the church at Corinth that when Jesus comes, “He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God” (1 Corinthians 4:5; cf. Luke 8:17). Paul also urged the believers at Corinth to build their faith on the foundation of Jesus Christ: “If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

In contrast to God overlooking the sins of the believers, the unbelievers will be closely scrutinised. Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of his day because of their evil hearts and warned them of the coming judgment: “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:34-36; cf. Luke 12:2-3). Similarly, Paul warned the unrighteous, “But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God ‘will give to each person according to what he has done’. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (Romans 2:5-8).

The judgment of the unbelievers is not to determine their innocence or guilt, because they are already guilty. Jesus said, “Whoever believes in [me] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:18-19). Rather, the wicked will be judged so as to determine the degree of their punishment in the afterlife. Thus, each person will be “judged according to what he had done” (Revelation 20:12, 13). This is also reflected in Jesus’ teaching about the master and his servants: “That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows” (Luke 12:47-48). Degrees of punishment are also implied when Jesus said of the

town that rejects the gospel message, “it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town” (Matthew 10:15; cf. 11:20-24).

It is clear from these teachings that the day of judgment will not involve a determination of innocence or guilt, which will have been settled by this time, but rather the degrees of reward for the innocent and punishment for the wicked. But what are these rewards and punishments?

Rewards for the Righteous

In considering the rewards that will be given to the believers we should begin by acknowledging the greatest and most wonderful reward of all – our salvation. This is actually a double blessing. Not only do we get to live with God in his glorious kingdom, but we are also made righteous, as if we deserve to be there! A sinner in the presence of God would tremble in fear, but those who have been made right with God through faith in Christ will be filled with joy and peace in his presence. David said, “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit” (Psalm 32:1-2). David’s greatest desire was to be with God: “One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple” (Psalm 27:4; cf. 26:8). He also spoke of the great joy that awaits those who will go to be with the Lord: “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Psalm 16:11).

Beyond the great gift of salvation, Scripture also shows that individual believers will receive greater or lesser rewards according to how they have lived their lives. Daniel alluded to this when he said, “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:3). The picture presented here is of a great multitude of those who have been saved shining like the stars in the sky with those who have done greater works for God shining more brightly (cf. Philippians 2:15). This is also indicated in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 and the parable of the ten minas in Luke 19. These parables are very similar and show that Christ’s most faithful servants will be rewarded with greater authority than those who are less productive, while those who are lazy will receive no reward, and his enemies will be destroyed (Matthew 25:1-30; Luke 19:11-27).

Jesus also promised to reward his faithful servants in the seven churches in Asia minor (Revelation 2:7, 10-11, 17, 26-28; 3:4-5, 12, 21).⁵ The rewards are expressed in symbolic language, but can be generally interpreted as falling into one of the following categories: eternal life, righteousness, special authority and special glory. However, when John the Baptist was killed, Jesus said to the disciples, “I tell you, among those born of women there is no-one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:28). Therefore, regardless of what rewards or status we might receive from God in the life to come, there will be no place for pride.

Punishments for the Wicked

Throughout Scripture the fate of the wicked is often described in terms of their death, destruction and ruin. For example, in the Psalms we are told that the wicked are “like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous” (1:4-5). David said of the Lord, “You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name for ever and ever. Endless ruin has overtaken the enemy, you have uprooted their cities; even the memory of them has perished” (9:5-6). He also prophesied, “Your hand will lay hold on all your enemies; your right hand will seize your foes. At the time of your appearing you will make them like a fiery furnace. In his wrath the Lord will swallow them up, and his fire will consume them” (21:8-9). While

⁵ Recall that these messages apply to the whole church and, therefore, to every Christian.

another psalmist said of the Lord, “He will repay them for their sins and destroy them for their wickedness; the Lord our God will destroy them” (24:22-23).

The apostles also described the unrighteous as those who are perishing and whose fate is destruction. Paul said, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18; cf. 2 Corinthians 2:15-16). He also warned, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (Galatians 5:7-8). Peter also spoke of the “destruction of ungodly men” in the day of judgment (2 Peter 3:7), while James said, “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy” (James 4:12). And the writer of Hebrews warned, “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Hebrews 10:26-27).

In addition to the destruction of the wicked, Isaiah introduced the idea that they will also receive some degree of torment after death. He prophesied about the king of Babylon (who is a type of Satan): “The grave below is astir to meet you at your coming ... maggots are spread out beneath you and worms cover you” (14:9, 11). In regard to the enemies of the Lord’s people, he prayed, “Let them see your zeal for your people and be put to shame; let the fire reserved for your enemies consume them” (26:11). Speaking through Isaiah, God proclaimed that in the day of judgment his people “will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind” (66:24). The imagery of maggots and worms and an unquenchable fire has two aspects to it. Firstly, these things slowly consume their victims until nothing remains indicating the complete destruction of the wicked. Secondly, the images invoke a sense of continuous and intense pain as their victims are slowly consumed, presumably fully conscious until the end.

Jesus several times confirmed that the wicked will indeed suffer great torment for the evil that they have committed. At the end of the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, the Master gives the command, “throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 26:30). This statement reveals both a conscious suffering and the sense of the hopelessness of someone cast out into utter darkness. Similarly, in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, the King says to those who are condemned, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41), and Jesus concludes that “they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (v. 46). Jesus also quotes from Isaiah 66:24 warning that for those who are thrown into hell “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48).

Jesus also provided a vivid description of hell in the story of the rich man and Lazarus recorded in Luke 16:19-31. The rich man in this story lived in luxury every day and ignored the plight of poor Lazarus who longed even to eat the leftovers from the rich man’s table. Consequently, the rich man enters hell where he is in torment while Lazarus is comforted in heaven. The rich man cries out to Abraham, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire” (vv. 23-24). But Abraham explains that this is not possible because of a great chasm that has been fixed between hell and heaven which cannot be crossed. The rich man then begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers “so that they will not also come to this place of torment” (v. 28). To this Abraham replies, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them” (v. 29).⁶

⁶ The reader may be wondering how it is that hell is described as the place of torment for the wicked when Revelation 20:14 speaks of death and Hades (hell) being cast into the same lake of fire as those whose names are not found in the book of life. One possibility is that the word *Hades* applies only to the

Many Christians are troubled by scriptures which seem to indicate that the wicked will receive unending suffering. For example, in the passages quoted above from Matthew 25, we read of the “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment” which stand in contrast to the “eternal life” of the righteous. Similarly, in Revelation 14 we read that those who follow the Antichrist “will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name” (vv. 10-11). And in Revelation 20 we are told that when Satan’s time is up he will be “thrown into the lake of burning sulfur” where he “will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (v. 10).

On the face of it, these texts do appear to indicate never ending torment for the unrighteous. However, God is unable to be unjust, and therefore, the punishments that he metes out must fit the crimes that have been committed against him.⁷ God’s own law requires that, “If anyone injures his neighbour, whatever he has done must be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured” (Leviticus 24:19-20). This principle of “an eye for an eye” will undoubtedly apply to the wicked so that they are punished with exactly the same degree of pain and suffering that they themselves have inflicted upon others. In effect, their own sins will consume them, degree for degree, until they are utterly destroyed and perish. In this interpretation, the punishments will be “eternal” and “everlasting” in the sense that their consequences (rather than their duration) are eternal and irrevocable. Either way, Christians should be highly motivated by the horrors of hell to greater works of evangelism and prayer for the unsaved.

The New Creation

After the final judgment, God will destroy the present universe and create a new one. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God promised, “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind” (65:17; cf. 66:22). In regard to this time, Peter said, “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and new earth, the home of the righteousness” (2 Peter 3:12-13).⁸ In Romans 8, Paul explains that “the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (v. 22) because of the curse that God put upon it when Adam and Eve sinned against him: “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (vv. 19-21).

This event is also described in symbolic language in Revelation 21: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe

place of the dead prior to the day of judgment, while the word *hell* is used to describe the lake of fire itself. Alternatively, it might be that hell is the last thing to be consumed by the fire. An analogy is that of a vessel containing waste material thrown into a furnace so that the vessel itself is consumed once all the waste material inside it has been completely destroyed.

⁷ Even a small amount of suffering experienced for an infinite period of time would equate to an infinite amount of suffering which is not consistent with the texts indicating degrees of punishment.

⁸ The “heavens” being referred to here are those belonging to the creation (i.e., the earth’s atmosphere and outer-space); the heaven in which God himself lives will not be affected.

every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (vv. 1-4). In this passage, the sea is a symbol for trouble and danger while the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, and the bride all represent the saints who have been made righteous by their faith in Christ (cf. vv. 9-27). But the new Jerusalem is also a place in the new earth where God will live with his people: “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them” (v. 3).

From the text in Revelation 20 and 21, it appears that there is a distinction between the saints of God who take part in the first resurrection, and the rest of those whose names have been written in the book of life and who come to life at the end of the thousand-years reign of Christ and his saints (v. 20:4-6). While the former are the bride of Christ and will be the “priests of God and of his Christ” (v. 20:6) in the new Jerusalem, the latter will form the nations of the new earth under the governance of Christ and his saints. The new Jerusalem will become the new temple of God for the whole world: “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (vv. 21:24-27).

In this new creation, “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 22:3-5).

It is fitting to conclude this study with the words of Jesus at the end of Revelation: “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (vv. 22:12-13).

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Acknowledgments

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984 unless otherwise indicated. Other versions referred to from time to time are:

Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible, New American Standard Bible, 1977 (NASB).

The Spirit Filled Life Bible, New King James Version, 1991 (NKJV).