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JOHN 3:16: A KEYSTONE VERSE OF CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY

By Dr. Bob Hughes

It has been well said that John 3:16 could be called, “The Gospel in a Nutshell,” “The Golden Text of the Bible,” “The ‘Good News’ in Brief” and other such descriptive phrases. These kinds of statements are true and can be taken at face value, deservedly so. Titles such as these are justified by the verse’s total summation of God’s final plan for his human creatures. So complete is this summation, as has been stated often, that if all the rest of the Bible were totally destroyed, and only this particular verse left intact, right there is enough salvation for the entire world, and adequate information on the final destiny of all humanity.

This passage could also be known by another name: “A Keystone Verse of Conditional Immortality.” This name is justified by a simple but thorough examination of the verse itself. It is demonstrably clear that those who accept Christ as Messiah and conduct their lives accordingly, will be given eternal life and will not suffer the “perishing” of the “second death” of other Scripture references (Rev 2:11; 20:6,12–15; 21:8). And what of those who do not accept this offer? They are also specifically addressed in this verse, not by name but by direct comparison, and in just as complete and deep a manner as the accepters are, though most readers apparently fail to observe this fact. The message is clear that those who accept the poured-out love from God through his Son, and who live accordingly, will have eternal life. Those who do the opposite will get the opposite: no eternal life. So, though John 3:16 is not normally used as a proof text for conditional immortality, it can be, and should be.

Some critics might say that the verse does not specifically name the unbelievers as non-recipients of eternal life, and that one cannot debate from silence to present a valid, legal argument, for or

against any issue. True enough, one cannot argue from absolute silence on a matter, or on something that is not clearly stated, unless by direct comparison of the wording, one can detect a clear meaning for one of only two possibilities (in this case, the two are “with” or “without” eternal life). So then, if one of the two possibilities is very specifically defined (believers do not perish, but receive eternal life), then the non-believers are excluded from that possibility by not being named in what is more than an inference or a supposition, but is an obvious, logical deduction.

The word “eternal” αἰώνιος (*aiōnios*), as used here, carries a primary, and almost singular, meaning of “everlasting.” That is, once a given thing is announced and put in place, it will never change but will “last forever,” forever in that state. Those who believe and accept the death of Christ in their place, will have future lives that will last forever, while those who do not believe and do not accept, will “perish,” and have no future lives, and that will also be final and last forever. The word used for “perish” is the term ἀπόλλυμι (*appollumi*), and like the other John 3:16 terms, bears distinctive and unequivocal meaning. The Strongest Strong’s says that ἀπόλλυμι denotes “destroy,” “to kill” (by taking a life), “cause to lose” (especially a life), and “to die or perish.” So it is clear that a cessation of living is what is meant, not a continuation of it somehow through a detachable spirit-self, referred to as an “immortal soul” that leaves the body and lives on though the body dies.

The two possible final dispositions and destinations for human beings are both delineated with precision and exactness by logical connection and deduction. This is done through what could be called “oppositional equivalency.” Life is the opposite of death. If one receives living forever (being given eternal life) for accepting the grace of God through repentance and salvation, then it follows that one should receive being dead forever (being given eternal death, or perhaps better stated, being dead for eternity) for not accepting the grace of God through repentance and salvation.

In this logical sequence, life and death in the Bible are mutually exclusive but mutually suitable. There is perfect alignment of

these resulting conditions as they are 180 degrees apart, just as the causes of their being are. Nothing could be fairer or more honest. Such could be expected of a Holy God. All sin must be done away with, utterly consumed, absolutely destroyed, including Satan and his cohorts, and that will be in the lake of fire (Rev 19:20; 20:10–15; 21:8) following judgment day. This destruction will be final and permanently so. The two outcomes of accepting or rejecting Christ are equal in application and duration: Both are eternal (once pronounced at judgment), with persons sentenced to life forever or to death forever. The reward or punishment is pronounced as final and will never change: It is an eternal condition. But, many onlookers confuse the word “punishment” with “punishing.” The latter term is not in God’s plan for eternity, but the first one is. Once the “second death” punishment for sin is pronounced and carried out, that will never change and becomes eternally fixed and set. Of course, the “second death” is now required because the resurrection from the “first death” brings life back into all bodies, and those who are given eternal life will, of necessity, live on (and keep this new life forever) and those who are not given eternal life will have to die the second and final time in the fire of final destruction (Rev 20:10, 14–15; 21:8). The wages of sin must be paid, or God is a liar (Rom 6:23). Since accepting the death of Christ on the cross pays the penalty for believers (the absolute atonement; the “At-one-ment”) their debt is settled and they do not have to die a second time. However, since unbelievers do not accept the death of Christ as payment, their debt still exists and each person so found indebted will have to pay his or her own debt, which is the personal, second death of Rom 6:23. That same reference, once more, grants the opposite to those who accept and follow Christ, life for eternity.

While it is true that time, place and circumstances are not totally filled in by John 3:16 (as that is done by other Scriptures such as 1 Cor 15; 1 Thes 4:13–18; 2 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 2:8–12), there is no doubt that all believers/accepters will have eternal life; all non-believers/rejecters will not. Both will have an “everlasting” fate once instituted at judgment following the resurrection. One group (believers) will have a sentence of life placed upon them that

will last forever afterwards. The other group (non-believers) will have a sentence of death placed upon them that will last forever afterwards. These two results are permanent and therefore will remain forever just that way, or, “be everlasting” in result.

If some of the foregoing seems a bit repetitious, it none-the-less serves to underscore the importance of having a clear understanding of John 3:16 and other supporting Scriptures. The biblical information on immortality and eternal life has been over-read, over-quoted, under-explored and woefully misunderstood.

It seems that every denomination or sect even remotely connected to Christianity claims to “know” the truth on these matters. Many of these groups can all quote passages such as John 3:16, but cannot give substantive answers as to fuller meanings of them. Quoting surface Scriptures is an act of opinion as to what is meant. But, studying Scripture deeply (as advised in 2 Tim 2:15), creates opinion solidified and informed by fact, which renders not an opinion only, but truth. A given verse may seem to say a particular thing, but translator biases, preconceived notions brought to bear by readers, the musings and imaginations of secular theorists, inadequate study of original or source documents by scholars and ignorance of root word meanings in the Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic languages, all contribute to misinterpretations, and can actually render diametrically opposed meanings as to what is actually recorded.

Another source of confusion arises through the popular and highly esteemed writings of non-Biblical authors. Homer, Virgil, Socrates, Plato, Dante and the whole of Greek and Roman myths concerning the gods and religious themes have not helped, but have added a layer of fictional veneer that greatly disguises any truth beneath. While these, and other authors like them, have great standing in the at-large literary canon, just being literary-canon-included does not make them first-rank theologians. Since by definition, most of literature is fictional, one would not expect from such writers a clear separation of fact from fiction, but rather a weaving together of the two to give the writing cache and a sense of realism. According to literary experts, good fiction must be be-

lievable, so writers join the two in an unholy alliance that can lead to serious distortion of Biblical concepts. (Think Dan Brown's, *The DaVinci Code*, or Dante's *Inferno*, for example, or the entire genre of so-called, "historical" novels.) Less inquiring minds do not make the attempt at separation of fact from fiction, and wholesale error can thus creep in to be promulgated as deep, truthful insight, as is precisely the case with "immortality of the soul" via Socrates, Plato, many others, and later, Greek Christians in general.

If turned loose by practical preaching and emphasized in daily living, John 3:16 can solve once and for all the question of who has eternal life in their futures following the resurrection, and who does not. It cannot be made plainer that eternal life is conditional and based solely upon a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the Messiah. The rejection of him is eternal death with the same definitions used for eternal life. Life and death, for believer and unbeliever respectively, will be just what it says: lasting for all eternity in both cases, one as life, the other as death. John 3:16 is not often (if ever) used to present conditional immortality, but once more, it should be. After all, it is a "keystone verse" to that understanding.

To more completely comprehend this miniature summation of the great and grand gospel truth in John 3:16, one needs but to search more deeply into what is actually contained there: Those who accept the invitation to "believe" in the offering of the sinless life of Christ for the sins of the world, and who accept that for themselves on an individual basis will be given life for eternity; rejecters will not be so gifted. God so loved the lost world of humanity that he gave his Son as the perfect sin offering through his death on the cross. Sins have to be paid for in some manner. Those who say that "sin does not pay," are perhaps unfamiliar with Romans 6:23, "the wages of sin is death." Sin does pay, but look at what it pays! Sin brings death. The word translated "death" used here θάνατος (*thanatos*) has a primary meaning (in its simplest terms), as the cessation of life, consciousness, and any awareness of being. There is no way to stretch the meaning of this discrete noun to include any sort of "aliveness," by whatever name it may

be called, including that of an “immortal soul” that does not die, though it is said the body does. Death here is death: “dead” is “dead absolutely” (Ps 115:17; Ecc 9:5–6, 10). That is precisely the debt Christ paid on the cross: his life (a perfect, sinless one) for the sins of the world. His one death met the Romans 6:23 requirement, and atoned for all sins as the perfect sin offering, as no other death could. That debt is now fully paid for all who will accept the eternal life it affords.

Consider again the word “perish” as that which John 3:16 assigns to non-believers. The Greek word used here is ἀπόλλυμι, which has already been discussed at the beginning of this treatise, but bears some reiteration just now for emphasis. Ἀπόλλυμι has a primary meaning of cessation of all life, and when the variations and secondary meanings are taken into account, it means “to destroy utterly,” or “fully,” “to cause to perish,” “to come to an end,” and “to be finally ruined and destroyed.” Nowhere does this term allow for a partial dying of an individual with some person-portion still living on that cannot die. Ἀπόλλυμι is actually a stronger form of the term ὀλλυμι (*ollumi*), which itself means “to end life,” “bring to naught,” “cause to perish,” and “put to death.” Multiple Scriptures use this very strong word unabashedly (Matt 10:28; 21:41; 22:7; Luke 13:3–5; 17:27–30; John 10:28; Rom 2:12–13; 2 Cor 2:15–16; 4:3; 2 Pet 3:9).

The overall approach to Scriptural interpretation should be one of taking its words at face value in their simplest, elemental forms and meanings in their original languages, not meanings assigned to them to make them fit into an already-conceived doctrine. This latter process becomes an idea, however far-fetched, hunting for a proof-text. It is the act of first believing something and afterwards finding (bending or forcing) a Scriptural source of accommodation. This then, becomes not the logical result of “seeing it and then believing it,” but is the illogical result of “believing it and then seeing it,” no matter how wrong this latter “believing/seeing” may be. This process is one of wanting to believe something, coming to believe that something and then finding support for that something, even if it isn’t there!

It would seem that very unambiguous Bible verses such as John 3:15 (companion verse to John 3:16) and John 3:36 would lay to rest any issues concerning who will eventually gain “eternal” life, and who will eventually receive “eternal” death. However, persons with preconceived notions held tenaciously are not looking for alternatives to what they already believe, but rather, are searching for further support for those conceptions.

The twisting of words to garner desired meanings smacks of the erroneous effort in the literary world a few decades ago called “deconstructionism.” This concept taught that words have meanings only to the person who hears or reads them. It does not matter what the speaker or the writer intended, the meaning is outside his or her purview. The obvious fallacy here is that the author/speaker had a meaning in mind and chose words to deliver that, so there was an original meaning intended, even if not communicated perfectly, or if miscomprehended. If meaning is in the receiver only, trying to communicate anything to another person is a lost cause from the start because any meaning can be transduced and manufactured on the reception end: “I know what he said, but I know what he meant.” Perhaps what “he” said is exactly what “he” meant! The meaning intended is the genuine message, not what may be wrung out of it, wrought upon it, or written into it. Original intent using original meanings cannot be ignored or truth suffers.

So, trying to take a word like “death” (in its primary and elemental meaning, remember), and make it mean that only a part of a human being dies at “death” because there is an immortal part that does not, flies into the face of the original, elemental and assigned definition. And when the “second death” terminology is added, confusion should be cleared up as to what the eternal punishment of all sin, unrepentant sinners and Satan with his troop, is to be. Popular would-be-theologians may be sincere, but they can be sincerely wrong. “What does the Bible say?” is the question to be asked.

Dr. R. F. Weymouth, the eminent Greek scholar and Bible translator, had this to say about “everlasting torment” for the wicked

from a just God: “My mind fails to conceive a grosser misinterpretation of language than when the five or six strongest words which the Greek tongue possesses signifying “destroy,” or “destruction,” are explained to mean maintaining an everlasting but wretched existence. To translate black as white is nothing to this.” 1 John 5:12 slams the door on all such bogus notions as Dr. Weymouth is pointing out by undergirding John 3:16 with these words, “He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God, hath not life.” Period. John 3:16 as a Keystone Verse supporting the arch of conditional immortality is in place, and holds.

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON INTERPRETING THE BOOK OF REVELATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By Robert J. Mayer

Since the Second World War, biblical prophecy has driven Christian book sales, especially in the United States. With each new decade, a new best-seller promises to solve the puzzles and offer us a reliable countdown to the end of history. Moreover, the best seller of all best sellers in the 20th century was none other than *The Late Great Planet Earth*.¹ To be honest, in my early years in the faith I was captivated by the prophetic speculations of Hal Lindsey and others. Fortunately, my engagement with Christian theology leads to the rest of the story.

The book of Revelation is notoriously difficult to interpret and for 1,900 years Christians have been wrestling with how to make sense of the visions and dreams reported by John the Elder. This writer does not pretend to have the book figured out, not even close. Moreover, the more he reads and engages with the text, the more questions emerge. So these reflections are based on several recent readings of the text along with interaction with the work of Gordon Fee, N.T. Wright, John Stott and others.

¹ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970). Ironically, the title was a take-off from Curt Gentry’s 1969 novel titled *The Last Days of the Late Great State of California*, a description of events that might occur if a massive earthquake destroyed everything west of the San Andreas fault.

As one who affirms the inspiration and inerrancy of Holy Scripture, this writer thinks that understanding the text must begin with trying to get at the author's original intentions (something that is not as easy as it might seem).² What was John the Elder attempting to communicate to his audience, the church leaders and congregants of the seven Asia Minor congregations that the author lists in chapters 2 and 3. The entire book of Revelation was written to address their concerns, concerns rooted in the opposition and selective persecution they faced from Rome and its governing authorities. That reality must shape how we understand the book in our day and time. Revelation cannot be understood apart from its first-century context.

In the aftermath of the modern Enlightenment, several interpretive schools of thought have emerged concerning how to interpret the book and its content. While each has positive things to contribute to understanding Revelation, too often they lead us away from the text and what the author was attempting to communicate to his original listeners. The book of Revelation has at least three literary genres that shape its interpretation. The book is a prophecy (1:3), a declaring of the Word of God by John. Revelation is also an example of apocalyptic literature. The proper title is "The Apocalypse" and this form of Jewish literature was common in the first century and focused on conflict between God and the forces of evil (which Christians believe is rooted in Satan, the devil and the enemy of our faith) in language that describes a global and heavenly confrontation.³ Finally, the book contains letters written to

² Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart make this this important point in *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* 3d.ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 23-24; 249-50. David Bebbington in *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* 4th.ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2018) describes the impact of Postmodernism on historical and literary research and points out that characteristic to postmodern interpretation is the assertion that authorial intent is essentially undiscoverable and therefore, all interpretation is "reader-response" meaning that each reader "interprets" the text apart from any historical context. See 139–141 for discussion.

³ For a description of this literary form, see Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972).

seven specific congregations which were written to be read during worship, probably with the contents of the entire book.

What does the text say?

While this cannot be an exhaustive exposition of the entire book, there are several keys that shape how we understand and interpret the book. First, while the author identifies the book as “the Revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1), he does indicate that the book is written to the “seven churches in the province of Asia (1:4) that are identified in chapter 1, verse 11. John follows the same pattern as the Apostle Paul in his letters, and this tells us that the book of Revelation *in its entirety* is addressed to Christians in these seven congregations, not only the letters of chapters 2 and 3, but the visions of the 24 elders in chapters 4 and 5, the visions of the conflict described in chapters 6–18, and the return of Christ and the eternal kingdom articulated in chapters 19–22.

Second, more than any other New Testament document, the book of Revelation cites or alludes to images found in the Old Testament, especially from the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. For example, John liberally uses the number “seven” and speaks of seven churches, seven lampstands, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven trumpets and so on. The allusion to Genesis 1:1–2:3 is apparent where “seven days” is used to indicate that all of creation is the result of God’s creative activity. Even in the seven seals, trumpets and bowls, we see a parallel to the seventh day in Genesis 2:1–3 where God rested. In the same way that the number seven alludes to the perfection of God’s creative activity, so the same number offers an indication of God’s consummation of his kingdom, or what N.T. Wright terms “new creation.”⁴ Scripture offers a Christian understanding of human history through

⁴ N.T. Wright uses the term “new creation” when he speaks of this fourfold movement of God in human history. See N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 67.

its sequencing of creation, fall, redemption and consummation (or “new creation”) and the book of Revelation is integral to that.

Moreover, understanding the text of Revelation means grasping the significance of the many Old Testament allusions found throughout the book. This reflects what evangelical New Testament scholar Ben Witherington sees as foundational to understanding New Testament teaching in its entirety.⁵ Witherington remarks that the New Testament represents the efforts of its writers, indeed of all first century Christians, to come to grips with the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and how all of the Old Testament is fulfilled in his life, death and resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is so significant that for the New Testament writers, everything has changed. In the face of the first-century Roman religion of emperor worship, Christians can no longer say that “Caesar is Lord.” Now they proclaim that “Jesus is Lord” and this proclamation has deep implications for how they live in the midst of a hostile Roman society.⁶

Third, because all of the book of Revelation is addressed to hearers and readers in the seven Asia Minor congregations, they will naturally understand the images found throughout the book. For example, they will understand the use of *gematria* in Revelation 13:18 where John identifies the “beast” with the number “666” (more on this later, but this writer is convinced that they knew the meaning of this number in terms of the identity of the beast).⁷

⁵ Ben Witherington, *New Testament History: A Narrative Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

⁶ The second-century text, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* offers a dramatic illustration of Christian unwillingness to practice emperor worship. In 167 AD, when Polycarp is ushered into the stadium to either deny Christ or face certain death, he replies “For eighty-six years, I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” cf. Michael W. Holmes, ed. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3d.ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 317.

⁷ See G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 174–77).

They will understand the significance of the number “144,000” found in Revelation 7 as representative of the people of God. They will grasp the meaning of the measurements of the New Jerusalem described in Revelation 21. The visions articulated by John are not meant to be mysterious to his readers. Instead they are to provide concrete hope to the people of God who face political and religious opposition from the Roman Empire. As strong as Rome now appeared, it was temporal. But God’s kingdom is eternal and will be fully revealed by Jesus Christ at the end of history when he returns to earth. In other words, God wins!

Finally, while in the eyes of John and his readers the book represents both present and future events, for those of us reading the book 1,900 years later, the book represents past, present and future. This is where the various schools of interpretation often lead us astray. Preterists often see the book as almost entirely taking place in the past (even for some the return of Christ). A number of historicists see the images of the book as representing specific historical events over the past 1,900 years.⁸ Futurists see everything after Revelation 3 as located entirely future to our 21st century historical location.⁹ None of these views do full justice to a historical, grammatical, literary and cultural reading of the text. Our goal in reading is not to adhere to a specific school of thought but to read the text on its own terms.

This writer suggests that a proper reading of the text leads to an interpretative schema that sees chapters 6–18 as having past,

⁸ This is characteristic of the *continuous historical* school of interpretation. While the continuous historical school of thought has few modern-day adherents, a strong intellectually sound defense can be found in Oral C. Collins, *The Final Prophecy of Jesus: An Introduction, Analysis, and Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007). Parallel historicists would disagree with the continuous historical interpretive schema though both schools argue that the seals, trumpets, and bowls describe the period of time between Jesus’s resurrection and his return to earth in the future.

⁹ For a scholarly commentary written from a dispensationalist futurist point of view, see John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1966).

present, and future dimensions with its ultimate goal reflecting the bodily return of Jesus Christ to earth and the “already but not yet” kingdom of God being fully realized in a “new heaven and new earth,” ie, “new creation.”

Two interpretive issues

The brevity of this paper only permits time for exploration of two interpretive issues that shed light on how we read the text. The first is the tendency of some scholars to identify the second beast of Revelation 13 with the term “antichrist” identified in 1 John 2:18–23. The term “antichrist” is only used in 1 John, and he offers a clear biblical definition of the term. “Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist — he denies the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22). Earlier in the passage John indicates that his readers have heard that the antichrist is coming, but “even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). John seems to indicate that the term “antichrist” does not refer to a single individual but to multiple persons who deny Christ and who despite outward appearances have not gone out from the people of God (1 John 2:19).

This biblical understanding of antichrist as describing multiple individuals frames this writer’s interpretation of Revelation 6–18. Before we get there, we need to return to Revelation 13 and speak to the identity of the second beast in that chapter. Insight into that identification is actually found in Revelation 17 in the identification of “Mystery Babylon the Great.” Babylon is described as “the woman who was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus” (17:6). That woman rode on “the beast which has seven heads and ten horns” (17:7).

This beast is identified in two ways. First, “the seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits” (17:9). Rome has always been known as the city of seven hills, and this is an obvious reference to that city. Moreover, it is not surprising that John would equate Rome with Babylon. In Daniel 2 and Daniel 7, Babylon and Rome

are two of the four great world empires, each of which stand in opposition to God and his purposes. The second way the beast is identified is through the curious phrase “who once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction” (17:8). This is a play on the phrase found in Revelation 1:8: “who is, and who was, and who is to come,” a phrase that clearly identifies Jesus Christ.

So if this identifies Jesus Christ, then who is identified by this strange phrase in chapter 17. Assuming that John wrote the book in AD 90–95, this writer suggests that it refers to Nero Caesar. Nero was probably the most feared emperor of the first century and most likely the man responsible for the deaths of the apostles Paul and Peter, as well as hundreds of Christians whom he blamed for the fires that swept Rome as part of his failed efforts at urban renewal (“who once was”). He had been dead for over 20 years at the time of John’s writing (“now is not”). Now a new Nero would return in the person of the current emperor Domitian and in future emperors who would bring opposition, even death, to those Christians who refuse to take the mark of the beast (which in my view simply means their refusal to confess that “Caesar is Lord”). So Revelation 17 helps us understand the gematria of Revelation 13:18 and make a primary (but not a sole) identification of the second beast as Nero Caesar.¹⁰

The second interpretive issue is that John’s intent is probably not to identify the second beast exclusively with Nero Caesar, but with the theological character of Roman state religion. In the first century B.C., Rome began to identify their emperors with deity at their death. But beginning with Nero, the identification of deity with the emperor happened while the emperor was still alive. Nero,

¹⁰ For a further explanation of gematria and its usage in this passage, see Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2d.ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 757. Keener points out that the term translated as “mark” in 13:16 “is among other things, the regular term for the imperial stamp on documents and of the image of his head on coins.”

Domitian and their successors were now seen as objects of patriotic worship. Anyone who attempted to force Christians to proclaim that “Caesar is Lord” is an antichrist because Christians could only claim that “Jesus is Lord.” And John shows why by linking Rome to Babylon and describing its destruction, while showing that the kingdom of God transcends all temporal empires. This fits nicely with John’s description of multiple antichrists that we noted earlier in 1 John 2, and suggests some fresh ways of interpreting the book of Revelation that are relevant to the people of God in the 21st century.

An interpretive schema

In thinking about interpretation, it is important to grasp the difference between exegesis and interpretation. Earlier, we described the importance of authorial intent for understanding the message of Scripture. Exegesis involves just that, in that we strive to determine what the author attempted to communicate to his original hearers. Only after that can we engage in hermeneutics, toward interpreting and applying Revelation (or any biblical text) for our contemporary context.

This is where the various schools of interpretation come into play. The various forms of preterism, historicism and futurism are mostly questions of hermeneutics as opposed to exegesis, in that they address how the text speaks to contemporary Christianity. The interpretations that draw around Reformed amillennialism, Dispensational premillennialism, parallel historicism, and other schools of thought speak primarily to how we interpret the text in our present day. But for any of those interpretations to be valid, they must be grounded in what the author desired to tell his readers and listeners.

This writer seeks to build his interpretive schema on the conviction that Revelation speaks to past, present and future. Some argue that properly interpreted, the New Testament must have been seen as teaching there are two distinct peoples of God. This is a complex argument that cannot be described here, but the point

is that only chapters 1–3 are seen as applying to the church, while chapters 4–18 are viewed as applying only to a national Israel.¹¹ The fundamental problem with this viewpoint in this writer’s opinion is that it reads a theological schema on the biblical text that the author did not intend. In Revelation 1:10–11, John indicates that while he was “in the Spirit” he was commanded to “write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches.” Moreover, what he writes is “what is now and what will take place later” (1:19). From this passage, it is clear that the message of entire book is for those seven churches, not just one portion of it. Everything in the entire book of Revelation is written for Christians in those seven congregations (and by extension to us).

An important corollary to this conviction is that because the entire book is written for these followers of Jesus who face significant opposition from the Roman government, especially in the eastern provinces of the Empire, the apocalyptic images and references in chapters 4–18 speak of Rome as a political entity. In other words, the evil described in those chapters finds its initial fulfillment in the Roman Empire itself. As John weaves vision after vision, image after image, followers of Jesus knew exactly what he was speaking about. They faced incredible opposition from a powerful force about which they could do nothing. But as powerful as Rome was, a day would come when it would be smashed by the eternal God. Caesar thought he was god, and indeed Caesar was powerful. But like all human empires, Rome would fall in the face of the eternal God who was working out his purposes in human history.

¹¹ Known as Dispensational-premillennialism, this school of thought originated with John Nelson Darby in the early to mid-19th century and had its ablest 20th century defenders in C.I. Schofield, John Walvoord, and Charles Ryrie. See, Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965). A more recent view called “Progressive Dispensationalism” offers a different reading of the kingdom of God and embraces the “already but not yet” idea of the kingdom of God while still holding for a distinct future for Israel as a political entity. See Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bridgepoint, 2000).

Moreover, the sequencing of the seven seals, trumpets and bowls found in chapters 6–18 points toward an intensification of opposition. For example, notice that each of the sequences ends with activity in heaven. The opening of the seventh seal in Revelation 8 leads to silence in heaven followed by the inauguration of the seven trumpets. The blowing of the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11 is followed by worship in heaven followed by even more significant destruction on earth. The seventh bowl is poured out with the cry, “It is done” (Revelation 16:17) and followed with unprecedented destruction visited on Babylon/Rome. This intensification can be seen in the all of the seals-trumpets-bowls.¹² In terms of our exegesis, we discover that chapters 6–18 primarily reference first century Rome and that the beast (or “antichrist”) referenced is the office of the Roman Emperor. The question then becomes whether or not the seals-trumpets-bowls schema in Revelation speaks to future periods of Christian history as well.

Many preterists would answer “no” and argue that Revelation 19 speaks to something other than a literal return of Christ to earth. Historicists will see Revelation 6–18 as speaking to a progression in human history leading up to a future return of Christ. Futurists see everything from Revelation 6 on as referring to events still yet to take place.

What is John the Elder attempting to communicate in these texts? How should we read Revelation 6–18 as the people of God today? Can we make sure that our reading takes into account the intent of the author in terms of his historical and cultural context, and in terms of the grammar and literary forms found in the book?

I think the literary structure suggests good ways to read the text and make the following observations:

1. The seven churches found in the first three chapters are real congregations and all of the book is addressed to them. Moreover, John has written to them in language that they

¹² J. Scott Duvall, *Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 126.

- would readily understand given their personal, political and cultural contexts.
2. The heavenly scenes communicate the nearness of heaven and earth. Modern people are used to thinking of heaven as something far distant and ethereal and not connected to the reality of earth. But for John, heaven is a concrete reality that will be fully realized on earth at the return of Jesus Christ.
 3. John's understanding of multiple antichrists in his first letter fits well with his identification of Babylon with Roman emperor worship. Even after the fall of Rome, antichrists will continue to appear in human history right up until the return of Jesus Christ. Mohammed, Charlemagne, Napoleon, Stalin, Hitler, Mao and others fill the bill, and historically the number of antichrists can be expected to grow and intensify leading up to the end of this age.
 4. The seals, trumpets and bowls convey an intensification of evil from the time of the resurrection until Christ's return. They are parallel accounts of this intensification of evil, and while we cannot equate specific historical events with the pestilences described, they do demonstrate that evil will grow stronger as world history moves toward the return of Christ. This "parallel historical" description fits the intentions of the text better than the preterist, continuous historicist, idealist and futurist schools of interpretation.¹³
 5. This interpretative schema leaves open the possibility of a future singular antichrist who will dominate the political, cultural, and religious landscapes of the world. While the

¹³ For a chart that demonstrates the interrelationship between the seals, trumpets, and bowls, see Duvall, 126. According to Duvall, "The three series of judgments cover much of the same ground but also increase in intensity... Revelation moves forward in cycles of judgment rather than a neat, linear, sequential progression. Perhaps this slow movement hints at God's patience in wanting people to repent." In this writer's view, this is the reading that is most literal because it allows the text itself to shape the interpretive schema and does not seek to impose a school of thought on the text.

- text does not require a future singular antichrist, it certainly leaves room for it but refuses to be dogmatic. This is a matter that well-meaning Christians can and should disagree over and it certainly is not central to the faith.
6. A parallel historical schema reflects the entire New Testament teaching that the return of Jesus Christ will be personal, visible and not subject to any secret prophetic knowledge that some may claim. Too many people have argued about various prophetic interpretations, and attempted to make certain images and symbols fit with historical or future events to the point where the people of God have been distracted from their mission in the world. The reality is that only the Father knows the day and time of Christ's return (Matthew 24:36–37) and useless speculation is harmful.

In no way do I pretend that this is the final word on understanding and interpreting the book of Revelation. I think this is the best way to understand the book in terms of reading the text on its own terms, but I recognize that well-meaning Christians will disagree. Our interpretation of Revelation should not be a test of Christian orthodoxy unless that interpretation denies the core of Christian faith and the Christian understanding of history in terms of creation, fall, redemption and consummation. I simply offer this as my understanding as I try to be faithful to the author's original intent.

All of this to say that we can be confident that evil will continue to grow and expand during this age when the kingdom of God is "already but not yet." Christians are not immune from suffering, persecution and death. Indeed, even today Christians are suffering and facing death for their faith in places throughout the world. Evil will continue to intensify. But we take courage in the same way that Christians did during John's time. No matter how evil the times seem, no matter what happens, we have confidence that the triune God is present with us, and that we will see our Lord Jesus Christ face to face at his return. Amen. Come Lord Jesus Christ.

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JESUS SHALL RETURN!

By Dr. John H. Roller

In their concerted drive into the Pacific, the Japanese army landed on the northern coast of Luzon Island, in the Philippines, on December 10, 1941. The American and Filipino troops were slowly pushed southward until they were concentrated on Bataan Peninsula and on Corregidor Island, near the mouth of Manila Bay. General Douglas MacArthur was on Corregidor Island at the time and he listened to the daily news bulletin every evening via shortwave radio.

MacArthur was one of history's greatest military orators. When ordered by President Franklin Roosevelt to evacuate to Australia, he made one of his shortest, yet most memorable speeches, a simple statement to reporters: "The President of the United States ordered me to break through the Japanese lines and proceed from Corregidor to Australia for the purpose, as I understand it, of organizing the American offensive against Japan, a primary objective of which is the relief of the Philippines. I came through and **I shall return.**"

These three small words became the "rallying-cry" of the United States Army for the next few years. They gave courage and hope to millions of soldiers as they fought toward the goal of reconquering lost territory. They represent the "hope" of MacArthur's Army. Eventually, on October 22, 1944, the promise was fulfilled. Standing on a small beach in the Philippines, the great speaker began a longer oration with the words, "I have returned."

But it was not Douglas MacArthur who first inspired discouraged followers with a departing promise of his final victory!

Over 1,900 years earlier, under orders from his father to ascend to Heaven, Jesus Christ told his handful of disciples, “I go to prepare a place for you ... I will come again ... “ (John 14:2–3). These words, too, have given rise to a “rallying-cry:” “MARANATHA!” (which means, “Our Lord, come!”). The return of Christ is the hope of the church. One of these days his promise, too, will be fulfilled. Standing on a small hill outside Jerusalem, Jesus will be able to say, like MacArthur, “I have returned.”

The Apostle Paul wrote, “But we don’t want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who have fallen asleep, so that you don’t grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we tell you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left to the coming of the Lord, will in no way precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with God’s trumpet. The dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. So we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, WEB).

Paul had founded the Christian Church in Thessalonica, a major city in northern Greece (known today as Saloniki), during a three-week visit there, in AD 50, early in his second missionary journey (see Acts 17:1–9). Considering how short a time he had spent with these new believers, he had succeeded in teaching them quite a lot about their new-found faith, as is evidenced by the number of times he uses expressions like “you know” in his first epistle to them, which we know as 1 Thessalonians. Yet, obviously, there were gaps in their understanding. Bible scholars believe that when Paul’s assistant, Timothy (whom he had left behind in Macedonia), came to visit him in Athens, he brought with him a list of questions to which the Thessalonian Christians needed authoritative answers. The result of their query is the book we call “1 Thessalonians” — probably the first piece of the New Testament to be written by Paul.

One of the questions the Thessalonians asked seems to have been concerned with the condition of Christians who die. Probably no Christians had died during the three weeks Paul had spent in their city, so the question hadn't arisen then, and Paul hadn't dealt with it. Now, after the passage of several months, which included affliction and persecution (1 Thessalonians 3:3–4), they had probably had that experience, and were wondering what would become of their deceased loved ones in the future. Would they ever see them again? The Scripture text we are looking at is Paul's response to that question.

Paul's answer begins with a strong affirmation of both the importance of their question and the truthfulness of his answer. "We don't want you to be ignorant ... this we tell you by the word of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:13,15). This is not an irrelevant "side issue" and it is not a matter of personal opinion or speculation! It is a doctrine of vital importance to the "brothers" to whom Paul is writing (1 Thessalonians 4:13) and it is given in the form of a clear revelation from God (1 Thessalonians 4:15).

What is the present condition of Christians who have died? Three times in as many verses (vv. 13–15), Paul uses the expression "those who have fallen asleep" to describe those he later calls "the dead" (v.16). It is clear that Paul, along with all the other writers of Scripture, portrays Christians who have died as being "asleep" — unconscious and inactive — unaware of anything that is going on in the world and unable to participate in it in any way. Since the moment of their decease, they haven't gone anywhere or done anything, and that condition would remain unchanged forever were it not for God's revealed plan to intervene and change it!

But there is such a plan! Beginning in verse 16, Paul describes, in sequential order, the events of a day the Church can still look forward to, eagerly and expectantly:

1. "The Lord himself" (Jesus Christ) "will descend from heaven" (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Notice that nothing is said, in this passage or any other, anywhere in the Bible, about deceased Christians (or anyone else) "going to heaven;"

- rather, the promise is about a living Jesus “coming from heaven” back to this earth.
2. “... with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with God’s trumpet” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Where did anyone ever get the idea that this event would be a “secret”? This is a description of one of the “noisiest” events in our planet’s history! Not only is it “loud” but Revelation 1:7 adds that everyone in the world will see it happen as well as hear it.
 3. “The dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). The importance of resurrection (rather than “surviving” the experience of dying) cannot possibly be overemphasized. Paul would later write, in 1 Corinthians 15:13–14, “if there is no resurrection of the dead, ... then ... your faith also is in vain.” Of course, you have to be dead (not “more alive than you’ve ever been before”) in order to experience resurrection.
 4. “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up ...” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). This is the aspect of the event we are studying that gives it the name “Rapture” (the word “rapture” means “being caught up”). Notice that the “Rapture” is not a separate event from the second coming of Christ. It is a part of that same event.
 5. “... to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The word “meet” calls to mind a specific tradition in the ancient world: that when a conquering king makes a royal visit to a city he has added to his empire, those citizens of that community who have hoped he would someday rule them would come running out of the city to “meet” him on the road and to accompany him into the city as he makes his triumphant entrance. It would be a misuse of the word “meet” to apply it to a vision of the Church being “raptured” several years before the actual return of Christ.
 6. “So we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). In order to be “with” the Lord, of course, we will have to be wherever he is at the time. Where will that be? The logic of the word “return” implies that he will be on Earth, since one cannot “return” to a place other than

where one has been before (remember MacArthur? He didn't "return" by relocating from Australia to the United States; he "returned" by going back to the place he had earlier left, namely, the Philippines). So if Jesus is planning to return to Earth, then it is on Earth that we will "be with" him "forever."

7. "... comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). This statement isn't part of the description of the second coming, of course, but it is extremely important for an understanding of the entire passage. When loved ones die, we are instructed by this statement to use this very Scripture in giving comfort to one another. We are to remind one another of Jesus' promise to return. We are to look forward to seeing our (formerly deceased, but now resurrected) friends again when he comes (and not before then). We will live eternally with him and them on his beautiful, newly re-created Earth — not in heaven, where he himself specifically said (John 13:33) it is impossible for us to go.

Think about it!

1. Why is it important to know what condition the dead are in now?
2. How is the issue of the condition of the dead connected with the prophecy of Christ's return to earth?
3. How can discussion of a future event (the second coming of Christ) bring "comfort" to a bereaved Christian?

In the next chapter, Paul goes on to say, "But concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need that anything be written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night. For when they are saying, 'Peace and safety,' then sudden destruction will come on them, like birth pains on a pregnant woman; and they will in no way escape. But you, brothers, aren't in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief. You are all children of light, and children of the

day. We don't belong to the night, nor to darkness, so then let's not sleep, as the rest do, but let's watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep in the night, and those who are drunk are drunk in the night. But let us, since we belong to the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and, for a helmet, the hope of salvation" (1 Thessalonians 5:1-8).

Another question the Thessalonians may have asked Timothy to convey to Paul is, "When will the second coming take place?" This is a question that naturally occurs to anyone who is thinking about an event that is said to be in the future. We want to put things "on our calendar" so we can plan for them and anticipate.

However, Paul introduces his answer to this question with the little word "But" (1 Thessalonians 5:1), indicating a contrast between the vagueness of the answer he is about to give to the "when?" question and the detailed specificity of the answer he had just given to the "what?" question. "Of the times and seasons" he says (to the very same "brothers"), it is totally unnecessary that he should write. Why? Because "you already know perfectly well" (we would say) "that the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2).

Has your home, or place of business, ever been invaded by a burglar? (Having been through that experience myself, I can assure you that I wish your answer would be "no!"). But if it has, let me ask you another question: did the burglar first warn you that he was coming? Could you have marked your calendar and known when to expect him? Were there even any "signs" to give you a hint that his approach was imminent? I rather doubt it!

In the same way, Paul is telling us that Jesus will return without warning and at a time when his return is not expected. That is quite the reverse of the impression you would get from the flood of books on "prophecy" currently on the market. We are led to believe that the Bible is full of predictions about when Jesus will come and how we will know that the time of his advent is near. If those books are telling the truth, then how is the day of the Lord going to come "like a thief"?

The correct answer is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:3-8, where Paul explains a certain difference in the nature of Christ's return

between how it is to be viewed by believers and how it is viewed by unbelievers. To the unsaved, his coming will be like that of a thief; when they are not expecting him (v. 3), he will suddenly come, and the effect of his coming will be their “destruction.” But to the saved, there will be no “surprise” on the day he returns, since we live in the “light” of the knowledge that he has promised to return. We don’t know when he will come, but we do know how (thanks to 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17), so the day will not “overtake” us like the arrival of a burglar at midnight would.

Think about it!

4. Does prophecy contain any “clues” as to when Jesus will return?
5. In what way will Jesus’ coming be “like” the coming of a thief?
6. Should the actual return of Christ come as a “surprise” to his followers?

The Apostle Paul explains to curious Christians the truth about their loved ones who have died: those people are now asleep, awaiting a future resurrection to life in God’s eternal kingdom. They will remain in that condition until Jesus returns. His return will take place suddenly and dramatically, accompanied by audible sounds and visible activity. Deceased Christians will be the first to experience the change, but they will be joined immediately by the Christians who are still alive at the time. Together the entire Church will meet Jesus in the air and accompany him to his throne in the New Jerusalem. “What a day — glorious day — that will be!”

This message should be used to comfort the bereaved in their moment of grief — this message, not the spiritual-sounding platitudes of man-made tradition. Use the Scripture for its intended purpose: not to answer our curiosity about the future, but to encourage us with a hope we can live with in the present!

Remember: “ ... the Lord himself will descend from heaven” (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

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FINAL DESTINATION

By Dr. John H. Roller

On the way home from a much-needed vacation trip, I listened to the flight attendant’s familiar phrase: “We hope you enjoy your stay in Orlando, or wherever is your final destination.” It got me thinking. Orlando definitely wasn’t my “final destination” that day. For reasons totally unknown to me, my ticket said I was only there to change planes for Washington, D.C., only to change again, this time for Charlotte, N.C. It would be several hours before I was “home” in Concord. But even Concord wasn’t my “final” destination! North Carolina is the 11th state I’ve lived in, and there is no way to predict how many more times I may move before I reach my “final resting place.” Is it even over then? What will happen to me after I die? Where (if anywhere) is my absolutely “final” destination, forever?

For one-twelfth of my life (during my teenage years), I was an atheist. I was absolutely convinced that all religions were wrong; God didn’t exist; the world and everything in it (including human beings) were nothing but atoms in various combinations; it had all come about by chance and evolution; and nothing would ever happen in the future that would change those basic facts (or my beliefs). I was certain that all talk of “afterlife” was nonsense

and wishful thinking. I knew I would die someday, whether by accident, by violence, by disease or by the decay brought on by old age, and at that moment, I would cease to exist and would never exist again. The only “comfort” in that belief is that I knew I would never even realize it had happened.

Religion teaches a different view. One of the oldest religions in the world (Hinduism) teaches that there are over 300,000,000 gods (and goddesses); the world and everything in it is permeated by them and their activities; everything that happens is under their influence; and the future will consist of endless repetitive cycles of what has happened in the past. For Hindus, every individual person has lived before and will live again, the soul migrating from body to body to body in an endless round of birth, life, death and rebirth. Furthermore, this is not perceived as a “good” thing! It’s our punishment for not pleasing the gods and goddesses. If we please them, our next life might be somewhat better than this one; but if we displease them, it will certainly be worse. In this scenario, my “final” destination would be to suffer the punishment of living forever. I didn’t find this idea very attractive.

Buddhism, developed out of a Hindu background by Siddhartha Gautama, offers a solution to this problem: if one achieves enlightenment, one can escape the cycle of death and rebirth by being absorbed into the “World Soul,” thus having one’s candle of suffering (life) extinguished. The reward for living a good life would be to not have to live another one. To me, this sounded like we were back to atheism. My final destination would be non-existence. Enlightenment would literally gain me — nothing!

I had some Christian friends (you know who you are!), and over a period of a few months, they convinced me (in this order) that the life they were living was better than the life I was living, that the only way to have that life was to receive Jesus as my Savior, that God really does exist, and that after my death — which could happen at any time — my “soul” (the real me) would go to heaven (if I was a Christian) or hell (if I wasn’t). Deciding to act on that information was very difficult for me; it meant revising my entire worldview; but on December 29, 1968, I took that “leap of

faith” and it was (as one of them predicted it would be) a decision I knew I would never regret.

Christianity is not a monolithic religion (not all Christians believe the same things), and I soon discovered that the picture of the afterlife my friends had given me was not believed by all the Christians I ever met. For example, Roman Catholicism (the oldest and largest “branch” of the Christian religion) was teaching that there are four possible places to which a person’s soul can go when death occurs: heaven (for saints), hell (for non-Catholics), purgatory (for Catholics who aren’t saints), and limbo (for children who die before being baptized). (Limbo has recently been eliminated, by a decree of Pope Benedict XVI, so it’s unclear to me, at this point, where those unbaptized babies are supposed to be going.)

The denomination I was saved in had simplified this complicated system somewhat. Everyone was either saved or unsaved; the saved went to heaven, the unsaved went to hell. Heaven was pictured as “real” place where people would recognize each other, have conversations, sing, eat delicious food and enjoy life forever — though I was a little confused by this description, since it was taught that it was my “soul” (NOT my body) that would be going there. If the soul is immaterial, I thought, how can it enjoy all these material pleasures?

But it was the picture of hell that bothered me the most. Hell was also a “real” place — a “lake of fire” — in which those who had never accepted Jesus would burn forever, in unbelievable pain, screaming and “gnashing their teeth,” but would never burn up! Furthermore, all this was going to take place WITHIN EARSHOT of heaven, as vividly described in the “true story” of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). No matter that it was also taught that it was “souls” (not bodies) that were going there: these “souls” had eyes (v. 23), bosoms (v. 23), voices (v. 24), fingers (v. 24) and tongues (v. 24)! As far as I could tell, the “soul” was nothing but a different kind of body: a kind that couldn’t be destroyed, even by an unquenchable fire.

I want to pause, at this point, to offer a suggestion. If this is what you believe, and if you are satisfied with believing it, and you don’t

want to think about changing that belief, put this e-tract in a folder, and come back to reading it some other day. It's not my purpose to upset you, or to get you to leave your church, or anything like that. But I want to warn you: if you keep reading, you're going to have that view challenged. So don't keep reading and then write to me to say you're upset with me. I'm giving you a fair warning! I also want to say this: if this is what your church teaches, I feel very, very sorry for you. I vividly remember what it was like to believe that this was the fate of my unsaved loved ones — and to think that I would have to “spend eternity” listening to their screams.

Billy Graham, among many others, (after several decades) quit preaching this view of the final destination of the unsaved. He still said, “You have a soul that will live forever somewhere” — and he still talked about heaven as the final destination of the saved — but he then described hell as “eternal separation from God” and claims the “fire” is merely a figure of speech whose purpose is to describe the “mental anguish” of the realization that one has missed out on the joys of heaven. But this view troubles me as well. Nearly every theologian I've ever heard of teaches that God is “omnipresent” — He's EVERYWHERE. If he's everywhere, then how can I be “separated” from him? Psalm 139:7–12 asks (and answers) that very question. In the King James Version, verse 8 specifically states that hell is NOT “a place where God is not.”

Furthermore, I also worry about the impact this kind of preaching will have on the unsaved. Had I heard Billy preaching this when I was a teenager (back then he was preaching the literal fire and brimstone), I might have responded, “Great! If I don't accept Jesus as my Savior, I'll get to live forever, in a place where there is no God. It sounds like you're promising heaven to the atheist and hell to the Christians!” I don't think any atheist will ever be drawn to faith in Jesus by the “threat” of being “separated from God.”

Another “modern” solution (though it's really not modern at all; it was preached over 1,700 years ago) is to say that while it's true that all souls live forever, and only Christians go to heaven when they die, it's not true that the souls of non-Christians burn forever in hell. They burn only until their sinful natures are burned

away (in a process that reminds me of the purification of gold or silver), then they are transferred to heaven and enjoy eternal life right along with the saved. This process might take longer for some than for others, but eventually everyone (or, in some versions of this theory, ALMOST everyone) will be saved. This theory goes by the name of Restorationism, or, sometimes, Universalism. While it's usually affiliated with the "liberal" wing of Christianity, it's gaining more and more adherents among the "conservative" wing as well. It troubles me, too, though. It doesn't seem to leave me much motivation for holy living here on earth. My final destination will be Heaven no matter what I do in this life! In that case, why not "live as the heathen do" — enjoying the pleasures of sin for this "season" of 70 years (or so) — knowing that hell will be only another "transfer point" like Orlando or Washington, D.C.?

Not long after I joined the church where they described hell as "25,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and not a drop of water in sight," I met some Christians who held another view, one I haven't mentioned yet. When they first described it to me, I thought, "It sounds great, but it isn't what the Bible teaches, so what good is it?" This new group didn't try very hard to convince me they were right. They simply suggested, "Read the Bible and see for yourself." So I did.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY about my "final destination"?

For starters, the Bible doesn't say that "souls" are immortal. The Bible doesn't actually say very much about "immortality" at all. The word only occurs half a dozen times.

What it DOES say about "souls" is that they are MORTAL (capable of dying, and of being destroyed). Take a look at Ezekiel 18:4 (and 18:20), and Matthew 10:28, and I don't see how you can come to any other conclusion.

The Bible speaks of "living souls" (Genesis 2:7), and it also speaks of "dead souls" (Numbers 19:13). This is not immediately obvious, unless you can read Hebrew. The word translated "body" in the latter verse is the same word (*nephesh*) that is translated "soul" later in the same verse!

Furthermore, the “soul” (in the Bible) is not a “part” of the human being (distinct from the “body”): it is simply a name for the human being himself (or herself). The same word (*nephesh*) is also used to describe non-human beings, such as fish (Genesis 1:20), cattle (Genesis 1:24), and God himself (Matthew 12:18, quoting Isaiah 42:1). Saying “my soul” is just another way of saying “I.”

So what is MY final destination? It is the same as the final destination of my “soul.” Where does the “soul” go? What becomes of “it”? This is just another way of asking, “Where do ‘I’ go? What becomes of ‘me’?”

Hundreds of verses, throughout the Bible, make it perfectly clear that the final destination of the saved is eternal life in the presence of God, and the final destination of the unsaved is complete nonexistence. Here are just a few:

“Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19) — “thou” (you), not “thy body” (leaving “thy soul” free to go somewhere else).

“He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life (1 John 5:12) — “not life” at all, not just “not a blessed, happy life in Heaven.”

“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23) — the word “but” clearly shows that “death” is a different thing from “life,” not just life in a different place.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Here is the most-quoted verse in Christendom. It contrasts the destiny of the unsaved (“perish”) with the destiny of the saved (“life”). What could be plainer? The destiny of the saved is to live forever. The destiny of the unsaved is to not do so.

The final destination of the unsaved is always, in the Bible, described in terms such as “die,” “death,” “perish,” “destroy,” “burned up,” “consumed” and so on. Such concepts as “ultimate

restoration to heaven,” “eternal separation from God,” “burning forever and never burning up” and “eternal life in hell” (which I found on a tract published by a prominent disciple-making ministry) are never once hinted at in any of its 31,173 verses.

I don’t mean to brag, but the fact is, I’ve read the Old Testament cover-to-cover in 16 different translations, and the New Testament cover-to-cover in 28 different translations. It simply isn’t in there.

God certainly has a plan to punish those who refuse his generous offer of eternal life. The punishment consists of the fact that they will not get what they didn’t ask for. No harsher punishment than that is needed, and none is promised in the Bible. To me, this is a far more comforting belief than to think of my now-deceased, never-saved loved ones as burning forever, screaming in pain, within earshot of my heavenly mansion. How would I be able to enjoy eternity in a scenario like that? But that is precisely what most Christians believe. I’m glad I “discovered” what the Bible says!

I didn’t really “discover” it, though, and neither did the small denomination I now serve as a minister. It’s been there all along. Every Christian writer before the year 1777 taught it (I’ve proved this in my doctoral thesis, which became my “book,” “The Doctrine of Immortality in the Early Church;” I’d be happy to send you a copy by e-mail if you ask me to.) It was “buried” under the traditional view for several centuries, but there were always “heretics” who believed it, often at the cost of their lives. It “reappeared” during the Reformation and was held by such “greats” as Martin Luther, John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, John Milton and others — though later rejected by the “mainline” churches they founded. It’s been preached in America, under the label “Conditional Immortality,” since at least the year 1795. I, myself, have held to it for 35 years now, and have never found a “flaw” in it, though many of my friends have shared with me the “flaws” they believe it has. I’ll be writing about some of those “flaws” in future e-tracts. I hope you’ll study them with an open mind. But I don’t ask you to believe ANYTHING unless you become convinced it’s what the Bible teaches.

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SOUL SLEEP

By Dr. John H. Roller

“Be careful with that sample; it’s hot!” warned my lab partner, pointing to a petri dish in the middle of my counter top. I froze in confusion. What was Al trying to tell me? Did the sample have such a high temperature that I would burn my fingers if I touched it without wearing asbestos gloves? Was it radioactive, so that I would need to don protective clothing before approaching it? Was it contaminated with some bacterium, and I should wear latex gloves while handling it? Was it the product of the latest new research, meaning the boss would be very upset with me if I damaged it? Was it electrically charged, so I would receive a “shock” if I touched it? Was it very spicy, like Mexican food? Had Al stolen it from another lab? Webster’s Dictionary lists nine distinct definitions for the word “hot” (and Al and I knew of a few that weren’t in the list) — and he had given me no context by which to decide which one he meant.

Many words, in most languages (and especially English), have a variety of related and unrelated meanings. “Sleep” is another word like “hot” — Webster defines it as “the natural periodic suspension of consciousness during which the powers of the body are restored” — but different things are meant if I say, “My foot went to sleep” (I lost the sensation in that part of my body) or,

“I’ll sleep on it” (I’ll think about it and come up with an answer later) or, “Let’s have a sleepover!” (All the other kids will gather at my house and we’ll stay up all night talking, playing games and eating pizza) or, “They’re sleeping together” (They’re having sex) or, “I’m afraid this country is full of sleeper cells” (There are terrorists waiting to be told it’s time to strike) or, “I had to put my pet to sleep” (I had to ask the veterinarian to kill it).

What does the Bible mean, then, by using the word “sleep” to describe what theologians call “the intermediate state” (the condition of human beings between the moment of their death and the moment of the resurrection at the return of Christ)? Let’s make no mistake: the Bible definitely does use the word that way. My friend Geoff Davies, in his paper, “If A Man Die” (published in July 1993), lists 44 references in the Old Testament and 20 in the New Testament “teaching that the dead are asleep.” But what does “asleep” mean in this context?

Some have suggested (and perhaps you believe) that man is a “two-part” being — one “part” of the man being the “body” and the other “part” being the “soul” (or the “spirit”) — and that it is only the “body” that goes to “sleep” when the man dies, the “soul” (or “spirit”) remaining conscious and going somewhere (heaven, hell, purgatory, limbo, paradise, the bosom of Abraham and the arms of Jesus being some of the “places” where a “soul,” or a “spirit,” might go when the “body” goes to sleep). If you’ve read my previous e-tract (“Final Destination”), you know that I don’t believe in the “two-part” theory. It’s my contention that “the body IS the soul” — or, more exactly, that both terms (“body” and “soul”) are merely different ways of describing the one specific human being — and that whatever happens to either the “body” or the “soul” necessarily also happens to the other, since they are the same thing. That is true at the moment of the final judgment (which is what I was discussing in “Final Destination”), and it is also true, I believe, of what happens during the intermediate state.

Does Scripture support my belief? Can I quote specific verses that teach complete unconsciousness and inactivity in the interval between an individual’s death and the great resurrection day?

Here are just a few (quotations are from the World English Bible, available free at www.worldenglishbible.org):

Job 14:12 — “Man lies down and doesn’t rise. Until the heavens are no more, they shall not awake, nor be roused out of their sleep.” (This doesn’t sound to me like the “man” is going anywhere, or doing anything, while he is “asleep.”)

Ecclesiastes 9:5 — “The living know that they will die, but the dead don’t know anything.” (The dead are unconscious, just as in the dictionary definition of “sleep.”)

Ecclesiastes 9:10 — “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in Sheol, where you are going.” (“Sheol” is the Hebrew word for “the place of the dead.” It is directly related to the English word “hole,” as in “hole in the ground.” Notice the list of things that are NOT found there!)

Psalms 115:17 — “The dead don’t praise Yah, neither any who go down into silence.” (If dead believers were capable of praising the Lord, wouldn’t they be doing so?)

John 11:11–14 — “He said these things, and after that, he said to them, ‘Our friend, Lazarus, has fallen asleep, but I am going so that I may awake him out of sleep.’ The disciples therefore said, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.’ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he spoke of taking rest in sleep. So Jesus said to them plainly then, ‘Lazarus is dead.’” (I think it’s interesting that Lazarus, dead for four days, then raised back to life, didn’t leave us with any stories about where he’d gone and what he’d done while he was dead. Wouldn’t his case have been a perfect opportunity for this important information to have been revealed to us?)

Acts 2:24 — “David didn’t ascend into the heavens” (If David didn’t go to heaven when he died, who will? Some have suggested that only since Jesus’ ascension have believers been taken to heaven. But this was spoken AFTER Jesus’ ascension. So Jesus didn’t take David to heaven with him when he ascended,

as is sometimes said he did with all the Old Testament saints.)
Revelation 20:5 — “The rest of the dead didn’t live until the thousand years were finished.” (As opposed to, “All the dead continued to live, in another place, during the thousand years” — as is taught in most churches nowadays.)

Our ancestors, who developed the English language, seem to have understood this concept. To describe the place where people go when they die, they coined the word “cemetery,” from the Latin word “coemeterium,” itself based on the Greek word κοιμητήριον “koimeterion,” which meant “sleeping room” (as in, “we have three rooms in our house — a kitchen, a living room, and a sleeping room”).

John Wycliffe (1324–1384), known as “the Morning Star of the Reformation,” taught that there was “unconscious sleep between death and resurrection.”

Martin Luther (1483–1546), the founder of Protestantism, referred to the resurrection (which will take place when Jesus returns) as being “awakened out of a deep sleep.”

William Tyndale (1490–1536), who was burned at the stake for translating the Bible into English (which was a crime in his day), argued that the traditional view, “in saying that the souls of the dead are in heaven, hell and purgatory, destroys the argument with which Jesus and Paul prove the resurrection . . . The true faith speaks of the resurrection. The heathen philosophers, denying the resurrection, said that the souls of the dead continued to live . . . If the souls are in heaven . . . why do we need to look for a resurrection?” (Good question, William! Does anybody have a good answer for it?)

On the other hand, John Calvin (1509–1564) “blasted” his opponents, the Anabaptists (predecessors of the modern Baptist movement), with a tract calling them “unskilled persons who ignorantly imagine that in the interval between death and resurrection the soul sleeps.” (Evidently the Anabaptists believed as I do; I wish the same could be said of their successors.)

Anyway, truth isn’t determined by who believes what, but by what the Bible says. I don’t expect you to be “convinced” of this

truth just because the above 10 verses seem to me (and a handful of famous reformers) to teach it. Those verses, though, are just a sample of what can be found in many other places throughout the Bible (and, for that matter, those reformers are just a few of the hundreds of eminently qualified Bible scholars who have held this position). I'd just like to suggest these few thoughts as a starting-point for your own investigation into the topic, if it's one you're interested in.

In future e-tracts, I plan to deal with some of the objections that are often raised against this belief. If you have questions you'd like me to answer — either privately or in a “public” forum — I'd be happy to do that.

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THE ADVENTS

By Rev. Jefferson Vann

The patriarch Jacob, an old man, gathered his sons together and told them what would happen to their families “in days to come.”¹⁴ He told Judah that his descendants would have the scepter, and the ruler's staff, and to him shall be “the obedience of the peoples.”¹⁵ It would be many days, indeed many centuries before that prediction became fulfilled by David. He would lead

¹⁴ Genesis 49:1.

¹⁵ Genesis 49:10.

not only his own people, but many other nations (peoples) would obey him as well.

Yet David did not completely fulfill this prophecy. Jesus is the “Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.”¹⁶ He will lead both Israel and the nations. By his blood he has “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.”¹⁷ He has “made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”¹⁸ So, Judah’s son is also God’s Son, and the King of kings.

When Jesus came as a babe in a manger, some recognized him as heaven’s king. The angels described him as a “Savior” and “Christ the Lord.”¹⁹ The term Χριστός “Christ” is Greek for anointed one: the title of a king. Even as a child he was recognized as Judah’s heir, and God’s king. The wise men went to Herod and asked “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?”²⁰ Herod recognized the threat that this child posed for him, and sought to destroy him. Pilate asked Jesus “Are you the King of the Jews?”²¹

Advent

At the end of every year, much of the world celebrates a season that some call Advent. It is a season that church tradition has championed for the purpose of remembering the first coming, or advent of Christ. For Advent Christians, this season is all the more special because we celebrate not only our Lord’s first advent, but the promises it brought of his second advent. Much of the world celebrates Christmas without this hope. Like the Jews who missed their Messiah, much of the world sings “Joy to the World” without recognizing its future implications.

¹⁶ Revelation 5:5.

¹⁷ Revelation 5:9.

¹⁸ Revelation 5:10.

¹⁹ Luke 2:11.

²⁰ Matthew 2:2.

²¹ Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3.

The first advent of Jesus Christ was predicted for thousands of years, in numerous ways, and detailed in hundreds of Scripture texts. Yet many of the Jews who had access to the predictions either ignored them or misinterpreted them. Likewise, the second advent of Christ is detailed fully in both Testaments, but Christians differ widely on their expectations. A survey of the predictions and fulfillments of the first advent will yield principles that help us know what to expect as we read the predictions of the second advent.

Incarnation

The Christ expected was to be a real and completely human being, yet also God's unique Son in human flesh. The eternal Logos, the second person of the divine trinity, would become a human being by being conceived miraculously (without a human male partner) in the uterus of Mary. Isaiah said "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel — 'God is with us.'"²² When told of this reality, Mary said "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin."²³ Matthew explained "All of this happened to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel (meaning, God is with us)." Joseph ... brought Mary home to be his wife, but she remained a virgin until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus."²⁴

This incarnated Christ would be the unique seed of a woman, his human nature descending directly from Mary. God told the serpent that "From now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."²⁵ Paul explained that "when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman."²⁶

²² Isaiah 7:14, NLT.

²³ Luke 1:34, NLT.

²⁴ Matthew 1:22-25, NLT.

²⁵ Genesis 3:15, NLT.

²⁶ Galatians 4:4, NLT.

This incarnated Christ would be the direct descendant of Abraham, the means by whom Abraham would bless the whole planet. God promised Abraham that he would bless those who bless him, and curse those who curse him. He said “All the families of the earth will be blessed through” him and his family.²⁷ So, people had every right to expect this awaited Messiah to appear in Abraham’s family line. The first verse in the New Testament says “This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of King David and of Abraham.”²⁸

As already mentioned, this incarnated Christ would qualify as ruler over the people of Israel (and all peoples) since he would legally descend from the ruling tribe of Judah. Jacob predicted “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from his descendants, until the coming of the one to whom it belongs, the one whom all nations will obey.”²⁹ Luke informs his readers that “Jesus was known as the son of Joseph. Joseph was the son of ... Judah.”³⁰ Matthew puts it the other way around: “Judah was the father of ... Joseph, the husband of Mary. Mary was the mother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah.”³¹

This incarnated Christ would be a direct descendant of King David. Isaiah predicted that the Messiah’s “ever expanding, peaceful government will never end. He will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David. The passionate commitment of the LORD Almighty will guarantee this!”³² The angel Gabriel told Mary that “He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.”³³

From these predictions and fulfillments of our Lord’s first coming, we can derive this principle: *the Lord’s advent will be a*

²⁷ Genesis 12:3

²⁸ Matthew 1:1, NLT.

²⁹ Genesis 49:10, NLT.

³⁰ Luke 3:23,33, NLT.

³¹ Matthew 1:3, 16, NLT.

³² Isaiah 9:7, NLT.

³³ Luke 1:32, NLT.

very real human presence, but will be the result of an unprecedented divine miracle. When speaking of his second advent, the New Testament uses two Greek words that also point to this principle: (παρουσία) *parousia*, the word for a real visible human presence,³⁴ and (ἐπιφάνεια) *epiphaneia*, the word for a miraculous divine appearance.³⁵ Like his first coming, then, our Lord's second advent will be a combination of physical visible presence and a miraculous, powerful event that defies the ordinary. It will be the same Jesus who came as a baby, but it will not be an ordinary day. His next coming will be noticed!

Preparation

Christ's first coming was not a single event. It was an era in which the newborn Christ grew to manhood, and prepared for his earthly ministry as a discipler, and as the divine atoning sacrifice. The entire era was orchestrated by God and revealed in his word. Micah predicted that he would be born in Bethlehem.³⁶ When the timing was right, the Lord orchestrated events so that Joseph and Mary moved from Nazareth to Bethlehem.³⁷ Mary gave birth in Bethlehem even though they had no home there, because God was in the process.³⁸

The Holy Spirit continued to be involved in the preparation process, ensuring that Jesus would spend his early childhood in Egypt, out of harm's way. Hosea had hinted at this move when he said "I called my son out of Egypt," and that hint was made more clear by the Angel of the Lord at the proper time.³⁹ Mary and Joseph traveled and stayed in Egypt until after Herod's death,

³⁴ Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Corinthians 15:23; 16:17; 2 Corinthians 7:6f; 10:10; Philippians 1:26; 2:12; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8f; James 5:7f; 2 Peter 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28.

³⁵ Thessalonians 2:8; 1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 1:10; 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13.

³⁶ Micah 5:2.

³⁷ Luke 2:4–5.

³⁸ Luke 2:7.

³⁹ Matthew 2:13.

and then returned.⁴⁰ By so doing, they escaped Herod’s attempt to kill Jesus by ordering the deaths of all the young male children in the village of Bethlehem. That massacre had been predicted by Jeremiah.⁴¹

The Holy Spirit brought about the birth and orchestrated the ministry of John the Baptist, whose task it was to bring revival to Israel, preparing them for the appearance of their king. Malachi had predicted a coming messenger,⁴² and Jesus admitted that John was “the man to whom the Scriptures refer when they say, ‘Look, I am sending my messenger before you, and he will prepare your way before you.’”⁴³ John was the forerunner — who introduced an expectant nation to their true king. He was a part of what God was doing during that 33-year period.

God had in past ages declared the identity and unique relationship he had with Christ to the angels.⁴⁴ But at a crucial point in that 33-year period, God himself identified Jesus as his unique Son to the watching world. Matthew records “After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him.”⁴⁵

One of the characteristics, then, of Christ’s first advent was that over a period of time and a series of events, the Lord worked out his plan and accomplished his purpose. Rather than being a singular event, the first advent was an entire era, consisting of a series of events in which the Holy Spirit prepared the world for its Savior, who had come. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the second advent will be a similar inter-related series of events.

⁴⁰ Matthew 2:14–15.

⁴¹ Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:16–18.

⁴² Malachi 3:1.

⁴³ Luke 7:27.

⁴⁴ Psalm 2:7.

⁴⁵ Matthew 3:16–17, NLT.

Demonstration

During his first advent, *Jesus showed the world who he is by what he did*. His miracles demonstrated and affirmed the audacious claims he made about himself. He began by bringing God’s light to the darkest region of Palestine: Galilee of the Gentiles.⁴⁶ He brought his message of deliverance and healing to the enslaved and infirmed, proving his message by setting them free from demons and sickness.⁴⁷ The incidents of physical healing and deliverance themselves demonstrated the freedom Christ had to offer through his gospel message.⁴⁸ He preached that gospel by many means, including sermons, parables⁴⁹ and fits of wrath against the hypocrites who opposed him.⁵⁰ By so doing, he demonstrated that he, himself, is the focal point of God’s plan. Those who refuse to believe in him will be rejected by God, no matter what nation they were born into.

In the same way, the second coming of Christ is described in the New Testament as a tremendous demonstration of Christ’s power, revealing his true identity. Jesus predicted that when he comes “all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”⁵¹ He warned the Council (seated in judgment against him) that they will someday “see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”⁵²

Peter writes “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”⁵³ He is intentionally ambiguous. It is not clear whether he is talking about

⁴⁶ Isaiah 9:1–2; Matthew 4:13–16.

⁴⁷ Isaiah 53:4; Matthew 8:16–17.

⁴⁸ Isaiah 61:1–2; Luke 4:18–21.

⁴⁹ Psalm 78:2; Isaiah 6:9–10; John 16:25; Mark 4:11.

⁵⁰ Psalm 69:9; Mark 11:15–17.

⁵¹ Matthew 24:30, ESV.

⁵² Mark 14:62, ESV.

⁵³ 2 Peter 1:16, ESV.

descriptions of Christ's first coming in power, or predictions of his second coming in power. Rightfully so, because both of Christ's advents will be characterized by a demonstration of power.

When he comes again, Christ will demonstrate his power over sickness and death not by raising some, but by emptying all the graves. He said that "a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice."⁵⁴ He had told Martha that he is the resurrection and the life.⁵⁵ We believe that by faith, but we also look forward to the day in which he will demonstrate its truth.

When he comes again, Christ will demonstrate his power over Satan and all his kingdom of darkness. He has delivered some from bondage, but he longs to set the whole world free. The battle is raging now, and we are fighting it by means of the victory won for us at the cross.⁵⁶ But when the king comes, he will demonstrate his power by defeating Satan, casting him into a bottomless pit,⁵⁷ undoing his corruption of this world, and ultimately throwing him into the lake of fire, which is the second death.⁵⁸ That snake will be revealed to be something entirely different than the immortal god he claimed to be. Christ will demonstrate his supreme power over him.

Opposition

When Jesus first appeared and identified himself as the Savior of the world, he faced rejection, humiliation, and opposition from almost everyone. The clearer he became about what his kingdom entailed, the more people turned away from him. The psalmist had prophesied "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One."⁵⁹ Luke wrote that "The leading priests and teachers of re-

⁵⁴ John 5:28, NIV.

⁵⁵ John 11:25.

⁵⁶ Revelation 12:10–12.

⁵⁷ Revelation 20:2.

⁵⁸ Revelation 20:10, 14.

⁵⁹ Psalm 2:1–2, NIV.

ligious law were actively plotting Jesus' murder."⁶⁰ Even though Jesus had demonstrated who he was, his own nation would not accept him. He was betrayed by one of his close friends.⁶¹ They mocked and crucified him.⁶²

Sadly, that is going to be the case on a cosmic scale as well. In the end, the vast majority of those for whom Jesus died will say "no thanks" to his salvation. They will take sides with the devil and his kingdom, and reject their Savior. Only, in the second advent, this choice will not lead to Christ's death on the cross, but the second death of all sinners who rejected his love. The lake of fire is a very real event, and it will mean irrevocable destruction to all who have opposed its alternative: Christ, the life.

Exaltation

The Gospels do not end with the death of Christ on the cross, but they tell the amazing story of his resurrection and ascension. The psalmist predicted that the Messiah would say "For you will not leave my soul among the dead or allow your godly one to rot in the grave. You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever."⁶³ The Lord, once brought down low, would ascend on high.⁶⁴ The first advent ended with *the exaltation of Christ to heaven's throne*. The second advent will see Christ exalted as king of kings and Lord of Lords.⁶⁵ His is the name above every name that is named in the whole universe.⁶⁶

The prophecies fulfilled when Jesus came to this earth the first time set a pattern that help interpreters learn what to expect when the prophecies of his second advent are fulfilled. We know to

⁶⁰ Luke 22:2, NLT.

⁶¹ Psalm 41:9; Luke 22:47-48.

⁶² Psalm 22:7-8; Luke 23:35; Isaiah 53:12; Mark 15:27.

⁶³ Psalm 16:10-11, NLT.

⁶⁴ Psalm 68:18; Mark 16:19.

⁶⁵ Revelation 19:16.

⁶⁶ Ephesians 1:21; 2:9.

expect a series of events in which the Holy Spirit works out God’s eternal plan, and exalts his eternal Son. We can expect mighty miracles, in demonstration of who Christ is, and his real physical presence among us. We will see the ultimate battle with Satan, and his ultimate demise. We will see heaven intervene in the affairs of men, and hell destroy the wickedness and evil in this world.

In the first advent, Christ came as God with us. In the second advent, the world will be transformed so that we will finally be with him. The “kingdom of the world (will) become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.”⁶⁷ In the first advent, Christ brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.⁶⁸ At the second advent, believers will put it on like a garment.⁶⁹

One of the men who was privileged to see his first advent also heard him promise “Surely I am coming soon.” His response is ours: “Amen. Come Lord Jesus.”⁷⁰

THE TIMING

By Rev. Jefferson Vann

To quote the previous article: “Rather than being a singular event, the first advent was an entire era, consisting of a series of events in which the Holy Spirit prepared the world for its Savior, who had come. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the second advent will be a similar inter-related series of events.” In our preaching, we often lump all that is promised about the end times

⁶⁷ Revelation 11:15, ESV.

⁶⁸ 2 Timothy 1:10.

⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:53–54.

⁷⁰ Revelation 22:20, ESV.

into one single “when Jesus comes” event. The New Testament authors did that as well.⁷¹ But that does not mean that everything prophesied will happen at once. One can place the prophecies into three distinct categories, based on the timing of their fulfillment: those actually taking place *before* the second coming, those that occur immediately *at* the second coming and those that happen some time *after* the second coming.

before the second coming

Firstly, a number of events that people tend to equate with the second coming do not have to happen at that time. It takes discernment to sort through all the traditions that interpreters have pieced together and lumped with the second advent. Some church traditions are so tied to those interpretations that they even make them a test or standard for fellowship. Advent Christians do not do so. Many of us see at least three events which are typically paired with the return of Christ as having been fulfilled in the past, or presently being fulfilled.

Jerusalem’s tribulation

The Bible describes a great deal of trouble for the nation of Israel. Jesus predicted that they “will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”⁷² Since the re-emergence of Israel as a separate nation in 1948, some interpreters have suggested that this time of Israel’s tribulation will begin at some point after Jesus returns. Traditionally, however, interpreters have seen the establishment of Israel as a sign that we are nearing the end of the times of the Gentiles, not its beginning. There is no exegetical need for Jerusalem and the temple to be rebuilt and destroyed again.

⁷¹ 2 Thessalonians 1:10 (for example).

⁷² Luke 21:24, ESV.

Jesus' predictions of a 40-year period of trouble and warfare for Jerusalem⁷³ were completely fulfilled in the period between his Olivet discourse and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. He predicted nine specific characteristics of that tribulation period:

1. Jerusalem surrounded by armies
2. Immediate flight from Jerusalem
3. Unequalled distress for those in Jerusalem
4. An abomination that desolates temple
5. Jews will fall by the sword
6. Jews will be taken as prisoners
7. Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles
8. The days will be shortened
9. Fulfilled before this generation (40 years) ends

All of these characteristics were found in that 40-year period. Prediction fulfilled. It does the church and the world no good to reintroduce those predictions and seek to integrate them into a last-days scheme. That kind of exegesis only leads to confusion and tarnishes the reputation of the church.

the “great tribulation”

Jesus also predicted a period of worldwide tribulation.⁷⁴ The specific attributes of that tribulation are as follows:

1. False messiahs
2. Wars, rumors of wars, revolutions
3. International strife
4. Famines, earthquakes, pestilences
5. Fearful events, great signs from heaven
6. Apostasy and schism

⁷³ Matthew 24:15–22; 32–35; Mark 13:14–20; 28–31; Luke 21: 20–24; 28–33.

⁷⁴ Matthew 24:4–14; Mark 13:5–13; Luke 21:8–19.

7. Persecution, false prophets
8. Martyrdom
9. Increased wickedness
10. Love grows cold, family betrayal
11. Gospel preached to all nations

Jesus is describing this entire age in which the church has the opportunity to preach the gospel and seek to bring the world to Christ. Yet, many insist that these are signs of the end-times, and seek to place them in the future — perhaps in the time immediately preceding Christ’s second coming. None of these characteristics are new to this age. All of them are characteristic of this entire era from the time of Christ’s first advent to the present. But some traditions teach that this worldwide tribulation is unique to a seven-year period immediately after Christ’s rapture of the saints.

What the Bible reveals about this great tribulation era:

- A Christians encouraged to be patient since they will endure it until the Lord comes (James 5:1–2).
- B It will occur during a long age in which several signs will be repeated as birth pangs (Matthew 24:4–14 and parallels).
- C During this age, Christians are warned to stay alert for the second coming (Matthew 25:1–13).
- D During this age, Christians are warned to stay committed to kingdom work (Matthew 25:14–30).
- E During this age, Christians are warned to be authentic, not just to do things that look real (Matthew 25:31–46).
- F During this age, most people (as in Noah’s time) will reject the gospel message and not seek salvation (Luke 17:26–30).

These statements do not agree with the assumption that the great tribulation is limited to a short period of time after Christ’s return. They are consistent with the teaching that we are currently enduring this great tribulation period, and that Christ’s return will end it.

the apostasy

The apostle Paul predicted a time of rebellion to occur within the church during this great tribulation age between Christ's first and second advents.⁷⁵ Many traditions have emerged regarding a global antichrist that do not jive with what Paul said in that text. He is purported to be a political figure, yet Paul says he leads an apostasy — the word *apostasia* being the Greek for rebellion here. That term suggests a spiritual leader in the visible church. Paul says he will be destroyed by Christ's second coming, but many teach that antichrist will not even appear until after Christ comes and raptures the church away. That would make an apostasy impossible, and it would make Christ pave the way for the Antichrist instead of destroy him.

What the Bible teaches is that an apostate Church will emerge in history between Paul's time and Christ's second coming. This apostate Church will introduce demonically inspired pagan teachings and rituals and forbid marriage and institute dietary restrictions.⁷⁶ It will be led by imposters who oppose the truth and introduce myths into its official teachings.⁷⁷ Its leaders will be guilty of such hypocrisy and corruption that the whole of Christianity will be blasphemed.⁷⁸

There is plenty of historical evidence that apostate churches and movements have emerged within the last 2,000 years. There are also numerous attempts to reform the churches that suggest that at many times those who have professed faith have wandered away from that professed faith. It does not make sense theologically to cast all that evidence aside and insist that another great apostasy must occur, and after the church is taken away. For that reason, it makes sense to place the apostasy among this list of things that have already taken place, and not in the list of events

⁷⁵ 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, ESV.

⁷⁶ 1 Timothy 4:1–3.

⁷⁷ 2 Timothy 3:1–13; 4:3–4.

⁷⁸ 2 Peter 2:1–3.

to occur during or after the second coming. This issue will be treated more extensively in chapter 64: The Apostasy.

at the second coming

There are five events prophesied as occurring at and as an immediate result of the second coming of Christ. These are the eschatological events which are next on the historical horizon. As such, they are tremendously important, and should not be trivialized. Many churches preach about these events, but seem to emphasize other things.

the parousia

Christ will reverse his ascension to heaven, and appear in the sky just as he had disappeared.⁷⁹ It will be his physical presence (Greek παρουσία “*parousia*”) instead of his physical absence.⁸⁰ Many speak of this coming of Christ as being secret or silent, but Christ described it as a sudden, unexpected, worldwide cataclysmic event.⁸¹ Notice the elements of the actual coming of Christ that he points out in his Olivet discourse:

1. He will come like lightning.
2. The Sun will darken.
3. The Moon will eclipse.
4. Stars will fall.
5. Heavenly bodies will shake.
6. Nations will mourn.
7. Angels will be sent with a loud trumpet call.
8. Men will faint from terror.
9. The Elect will be gathered.

⁷⁹ Acts 1:11.

⁸⁰ παρουσία “*parousia*” combines the prefix *para* (alongside) and the noun *ousia* (substance, presence).

⁸¹ Matthew 24:23–31; Mark 13:21–27; Luke 21:25–27; 34–36.

That does not sound like an event anyone is likely to miss. Jesus had been asked for a sign by his disciples. They did not want to miss his return. Jesus taught them that, unlike his first coming as a babe in a manger, this one would not be secret. All the world will know. For Christ to be any more specific as to the timing of his παρουσία would be to defeat its purpose. It is supposed to catch the world off guard. It is to be sudden, like the coming of a thief.⁸² The church must be prepared for the παρουσία at any time.⁸³

the first resurrection

Christ's first priority when he comes is to raise the dead in him. Paul spoke of the order of the harvest, where Christ's resurrection was the firstfruits, and the second stage is "at his coming those who belong to Christ."⁸⁴ This was Paul's hope, to be among those raised from the dead.⁸⁵ John called this the first resurrection, and spoke of those who experience it as blessed.⁸⁶ Although dead now, those who are raised at Christ's return are blessed because Christ will revive them, and they will never experience death again. Paul describes the event this way: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first."⁸⁷ It is the first thing of Jesus' to-do list when he comes.

the rapture

His next task is to transform those in Christ who are still living so that they, too, have immortality and are fit for eternity

⁸² 2 Peter 3:3–13.

⁸³ Matthew 25.

⁸⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:23, ESV.

⁸⁵ Romans 6:5; Philippians 3:10, 20–21.

⁸⁶ Revelation 20:5–6.

⁸⁷ 1 Thessalonians 4:16, ESV.

with him. Paul says “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.”⁸⁸ Paul expected to be among this group, but we know now that he will be among the first. Regardless, both groups will become one, as we are caught up (raptured) into the air to meet with Jesus.

Armageddon

Meanwhile, back on earth, World War ? has broken out. The demons and people who have not bowed the knee to Christ are suddenly left in charge of a world without redeemed humanity. Angels from heaven have been summoned by a trumpet blast to wage war against them. The nations mourn because it becomes clear that Christ has come, and they were all left behind. Nations fear because natural disasters are creating chaos everywhere.⁸⁹ Demonically controlled leaders seek to unite this population for this battle, which is worldwide, but has a focal point at the mountain (Hebrew *har*) of Megiddo.⁹⁰ The world will be caught unprepared, and sudden destruction will come upon them.⁹¹

the Wedding Supper of the Lamb

Meanwhile, back in the air, the Bride of the Lamb is celebrating her wedding feast with her Bridegroom. This feast does not take place in heaven. It is the wedding feast celebrating the reunion of Christ and his church. He has come for us, not to bring us to heaven, but to rule with us on earth. But before the king and queen co-rule, the wedding must occur.

We will be as we are now, only perfected, since the Bible teaches that “when he appears we shall be like him.”⁹² Perfection

⁸⁸ 1 Thessalonians 4:17, ESV.

⁸⁹ Luke 21:25–26.

⁹⁰ Revelation 16:16.

⁹¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3.

⁹² 1 John 3:2.

meets perfection in a wedding unlike any other in all the ages. The wedding gifts include the “the unfading crown of glory”⁹³ No shame will ever attach itself to us again. When he appears in his glory, we will appear in glory with him.⁹⁴

after the second coming

The Bible does not specify how long the battle of Armageddon lasts, nor how long the wedding supper of the Lamb lasts. The duration of these events is not as important as the fact that other events prophesied must take place after them. It is, therefore, appropriate to speak of these next events as taking place after, and as a result of — the second coming.

the destruction of the beast & false prophet

Jesus and his church are not to remain celebrating in the air forever. At some point in time — it does not really matter when — Christ and his glorified bride will descend to earth. Having concluded the celebration of their reunion, they must now conclude the other consequence of the coming of Christ — the judgment of this world. John in Revelation speaks of Christ destroying the beast and false prophet:

“And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who

⁹³ 1 Peter 5:4.

⁹⁴ Colossians 3:4.

was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.”⁹⁵

“This is the second death, the lake of fire.”⁹⁶

John says that these two spirit beings (like Satan) are to be judged. They are the spirit beings who have led humanity in its rebellion against the Lord and his Christ throughout the ages. The beast has led the kings of the earth in rebellion against God’s political rule. The false prophet has masterminded and taught the religions of this world to reject Christ and his gospel.

John sees them suffering torment “for ages and ages.”⁹⁷ Most translations render that phrase “forever and ever” which is not literal, and it does an injustice to something else that John asserts about the lake of fire, namely, that it is the second death. In a logical universe, you cannot have both. Either these spirit beings will suffer eternally, and not die, or they will suffer for ages, and eventually die. John asserts the latter.

The beast and false prophet are eternally put out of commission at this point by having been thrown into the lake of fire. Satan remains, but he will also be rendered useless in the next event as divine history progresses.

the binding of Satan

Satan’s judgment is not immediate destruction. Before he is thrown into the lake of fire, he will be allowed to live to see the undoing of his defilement of planet earth.

And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the

⁹⁵ Revelation 19:20–21, ESV.

⁹⁶ Revelation 20:14.

⁹⁷ Revelation 20:10.

thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.⁹⁸

He will know that redeemed humanity will be undoing the curse that his influence had put on God's creation. He will not be allowed to deceive the nations during this incarceration. He will have no control over the world that he had controlled for ages.

the millennial reign

A separate article will deal with the description of, and an evaluation of the theological debate over the millennium.⁹⁹ Suffice it to say that — in this presentation, a thousand year earthly reign of Christ and his church¹⁰⁰ fits into the overall plan to judge the enemies of Christ, and to redeem his creation, vindicating the dominion over the earth that God originally gave humanity.

the final battle

After Satan is released, he will immediately seek to lead the world in rebellion again:

And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them.¹⁰¹

It is difficult to understand how a rebellion like this can occur after a thousand-year reign of righteousness. Such is the power

⁹⁸ Revelation 20:2–3, ESV.

⁹⁹ see next issue.

¹⁰⁰ Revelation 20:4–6.

¹⁰¹ Revelation 20:7–9, ESV.

that Satan holds over us. But the good news is that this rebellion is put down, and then its instigator is definitively dealt with. His place is in the lake of fire prepared for him and his angels, which is the second death.¹⁰²

the second resurrection

John’s vision of the final events continues with a reference to the sea and death and Hades giving up the dead who are in them.¹⁰³ This second resurrection will involve all those who have died from the beginning of creation — with the exception of those who have already been raised at the παρουσία. Its purpose is to have all those who have ever lived face Christ as their judge.

the great white throne judgment

The purpose for this judgment is to determine two things: the status of all people who have ever lived, and the extent of each unbeliever’s punishment before their destruction. There are only two statuses: saved or unsaved. We will either be in the Lamb’s book of life or not. For those who are not, they will each be judged based on their own works. While their works cannot save them, their works will determine the extent to which they obeyed the light that they had. The punishment will be proportional. Here is another biblical reason to reject the notion that all the lost will be punished perpetually. The sequence is that the lost will be judged “according to what they had done”¹⁰⁴ and then “thrown into the lake of fire”¹⁰⁵ afterward — to be destroyed.

the second death

This lake of fire is the second death, and it will do what the first death did. It will put the lost out of conscious existence. The

¹⁰² Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:14.

¹⁰³ Revelation 20:13.

¹⁰⁴ Revelation 20:13.

¹⁰⁵ Revelation 20:15.

difference is that there will be no resurrection from the second death. In that since, it will be αἰώνιος “*aionios*” — permanent.¹⁰⁶

the new heavens and earth

After finally destroying all traces of unredeemed humanity, the Lord will recreate the universe to make it suitable for the saved. The new Jerusalem that John saw in Revelation 21 is a picture of that new beginning. Just as the old Jerusalem was intended to represent God’s presence on earth, so the new Jerusalem/heaven and earth will be that presence. God will be among and within us. The second advent will then be complete.

THE DESTINIES

By Rev. Jefferson Vann

John

The apostle John had a way of taking ultimate reality and boiling it down to simple statements that captured its essence. For example, he divided the whole of the human race into two categories — two destinies. He said “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”¹⁰⁷ By that he meant that the objective of life today is to gain eternal life in the future, and only those who are in Christ will accomplish that objective. Jesus implied the same thing when he said “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of

¹⁰⁶ see the next article: The Destinies, for more on the meaning of αἰώνιος.

¹⁰⁷ 1 John 5:12, ESV.

Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”¹⁰⁸ He spoke of only two eternal destinies: to perish forever, or to live forever. Those destinies will each begin with a resurrection. Believers will experience a “resurrection of life” but unbelievers will experience a “resurrection of judgment.”¹⁰⁹ That judgment will culminate in the second death.¹¹⁰

Paul

Paul taught that the world has those same two destinies. He said “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”¹¹¹ You will notice that both apostles only refer to believers as having life. They each must have been out of class the day their teacher taught them Platonic dualism and the notion of all human souls being immortal. Paul taught that only God is now immortal,¹¹² and that Jesus brought immortality to light through the gospel.¹¹³ Only those who respond to the gospel and put their faith in Christ will receive immortality, and even then it will only be at the resurrection when Jesus comes.¹¹⁴ In the meantime, people have a choice. They can either live according to the flesh, and earn the judgment of destruction, or live according to the Holy Spirit, and reap the grace of eternal life.¹¹⁵

So, Paul designates two kinds of people. Those who are being saved are contrasted with those who are perishing.¹¹⁶ He presents

¹⁰⁸ John 3:14–16, ESV.

¹⁰⁹ John 5:28–29.

¹¹⁰ Revelation 21:8.

¹¹¹ Romans 6:23, ESV.

¹¹² 1 Timothy 6:16.

¹¹³ 2 Timothy 1:10.

¹¹⁴ Romans 2:7; 1 Corinthians 15:53–54.

¹¹⁵ Galatians 6:8, NIV. The ESV uses the word corruption for the Greek *phthora*, but Peter uses the same term in 2 Peter 2:12, and there the ESV translates it “born to be caught and *destroyed*.”

¹¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15; Philippians 1:27–28.

it this way so that his readers may know that the choices they make today will determine the nature of their eternal destiny. For Paul, there are two main events in history, and we stand between them. The first main event is the cross, where Jesus took on the punishment for all the sins of the world. But for those who regard the message of the cross as foolishness, God will allow them the privilege of paying for their own sins in hell. Those who choose to do so are perishing, even as they live. Their “destiny is destruction.”¹¹⁷ But for those of us who choose to cling to the cross, we are being saved, even as we die.

The author of Hebrews

The author of Hebrews speaks of these two destinies as well. He says that those who have faith “preserve their souls” — a reference to not being eternally lost. But those who “shrink back” and do not have faith will be destroyed.¹¹⁸

Peter

Peter spoke of believers being heirs of the grace of life.¹¹⁹ He said that God has called believers to his own glory and excellence, and his power has granted us all things to pertain to life and godliness.¹²⁰ But the unsaved will be “destroyed in their destruction.”¹²¹ They are being “stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”¹²² Two destinies — count them — two.

Jesus

Jesus had taught those same two destinies. He was even more clear in distinguishing the two. He said that the right choice leads to life,

¹¹⁷ Philippians 3:9, NIV.

¹¹⁸ Hebrews 10:39.

¹¹⁹ 1 Peter 3:7.

¹²⁰ 2 Peter 1:3.

¹²¹ 2 Peter 2:11.

¹²² 2 Peter 3:7, ESV.

but the wrong choice leads to destruction.¹²³ He said that we should fear God, who is able to destroy souls and bodies entirely in hell.¹²⁴ He warned the Jewish leaders who were not tending the Master's vineyard that they would be destroyed when the Master returns.¹²⁵

Jesus never defined salvation as a ticket to a nice place to retire after you die. He defined salvation in reference to destruction in Gehenna hell. That is what people are being saved from. Eternal life in the new heaven and earth is what people are being saved for.

Having determined that the Bible is clear about the ultimate destinies of both the saved and the lost, we can now examine the steps that our Lord will take in bringing about those two destinies.

The Destiny of the Saved

1. A GLORIOUS REUNION

Believers will be reunited with Christ when he returns. Paul taught that the same God who foreknew us in eternity past, also predestined us to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus. The same God who called us and justified us by the death of Jesus, also has glorified us.¹²⁶ For God, it has all been done, since he resides outside time. For us, some of it has been done, and some of it awaits our reunion with Christ, for it to be perfected. We are foreknown and predestined, but we do not yet conform completely to our Savior's likeness. We have been called and justified, but we await the reunion for our glorification.

The reunion will be with Christ, but it will also be a reunion with all those in Christ who have fallen asleep. The Lord will appear, call the believing dead from their graves, and then those in Christ who are alive at that time will join that meeting in the clouds. It is then, and only then, that all believers will be "with the

¹²³ Matthew 7:13–14.

¹²⁴ Matthew 10:28.

¹²⁵ Luke 20:16.

¹²⁶ Romans 8:28-30.

Lord.”¹²⁷ This event is what Paul was referring to when he said he desired to depart and be with Christ.¹²⁸ Being with Christ at the reunion is the best thing that could happen to us today. It is better than any ministry we could have in this life, or any martyrdom we could have in death.

Jesus promised that we would be with him at that reunion. He said he was going to prepare a place for us — but not for us to go to at death. He said “if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”¹²⁹ Jesus is the way to the Father.¹³⁰ No one gets to the Father’s presence until Jesus comes back and takes us. This will happen at the reunion, and not before. Death does not take us into the Father’s presence — Jesus will.

2. A GLORIOUS TRANSFORMATION

At the same moment when we are reunited with our Savior, we will also be changed into his likeness. Our mortality will be replaced by his immortality. Paul puts it this way,

we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory.¹³¹

Some translations add the word “body” to this text, because the translators believe that souls are already immortal, so they think Paul is talking about immortal souls putting on resurrection bod-

¹²⁷ 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18.

¹²⁸ Philippians 1:23.

¹²⁹ John 14:3, ESV.

¹³⁰ John 14:6.

¹³¹ 1 Corinthians 15:51-54, NASB (1995).

ies. But that is not what Paul is talking about. Most of the mortal bodies will have already died. Most of the perishable bodies will have already perished and totally decayed into nothingness. For Paul, the whole being is “this mortal” and “this perishable.” The whole being takes on immortality, never to perish again.

John told his readers that “we are already God’s children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him”¹³² Our transformation will include more than just immortality. It would be a crime to impose immortality on a race of beings who do not have the purity and integrity of Christ.

Plato believed that all souls are given immortality at their creation, and Augustine followed him in that belief. Out of that syncretistic combination of Greek philosophy and Roman Catholic dogma came the terrible doctrine of an unending hell. God is charged with the crime of predestining the vast majority of the souls he created to an eternity of suffering.

The real story of eternity is that God plans it only for those who are transformed by grace to be in the likeness of Christ. As the four spiritual laws put it, God has a wonderful plan for your life. That plan begins to take place the moment of your glorification. Our entire lives are lived in anticipation of that event.

3. A GLORIOUS CELEBRATION

While the battle of Armageddon is raging on this planet, destroying and causing chaos as never imagined before, believers will be safe in the clouds with our Savior. John writes

“Let us be glad and rejoice, and let us give honor to him. For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself. She has been given the finest of pure white linen to wear.” For the fine linen represents the good deeds of God’s holy people. And the angel said to me,

¹³² 1 John 3:2, NLT.

“Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.”¹³³

All the hopes of humanity will come true at this great feast, while all the fears of humanity will come to pass at the battle of Armageddon.

4. A GLORIOUS DOMINION

As strange as it may seem, Christ’s return will not immediately destroy all evil from this planet. It will, however, end all opposition to his rule in the political and religious realms. John describes this reality when he speaks of the beast and false prophet being thrown into the lake of fire.¹³⁴ They will be tormented for their crimes for ages and ages, but will eventually be destroyed, because the lake of fire is the second death (not another form of life). The beast and false prophet are spirit beings, but not immortal beings. They will receive punishment appropriate for their sins, and the sins that they caused the kings and false prophets of the earth to commit. That will take ages and ages, but not forever.

Removing them from the scene will allow Christ’s will to prevail in the political and religious realms. Imagine that — no opposition to Christ’s rule on earth, no deception or rebellion caused by false religion. Christ must reign on the earth “until he has put all his enemies under his feet.”¹³⁵ Those who serve him today will reign with him then.¹³⁶ They will rule as princes and lead people to him as priests. This reign will last for a thousand years.¹³⁷

5. A GLORIOUS VINDICATION

Believers will be absolved of all guilt at the judgment. Although they will be judged according to their works, like all others, they

¹³³ Revelation 19:7–9, NLT.

¹³⁴ Revelation 19:20–21.

¹³⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:25, ESV.

¹³⁶ 2 Timothy 2:12.

¹³⁷ Revelation 20:6. {see chapter 65: The Reign, for more details}.

will be vindicated and declared not guilty due to the finished work of Christ, the Lamb. The book of life lists all these believers in Christ, and is the basis for this vindication.¹³⁸ As a result of this vindication on the Judgment Day, believers will not be destroyed in the lake of fire, but all others will.

6. A GLORIOUS SATISFACTION

Believers will receive rewards for faithful service, for those deeds done out of a Spirit led obedience to Christ and his kingdom. No good work will escape judgment, although some works that we might think are worthy of reward will burn up when evaluated. They will not have proved to be quality work.¹³⁹ Paul's instruction is that believers should be careful to build their works on the proper foundation. Even good works are eternally insignificant if they do not follow Christ's commands, or lead people to the cross of Christ and his grace.

7. A GLORIOUS PERPETUATION

Believers will live and reign eternally in the new heaven and new earth. John envisioned a continuation of the millennial reign that will go on forever and ever, after judgment and the destruction of all evil.¹⁴⁰ This is the ultimate answer to what it means to be saved, and it is the reason that we are saved to begin with. Our loving God wants us to have eternal freedom from sin, eternal sanctification and eternal life.¹⁴¹

The Destiny of the Lost

1. THE LOST WILL SUFFER SHAME AND REJECTION.

The lost will suffer public shame at having their sinful lives

¹³⁸ Revelation 20:11–15.

¹³⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:10–15.

¹⁴⁰ Revelation 22:3–5.

¹⁴¹ Romans 6:22–23.

exposed on the judgment day. Those who have pretended to be believers will be exposed as the imposters they are.¹⁴² Those who have trusted in other ways of salvation will discover that their gamble has not paid off. There was only one way to salvation and they rejected the way and chose the wrong way.¹⁴³ No secrets will remain unannounced.¹⁴⁴

2. THE LOST WILL SUFFER JUST PUNISHMENT FOR THEIR SINS.

Unbelievers will also experience just punishment for every transgression they have committed, whether in word or deed, commission or omission. The nature, severity and duration of that punishment will be determined by God, whose omniscience and righteousness insures that it will be just. God cannot overlook sin that has not been atoned for. Thus this punishment awaits all who are not protected by the blood of Christ. The Bible describes this punishment as trouble and distress,¹⁴⁵ torment,¹⁴⁶ darkness, weeping (out of remorse for losing salvation) and gnashing of teeth (out of anger against God),¹⁴⁷ and being beaten with whips.¹⁴⁸ While some of those images are no doubt symbolic, they describe a future reality that is horrible to imagine. We need to keep these images in mind so that we can pray urgently for our unsaved friends, loved ones and enemies, and seek to win them all to Christ.

3. THE LOST WILL EVENTUALLY SUFFER PERMANENT DEATH.

On the previous two points, all evangelical believers would agree. But some insist that God will not only punish sinners for

¹⁴² Matthew 7:21–23.

¹⁴³ John 14:6.

¹⁴⁴ Luke 12:3.

¹⁴⁵ Romans 2:8–9.

¹⁴⁶ Revelation 14:9–10.

¹⁴⁷ Matthew 25:30.

¹⁴⁸ Luke 12:47–48.

their rejection, but keep on punishing them throughout eternity. Thus they say that not only is God's punishment eternal, but also the act of punishing itself. Many base this belief on the mistaken assumption that human souls are already immortal by nature.

The Bible makes it clear that the punishment received at the judgment is not the last part of the bad news. The wages of sin is not perpetual suffering in hell, it is death.¹⁴⁹ Those who overcome are promised not that they will avoid an eternity in a bad place, but that they will avoid the second death.¹⁵⁰ The unsaved will suffer punishment according to their sins, and then will experience this second death.¹⁵¹ The lake of fire must consume and bring about the second death to all those thrown into it, then it will destroy death and Hades.¹⁵²

Typically, those who favor the view of eternal conscious torment redefine the term *death* as it has to do with the destiny of the lost. Since, in their view, both saved and lost will continue to live eternally, death cannot mean the loss of life. But Jesus' descriptions of the fate of the lost imply loss of existence, not just a conscious painful existence forever.

- He spoke of the house built on the sand collapsing and falling over.¹⁵³ That is the end of the house.
- He spoke of the weeds gathered up and burned with fire.¹⁵⁴ That is the end of the weeds.
- He spoke of the good fish being gathered into containers, but the bad fish are thrown away to rot.¹⁵⁵ No more bad fish.
- He spoke of plants not planted by his Father as being uprooted.¹⁵⁶ An uprooted plant dies.

¹⁴⁹ Romans 6:23.

¹⁵⁰ Revelation 2:11; 20:6.

¹⁵¹ Revelation 21:8.

¹⁵² Revelation 20:14.

¹⁵³ Matthew 7:26–27.

¹⁵⁴ Matthew 13:40.

¹⁵⁵ Matthew 13:47–48.

¹⁵⁶ Matthew 15:13.

- He spoke of branches that do not abide in the vine as being thrown away, drying up, being gathered and cast into the fire.¹⁵⁷ Burning branches burn up.
- He spoke of tenants who reject their master's authority as being destroyed,¹⁵⁸ not just punished.
- He said that the unrepentant will perish like those on whom the tower of Siloam fell.¹⁵⁹ Those unfortunate people didn't just suffer. They died.
- He likened hell to Noah's flood, which destroyed everyone outside the ark.¹⁶⁰
- He said that hell would be like the day Lot went out from Sodom, and all the inhabitants of Sodom were destroyed.¹⁶¹

There are only two eternal destinies: life or death. The saved will be rewarded with permanent life, while the lost will suffer permanent death.

¹⁵⁷ John 15:6.

¹⁵⁸ Luke 20:16.

¹⁵⁹ Luke 13:4–5.

¹⁶⁰ Luke 17:27.

¹⁶¹ Luke 17:29.

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

(Looking ahead to issue XLV/2)

by Rev. Jefferson Vann

- The theme for the Fall 2019 issue will also be Eschatology, looking at the doctrines of the last things.
- If you find anything written on eschatology, feel free to review it, pro, and/or con.
- Letters to the editor are welcomed.
- Reviews of Advent Christian or conditionalist writings are always welcomed.
- Any biblical or theological papers (regardless of topic) are also encouraged.

PLEASE SUBMIT ALL LETTERS, ARTICLES OR REVIEWS
BY EMAIL TO jeffersonvann@yahoo.com AND SPECIFY
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WHICH ARTICLE THE LETTER IS RESPONDING TO.