

ESCHATOLOGY

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COURSE OVERVIEW

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course studies Christian doctrines of the last times, based on biblical prophetic scripture. The course emphasizes essential doctrines such as the return of Christ, the final judgment, and the eternal kingdom of God. The course presents various controversies in eschatology but does not resolve every issue. The course includes study of the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, along with other sections of prophetic scripture.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To read and observe the content of prophetic scripture.
2. To learn the terms and great themes of eschatology.
3. To see the relationship between doctrines of eschatology and other Christian doctrines.
4. To distinguish between essential and debatable doctrines of eschatology.
5. To understand how a Christian can maintain faith in suffering, disaster, and world conditions that seem to contradict faith.
6. To learn to live a Christian life consistent with the message of prophetic scripture.

DIRECTIONS FOR CLASS LEADERS

The lessons have various lengths, and some of them have controversial topics. To cover one lesson in each class session may not always be possible. If a lesson is not finished in a class session, the class leader should be prepared to introduce the lesson again and finish it in the next session.

There are many different opinions about the topics covered in this course. The class leader should realize that it may be impossible to discuss a topic until everyone agrees. When a topic is covered adequately, the group should move on to the next topic. The class leader should not allow students to become angry and accusing in the discussions.

Notes to class leaders are included throughout the course with directions for specific parts of the lessons. *They are italicized.*

Discussion questions and **in-class activities** are indicated by arrow bullet points. For discussion questions, the class leader should ask the question and give students time to discuss the answer. If the same student usually answers first, or if some students do not speak up, the leader can direct the question to someone: “Igor, how would you answer this question?”

Much **scripture** is used in the course. Passages that should be read aloud in class are also indicated by arrow bullet points or **bold type**. At other times, scripture references are given in parentheses in the text. For example: (1 Corinthians 12:15). Those references are support for the statements in the text. It is not necessary to always read the passages in parentheses.

Occasionally there is a block **quote from a theologian**. When the class comes to a block quote, the class leader could ask a student to read and explain the quote. We do not necessarily agree with everything that these theologians taught, but we can learn from them.

Each lesson ends with **assignments**. Assignments should be completed and reported before the next lesson time. If a student does not complete an assignment, he can do it later. However, the leader should encourage students to keep on schedule so that they learn more from the class.

At the beginning of each class session the class leader should collect written assignments from the previous lesson. At times, the leader may ask a few students to share about what they wrote for their assignments.

One of the purposes of the course is to prepare students to become teachers. The class leader should give students opportunities to develop their teaching skills. For example, the class leader should occasionally let a student teach a short section of the lesson to the class.

If the student wants to **earn a certificate from Shepherds Global Classroom**, he should attend the class sessions and complete the assignments. A form is provided at the end of the course for recording the assignments completed.

LESSON 1

THE VALUE OF ESCHATOLOGY

NOTE TO CLASS LEADER

Let various students describe what they hope to learn from a course in eschatology. They could give examples of questions they hope will be answered. You should not try to answer the questions at this time.

WHAT IS ESCHATOLOGY?

The word *eschatology* is from the Greek word *eschatos*, translated “last,” and *logos*, translated “study of.”

Eschatology is a section of theology, usually coming last in a systematic study of theology. Eschatology shows the completion of salvation history, because it shows the restoration of creation from the fall and the completion of the plan of salvation.

Eschatology is the study of final earthly events, the eternal destiny of creation, and the nature of God’s eternal kingdom.

The field of study includes (1) the prophetic parts of the Bible, (2) related theology, (3) relevant historical events, and (4) current international events.

Eschatology helps us understand God’s way of fulfilling his ultimate purpose for his creation.

Christian eschatology is necessary and inevitable because of foundational Christian doctrines. Christians believe that God has absolute power and authority over the universe. They believe that sin exists as rebellion against God. They believe that Christ provided salvation that makes possible the reconciliation of rebels and restoration of fallen creation. They believe that the justice of God cannot tolerate sin forever. These are foundational doctrines. It is therefore necessary that Christianity also explain how Christ will triumph, salvation will be completed, and God’s authority be fully restored. Even without scriptural predictions, Christianity would develop eschatology. The Bible gives us God’s revelation so that we see the essentials of eschatology accurately. The Bible constantly connects eschatological doctrines to doctrines about salvation and Christian living.

- » Four different students should read these scriptures to the group: Jude 14-15, Titus 2:1-13, John 14:1-3, and James 5:7-8. How do each of these passages make a connection between eschatology and Christian living?

The practical usefulness of eschatology is that it teaches the believer to (1) have faith that endures and (2) live a Christian life consistent with an eternal perspective.

- » A student should read Colossians 3:1-6 for the group.

Spiritually we have already been resurrected with Christ. When Christ appears, we will be with him. Because we expect Christ's return we kill sin from our lives and live to please God.

- » What are some reasons that some people don't like to study biblical prophecy?

"The bright hope of living with the Lord forever is a strong incentive for faithful living on the part of Christians and a powerful motivating force for witnessing."

Mendell Taylor

Exploring Evangelism

REASONS SOME PEOPLE DON'T STUDY ESCHATOLOGY

1. They don't understand it.

Biblical prophecy has strange forms of literature, including even visions of animals and strange monsters. These details are not easy to interpret.

Scholars disagree about doctrines of eschatology. This makes many people feel that they cannot know for sure what is right.

However, the essential doctrines of eschatology are clear. Other details are not as clear, but we can understand some of them by applying good principles of Bible interpretation.

2. It scares them.

Many people are disturbed by the biblical descriptions of world-wide disasters and persecution. They worry about the safety of themselves and their children.

However, if these things will happen in the future, a Christian needs to know how to keep his faith during those times.

3. They don't want to risk division.

People often disagree about the interpretation of prophetic scripture. The arguments may cause a break in fellowship. Some Christians choose not to discuss prophecy because they do not want to argue.

However, the essential doctrines of eschatology should be accepted by all Christians. Agreement on less important details should not be required for fellowship.

4. They think it has no practical importance.

It is possible to follow the biblical description of Christian living without understanding much about prophecy. Therefore, some people think that study is not worth the effort, especially since they don't expect to understand it.

However, certain essential doctrines are important for Christian living, such as the doctrine of the final judgment. People who ignore biblical doctrines about the future tend to become too adjusted and invested in the present world.

MISUSE OF PROPHETIC SCRIPTURE

Prophetic scripture is misused if the scholar

- Is diverted from emphasis of central truths
- Becomes pessimistic about what ministry can accomplish
- Doesn't use prophecy for its intended purposes
- Breaks unity with other Christians
- Uses obscure biblical statements to support strange doctrines

Example of Abuse by False Prophecy

The Jehovah's Witnesses predicted the end of the world in 1975. In May, 1974, they printed this:

Reports are being heard of brothers selling their homes and property and planning to spend the rest of their days in this old system in the pioneer service [advertising their religion]. Certainly this is a fine way to spend the short time remaining before the wicked world's end.¹

1 Kingdom Ministry, May, 1974

REASONS TO STUDY BIBLICAL PROPHECY

1. All scripture is profitable (2 Timothy 3:16).
2. A blessing is promised to the readers of Revelation (Revelation 1:3).
3. Jesus preached prophecy (Matthew 24:29-31).
4. Prophecy comforts us about believers who have suffered and died (1 Thessalonians 4:18).
5. Prophecy encourages us to work for God faithfully (1 Corinthians 15:58).
6. Prophecy urges spiritual zeal and carefulness (1 John 3:2-3, Luke 21:34).
7. Prophecy is intended to strengthen our faith for the future (Luke 21:28, 2 Thessalonians 2:2).

LEVELS OF IMPORTANCE

Discussions of prophecy often focus on minor questions instead of major truths. Issues in prophecy are not all equally important. We will not try to cover everything about prophecy in this course.

Sometimes people wonder what the mark of the beast will look like, what country the antichrist will come from, and who the two witnesses will be. These are questions that the Bible does not clearly answer. We may find some evidence in scripture for those details, but arguing about them is not worthwhile.

There are other topics that the Bible explains more. Some examples would be whether Jesus will come back at the beginning, middle, or end of the tribulation, and whether the millennium is a literal thousand years. It is possible to come to a reasonable conclusion, based on Scriptural evidence. However, these doctrines are not essential to the gospel. You should never break fellowship with someone because you disagree with his opinion on one of these questions.

There are some necessary truths in biblical prophecy. These are truths that are so clear that everyone who believes the Bible accepts them. These doctrines affect Christian living and the whole system of Christian doctrine. Examples of these doctrines are the return of Christ, the final judgment, the physical resurrection of all people, and the eternal rule of God.

In this course, we will spend time in scripture, so that scripture can speak for itself. We will emphasize the most important truths of eschatology. We will study some of the evidence for less important doctrines, but will allow the student to come to his own conclusions. It is most

important that the purpose of prophetic scripture be accomplished; that the demonstration of the power and wisdom of God motivate us to trust and obey God.

THE CENTRAL THEMES OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY

Sometimes the study of eschatology becomes very human-centered. Much discussion of eschatology is about the timing of the Lord's return in relation to other events, because we want to know what will happen to us.

Study of eschatology may become earth-focused, as we study the biblical predictions and try to guess what events will happen on earth.

When we study the book of Daniel, we should notice that the emphasis is God's wisdom, power, and eternal kingdom. Daniel is entirely an eschatological book, and its themes are the themes of eschatology. God reveals what will happen. The righteous will understand what is happening, but the wicked will not. God's kingdom will cover the whole earth and last forever. Christ appears in the book of Daniel and is given the kingdom (Daniel 7:13-14).

When we study the book of Revelation, we find the same themes, with more emphasis on Christ. The book is the Revelation of Christ. He is the beginning and the end—the one who began everything and will bring it to its conclusion. He is the Almighty.

The worst sin of the Antichrist is that he demands worship. The great test of believers is to remain true to God. All others worship the Antichrist.

The throne of God is central in Revelation. Things happen on the earth as orders go from God. The entire sequence of events that bring in God's kingdom are symbolized by the seals on God's book, which Jesus opens one by one.

Throughout the book are passages of praise to God for his power, wisdom, and righteousness.

» What primary theme do you see in the book of Revelation?

We do not see clear outlines of future events in order. We do not see many details of events that we can understand for sure. Therefore, to make prophecy into a detailed outline of future events would not be fulfilling its purpose.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

The primary emphasis of a biblical passage or book should guide our use of scripture. We ordinarily should not use scripture passages in a way that the writer did not intend.

We see that the glory of God is the primary concern of eschatology. In a world that seems out of control, God is still sovereign. Though the righteous seem to be losing the battle, God will give ultimate victory. We may not be able to interpret some details ahead of time, but we will recognize their fulfillment and know that God knew them ahead of time. Eschatology constantly points our attention to God.

THE NEED FOR HUMILITY

If a person claims to completely understand all the prophetic scriptures, he claims discernment that has not been given to the church in general for its 2,000 years of history. Such a person should not be trusted. Many people have claimed personal revelation and complete understanding, but their views were never accepted by the church in general. Some people succeeded in attracting a group of followers that resembled a cult. Some people have developed strange doctrines and sometimes taught heresy.

The essential truths of eschatology, such as the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, are essential to Christianity. A person should not claim to be a Christian and to believe the Bible if he does not hold the essential doctrines. However, there are many details that are not as definite, and there are many predictions in scripture that are difficult to understand.

Even the prophet Daniel said, “I heard, but I did not understand” (Daniel 12:8). The angel told him that the words were closed until the time of the end, but at that time the wise would understand (12:9-10). Some predictions will not be understood until the period of time when they will be fulfilled.

John Wesley said of the book of Revelation,

The intermediate parts I did not study at all for many years; as utterly despairing of understanding them, after the fruitless attempts of so many wise and good men....

I by no means pretend to understand or to explain all that is contained in this mysterious book.²

May God help us to study his Word with humility and tolerance of the opinions of others.

THE THESSALONIAN FEAR

- » A student should read 2 Thessalonians 2 for the group. It is not necessary to explain all the details of this passage. We will study it again later. What were the Thessalonian believers worried about? See verse 2.

Verse 2 shows us how eschatology can be misused. Because of the eschatology that some people were teaching, believers were worried and confused.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

We should observe the concern addressed by the writer, especially when it is clearly stated.

- » Look at the conclusion of the passage (verses 15-17). What did the apostle want them to do because of his explanation of eschatology?

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The conclusion of the writer shows his intention for the passage. A conclusion is sometimes signaled by the word *therefore*.

He wanted them to continue to live as Christians, as they had been taught. He wanted them to be strong in faith and comfort, rather than being controlled by fear. He wanted them to continue to accomplish good works, rather than thinking only about survival.

2 John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, "Introduction to Revelation." Available at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/wesleys-explanatory-notes/> November 2, 2020.

A proper use of eschatology will accomplish the same goals that the apostle Paul had.

LESSON 1 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Writing Assignment: Look at the four reasons some people don't like to study prophecy. Imagine that someone tells you, "I don't like to study prophecy because..." (giving one of the four reasons). Write a few sentences explaining to this person why he should not avoid prophecy for that reason.
2. Passage Study: Study 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. Because we expect the return of the Lord and the destruction of the earth, we live holy lives and do not make earthly things our priorities. Write a summary of the message of this passage.

LESSON 2

FULFILLED PROPHECIES AND ISRAEL

NOTE TO CLASS LEADER

You may want to have two or three students share about what they wrote for the Lesson 1 assignments.

As an optional review exercise, you could read some of the scriptures that go with the “Reasons to Study Biblical Prophecy” section (from Lesson 1) and ask the students to give the reason that is based on each scripture. For example, read Revelation 1:3, then ask, “What reason does this give us for studying prophecy?”

This lesson has two parts. The first is about the significance of fulfilled prophecies. The second part describes the history of Israel and prophecies about Israel that many scholars consider important for eschatology.

PART 1: FULFILLED PROPHECY

The Significance of Fulfilled Prophecies

This course is a study of what God’s Word reveals about the future. This lesson will briefly study some fulfilled prophecies because they show how prophecy has been important in the past.

The Bible makes some statements about how we should think about prophecies.

- » A student should read Isaiah 46:9-10, Isaiah 48:3, 5 for the group. What do these passages show us about the importance of fulfilled prophecies?

God shows that he can decide what will happen, and he can make it happen. Fulfilled prophecy shows God’s control.

God sometimes said what he would do before he did it, so that people would know that it happened by his power and not by the power of false gods.

God says that he is the one who knows everything that will happen from the beginning. He also has the power to say what he will do. No other force can prevent God from accomplishing his will.

“God knows all of his own works from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18). From the beginning of time, God knew everything he would ever do. That implies that he knew all things, because he would not have known his own future actions if he had not known all future situations. Nothing ever surprises God. God is never unprepared for anything that happens.

- » A student should read Deuteronomy 18:22 for the group. Why was it necessary for a prophet to be perfectly accurate when he said that he spoke for God? How is that different from preaching and teaching in general?

Because of the complete knowledge and power of God, any prophet who claimed to speak for God had to be completely accurate. That did not mean that the prophet knew everything or that all his opinions were right; but when the prophet said he had a message from God, that message had to be accurate. If a prophet's prediction was wrong, people were not supposed to trust him as a prophet.

- » What if a person makes prophecies that come true, but teaches doctrines that are not true? Should we follow this person?
- » A student should read Deuteronomy 13:1-3 for the group.

Accurate prophecy is not enough to prove that a person is from God.

Prophecy Fulfillments Recorded in Scripture

Note to class leader: If the group needs to save time, it is not necessary to look up the references in this section.

A Failed Prophecy

“The battle of the great day of God Almighty (Revelation 16:14) which will end in A.D. 1914 with the complete overthrow of earth’s present rulership, is already commenced.”

The Time is at Hand
(Jehovah’s Witness publication)



A Failed Prophecy³

3 Image: “Evidently, 2012 is a lie” by Geoff Sloan, retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/g Sloan/5523158255>, used under CC BY 2.0, desaturated and cropped from the original.

The Bible contains the record of the fulfillment of many prophecies. This section gives a few examples.

When the city of Jericho was destroyed, Joshua made a curse that would come on whoever rebuilt the city. He said that the person's youngest son and oldest son would die (Joshua 6:26). The fulfillment of this prophecy is recorded in 1 Kings 16:34.

The army of Judah faced a large army of enemies, but the prophet told them they would not have to fight. Because the king believed the message from God, he sent singers in front of his army to lead them in praise for God. God caused the enemies to begin fighting each other until they were all killed (2 Chronicles 20:14-17, 20-23).

The prophet Elijah predicted details about the death of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 21:19, 23). He said that dogs would lick the blood of Ahab and that dogs would eat Jezebel. The prophecies were fulfilled (1 Kings 22:38 and 2 Kings 9:30-36).

Fulfillments in History

Cyrus of Persia

The empire of Babylon conquered the kingdom of Judah and moved much of the population into another country. The prophet Isaiah predicted that King Cyrus of Persia would release the Jews to return to their country and that he would order the rebuilding of the temple and city (Isaiah 44:28, Isaiah 45:1, 13). Isaiah made this prediction more than 100 years before it was fulfilled. At the time of Isaiah's ministry, Persia was not the dominant empire, and Cyrus had not been born.

The Bible records the fulfillment of this prophecy in Ezra 1:1-8. The Jewish historian Josephus and other Jewish historians wrote about it also. The Greek historian Herodotus gave a description of Cyrus's conquest of Babylon. An ancient Persian historian wrote about Cyrus's decision to send people from many countries back to their homelands. His writing is called the *Cyrus Cylinder*. The *Cylinder* does not mention Jews specifically, but shows that Cyrus set this policy.

Isaiah called Cyrus the "anointed" of God (Isaiah 45:1), but that means that God gave him the power to do the plan of God. It does not mean that Cyrus consciously served God. The *Cyrus Cylinder* says that Cyrus claimed to be blessed by Marduk, a god of Babylon.

God is glorified by the fulfillment of this prophecy, not only because of his knowledge ahead of time, but because he made the heathen king his servant, to fulfill his purposes.

Alexander the Great

The prophet Daniel predicted that a ruler of the Greek empire would conquer the empire of the Medes and Persians, and nobody would defeat him (Daniel 8:3-7, 20-21). At the time of the prediction there was no Greek empire and no powerful Greek kings.

Daniel predicted that the Greek emperor would suddenly “be broken” while he was still strong. He would be replaced by four rulers who were not his descendants (Daniel 8:8, 22, Daniel 11:4).

Alexander the Great fulfilled these prophecies 200 years later. He formed the Greek empire and conquered the Persian empire. When he died at a young age in 323 B.C., the territory was divided by four generals in his army.

God is glorified by the fulfillment of this prophecy because in a world where great powers were in conflict, he knew far in advance what would happen.

The Regathering of Israel

In the Bible, God repeatedly promised that Jews would return to their homeland from the various places they had been scattered. Centuries before it happened, God knew that Israel would again become a nation with a territory. He knew that millions of Jews would return from the nations of the world.⁴

Messianic Prophecies

Some Old Testament prophecies were obviously about the Messiah and were fulfilled by Jesus. The Messiah will be from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10, Hebrews 7:14). The Messiah will come from the family of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1, 10, Luke 3:32). The Messiah will be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2, Matthew 2:1-6).

Some prophecies had special symbolism. For example, a prophet predicted that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem on a donkey. This did not mean only that he would use the means of transportation that was normal at that time. It was customary that a king coming to power peaceably rather than by conquest would enter the capital city on a donkey and be welcomed by the people. That is what was predicted, and it is what Jesus did (Zechariah 9:9, Matthew 21:1-7). The palm branches represented their acceptance of him as Messiah.

Many Old Testament verses describe details that match events in the life of Christ, though they may not have been obvious predictions about the Messiah. Some examples are betrayal by a friend (Psalm 41:9), piercing of hands and feet and gambling for clothing (Psalm 22:16,

4 See Ezekiel 11:17. Additional passages are listed in the section “The Restoration of the Nation of Israel” in “Part 2: Israel” later in this lesson.

18), and thirty pieces of silver paid to a potter (Zechariah 11:12-13). Not every Bible scholar believes that all these specifically refer to Jesus.

In Psalm 16:9-10 the writer says that the body of the “Holy One” will not decay after death. The New Testament interpreted that verse as a prediction of the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:27-32).

Isaiah has four special passages called the “Servant Songs” (Isaiah 42:1-9, Isaiah 49:1-13, Isaiah 50:4-11, and Isaiah 52:13-53:12). Israel as a nation was the servant of God but ultimately failed in its mission. The Servant Songs describe a person who will be the Servant who fulfills God’s purposes. This person will bring God’s kingdom to the whole earth (Isaiah 42:1, 4), bring Israel back to God (Isaiah 49:5), bring salvation to the whole world (Isaiah 49:6), and provide the atonement for sin (Isaiah 52:15, Isaiah 53:10-12). Because of these details, we know that the Servant is the Messiah.

The passages about the Servant predict some details of the life of Jesus. These are details that nobody would have expected of the Messiah. He will not be the agitator of a violent revolution (Isaiah 42:2). He will be rejected by his own nation (Isaiah 49:7). Enemies will strike his back, pull out parts of his beard, and spit on him (Isaiah 50:6). He will be abused and injured severely (Isaiah 52:14). He will be rejected and despised (Isaiah 53:3). He will not argue with his accusers (Isaiah 53:7). He will be killed without proper justice (Isaiah 53:8). He will be buried with the rich though he died with criminals (Isaiah 53:9).

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

The first application of scripture was for the first hearers. Our interpretations and applications of scripture should ordinarily be based on the way scripture was understood by the first hearers. That principle is easiest to apply to the New Testament epistles. Though the time and place were far from us, most of them were addressed to Christian churches. The principle is most difficult to apply to the ancient prophecies. The first hearers could not understand how they would be fulfilled and would not live to see them fulfilled. The prophecies assured the people of the faithfulness of God and gave them hope for the future of their nation. The people were encouraged to stay faithful to God, knowing that his purposes would ultimately be achieved. The Servant passages reveal the loving and serving nature of God, showing that he would forgive the failure of Israel and send the Servant to accomplish their mission so that they could be restored to God's blessing. These prophecies gave them hope though they could not understand exactly how they would be fulfilled.

Zechariah 12:10 is a special verse that is explained only by the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. The speaker of the words is God. He promises to pour out grace on the nation of Israel. They will understand that they have pierced him, and they will grieve because of that fact. They will grieve for him as if he is their only son. How can these things be said about God? When did they pierce God, and how can God be called the son of Israel? The prophecies are fulfilled by Jesus because he is God. Jesus was pierced, and Jesus is the special promised son of the nation of Israel.

Messianic prophecy helps us understand the proper use of prophetic scripture. If a person did not know about the life of Jesus, he would not be able to understand many of the details in the prophecies about Jesus. Apparently the predictions were not given for the purpose of revealing history ahead of time. However, the details are clear enough for us to recognize the events as fulfillments of prophecy. The fulfillments show that God knew everything ahead of time and was in control.

Likewise, scriptural predictions about the last days may not be clear enough for us to write history before it happens. We may not understand many of the details. However, when the events happen we can see that the details of the predictions are fulfilled. The fulfillment of prophecy shows us that God knew what would happen and is in control.

PART 2: ISRAEL

The Restoration of the Nation of Israel

Jews were scattered throughout the world from ancient times. Many never returned from the Assyrian exile (beginning at approximately 740 BC) or the Babylonian exile (beginning at approximately 600 BC).

Other wars and exiles through the centuries caused Jews to be scattered among nations. Many Jews chose to leave their country (Judea) because of difficult conditions.

The Romans gradually took control of Judea. In 135 the Romans responded to a rebellion of the Jews (led by Bar Kokhba) by killing at least a half million people and destroying hundreds of villages completely. Judea ceased to exist as a nation. For centuries, Israel did not exist as a nation with a government and a territory.

The scattering of Jews throughout the world has been called the *Diaspora*, meaning “dispersion.” As early as the first century, the epistle of James in the New Testament was addressed to “the twelve tribes widely scattered.”

Many Jews suffered persecution and genocide, most notably in Germany during World War II. The term *ghetto* originally referred to the area of a city where Jews were required to live, but eventually came to mean a low-class area of a city where people lack opportunity.



The Dome of the Rock

Jews throughout the world consider themselves united by their ethnicity and unique religion. Even after several generations of living in other countries and speaking other languages, millions of Jews have not forgotten that they are Jews and feel a unity with Jews everywhere.

Jews considered their original territory to be home. It was the land that God gave them after he delivered them from slavery in Egypt. It is the land that God promised to Abraham, the ancestor of the Jews. Certain Jewish prayers ended with the phrase “next year in Jerusalem,” expressing a hope of returning, though most Jews using the prayer had been born elsewhere.

The Bible contains prophecies of a return of Jews from all nations of the world back to their homeland. For centuries, people did not understand these prophecies, because a nation of Israel did not exist as a place on the earth.

Prophecies of the return of the Jews include Isaiah 11:11-12, Jeremiah 16:14-15, Jeremiah 23:3, 8, Jeremiah 31:8, Jeremiah 32:37, Ezekiel 11:17, Ezekiel 36:24, and Zechariah 10:8-10.

At around 1900 many Jews began talking about establishing a national territory for a home for the Jews. They believed that Jews were not well accepted throughout the world and needed their own nation. The movement was called Zionism. The word *Zion* is a name for Jerusalem.

The government of Great Britain issued the “Balfour Declaration” in 1917, stating that they believed that the Jews should have an independent nation. The British government controlled much of the Middle East after World War II, because the governments of the nations in the area were unstable. The period of this rule is called the “British Mandate.” Eventually Egypt, Jordan, and other nations in the Middle East became independent of Britain.

During the period of the British Mandate, thousands of Jews moved back to the original land of Israel, though it was not an independent nation yet. By 1948, 650,000 Jews were living in the territory of Israel. The Arab nations in the region strongly opposed the presence of the Jews and did not approve of the establishment of a nation of Israel. War between Jews and various Arab groups went on for several years.

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations ruled that the territory governed by Great Britain would be divided into a nation for Jews and a nation for Arabs. The Arab nations in the area were angry at this decision, because they did not want a nation of Jews. War intensified, with thousands of casualties in a few months.

The British Mandate was scheduled to end on May 14, 1948. That meant that the British army would no longer control the area or restrain the groups who were in conflict. Arab leaders said that they would destroy the Jewish nation as soon as the British left. Jewish leaders worked to manufacture weapons, bring in weapons from other countries, and train soldiers to prepare for defense.

Israel declared itself an independent nation on May 14, 1948, on the last day of the British Mandate. Armies from several Arab nations surrounding Israel attacked the new nation on May 15, the nation’s first day of existence. The war lasted for ten months. During the war Jews continued to immigrate to Israel at the rate of 10,000 per month. At the end of the war, Israel held the territory that had been given to them and also much of the territory that had been given for an Arab nation.

The

“Tens of thousands of engineers and academics, along with thousands of scientists, artists and musicians, constitute unique ‘human capital’—educated, professional and dedicated—with an inestimable capacity for advancing the economy, the store of technological knowledge and creative culture in Israel.”

Israeli Website

www.moia.gov.il

Continued Return of Jews to Israel

From the time of its new beginning as a nation in 1948, Israel has invited Jews around the world to return. They call the return to Israel *Aliya*, a Hebrew word that means “ascent.” Jews in ancient times used the word to refer to going to Jerusalem, as in the phrase “going up to Jerusalem.”

For Jews who desire to return to Israel, the nation offers to pay their rent for a year, provides classes in the language of Hebrew, gives loans and training for those who want to start businesses, and pays back some of the salaries for the jobs that they left. Extra incentives are offered to scientists and researchers who move to Israel. Compensation is offered to Jews who have suffered because of being Jews in other nations.

These incentives have helped increase the population of the nation. The nation had a population of 650,000 in 1948 and 8.6 million in 2016.

The Temple in Jerusalem

King Solomon of Israel built the original temple in Jerusalem. It stood for 400 years and was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The second temple was built by Zerubbabel after the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. It stood for 580 years and was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. In place of the Jewish temple, the Romans built a temple for the god Jupiter.

Today on the temple mountain in Jerusalem is a Moslem mosque called “The Dome of the Rock.”⁵

Some scholars believe that for biblical prophecies to be literally fulfilled, a new temple must be built and sacrifices resumed.

The temple mountain is a holy place for Jews, not only because the temple was there but because they believe it was the place where Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac. The temple site is also a holy place for Moslems, and they would not willingly agree for the mosque to be removed so that a Jewish temple could be put in its place.

A temple in Jerusalem is mentioned in prophecies of the last days. Jesus implied that the prophecy of Daniel, that someone would demand worship in the temple, was still future (Matthew 24:15-16).

The apostle Paul referred to a person that will come before the coming of the Lord and will claim to be God and expect worship in the temple (2 Thessalonians 2:1-9). He will perform miracles that will deceive the world. He will be destroyed at the return of Christ.

5 Image by Stacey Franco on Unsplash, retrieved from <https://unsplash.com/photos/ex9KQrN1mj0>.

Prophecy scholars who believe in a literal Antichrist believe that somehow a temple will be built.

The Salvation of Israel

Hebrews 8:10-11 predicts a time when no evangelism among Jews will be needed because all of them will know God.

Revelation 7:4-8 describes 144,000 Jews with the seal of God. Verse 9 describes an innumerable crowd from all nations in heaven. It is debatable what aspects of this description of the 144,000 are literal, but apparently they represent redeemed Israel, because the people saved from all other nations are mentioned separately.

Romans 11 explains the relationship between the Jews and the gospel message. Some of them are saved (11:4-5). Any Jews who believe the gospel will be saved (11:23). God rejects the nation but will receive it again in the future (11:12, 15). The nation will come back to God: 11:26-29 says, “All Israel shall be saved” and says that God’s covenant with them will be fulfilled. That does not mean that every Jew will be converted, but that the nation as a whole will accept Jesus.

LESSON 2 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Writing Assignment: Imagine that a friend tells you that he has found an exciting new church where people make many prophecies. Write several paragraphs explaining what counsel you would give your friend.
2. Passage Study: Study the Servant passages in Isaiah and prepare a Bible study that you could teach to a group.

LESSON 3

INTRODUCTION TO APOCALYPTIC SCRIPTURE

NOTE TO CLASS LEADER

Ask several students to share what they wrote about the counsel they would give to a person who is excited about a new church that makes many prophecies.

THE APOCALYPTIC LITERARY FORM

Apocalypse is a literary form. It was used for some parts of the Bible but also for some other writings.

The writer says that he received the message in a vision or dream. It is highly symbolic. It often uses animals or strange, monstrous creatures as symbols. Rather than describing events in a chronological order, its pattern may be cycles of repeated parallels that add different details.

The writing usually deals with the problem of keeping faith in spite of the evil and injustice in the present world. It describes a universal battle with intense warfare.

Apocalyptic writings in the Bible show the ultimate triumph of God, who punishes evil and rewards the good. The focus is the sovereign God who comes to the aid of his people.

Apocalyptic scriptures include Daniel, Zechariah, Joel, Revelation, and passages from other books of the Bible.

“World history is moving toward a cataclysmic struggle out of which will come a cosmic transformation—a new heaven and a new earth.”

Thomas Oden

Life in the Spirit

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

Details should be understood literally unless it is obvious that the writer intended the description to be figurative. An example would be the animals and monsters in the visions of Daniel.

» Have students read the following scriptures.

- Examples of animal symbols: Daniel 7:3-7, Revelation 12:3, Revelation 16:13, and Zechariah 6:1-3.
- Examples of passages that describe a great, final battle: Joel 2:9-11, Revelation 19:11-21, and Revelation 20:7-9.
- Examples of passages that teach the final victory and eternal kingdom of God: Daniel 7:14, 27 and Zechariah 14:9.

Other sections of scripture may be considered apocalyptic writing because they speak of God's sudden intervention, when he judges the evil powers and delivers the righteous. These scriptures do not all have the other characteristics of apocalyptic writing, such as visions or animal symbols. (Examples are Ezekiel 37-39, Isaiah 24-27, Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, 2 Thessalonians 2, and 2 Peter 3.)

THE DAY OF THE LORD

» Students should look up the bold references in this section and read the verses.

A scriptural term for the time of God's final intervention is *day of the Lord*. Some of the Old Testament passages describe the day of the Lord as the time when Gentile nations are punished for their treatment of Israel.⁶ Many Jews assumed that as Jews they had nothing to fear from the judgment of God. The prophets tried to show them that they would also be judged if they were sinners (**Zephaniah 1:12**, Amos 5:18-27), and would not be spared simply because they were Jews.

In the book of Romans, Paul referred to the "day of wrath" (Romans 2:5), and to the "day when God shall judge" (Romans 2:16). These references follow from his theme in Romans 1:16-18 that the gospel is salvation from the wrath of God.

6 Some examples are Zechariah 12 and Joel 3.

The “day of the Lord” does not necessarily mean a literal, single day; the events described might last for more than one day. The emphasis is that it is “his Day;” earthly powers have defied him, but now it is God’s time to take charge.

The prophecies of the “day of the Lord” may not refer only to one time at the very end. For example, Joel predicted a foreign army sent by God to punish Israel (**Joel 2:1, 11, 20**). If the people repented, God would deliver them (**2:18-20**). This could be an example of a prophecy that had a fulfillment in history, yet also has an ultimate fulfillment at the end of time. The apostle Peter quoted prophecy from the book of Joel as if it were yet to be fulfilled (**Acts 2:16-21**).

Passages that describe the day of the Lord include Joel 2:10,11, 28-32 (quoted by Peter), Joel 3:14-15, Isaiah 13:9-11, Isaiah 24:19-23, Zephaniah 1:14-18, and 2 Peter 3:10-13.

Some passages describe sinners hiding from God and the nations expecting judgment, such as **Isaiah 2:10-19** and **Revelation 6:15-17**.

Some passages that mention the day of the Lord describe nations gathered for battle at the time when God comes, such as **Zechariah 14:1-2**.

There are many other passages that do not mention the “day of the Lord” specifically, but describe an event with some of the same details. For example, some of them describe heavenly signs occurring at the coming of the Lord similar to those described in the passages that refer to the “day of the Lord.” Examples include Matthew 24:29-30, **Mark 13:24-26**, and Luke 21:25-28.

“These meditations [on eschatology] will assist us to abstain from sin, and to wean our affections from earthly things; they will console us for the absence or loss of worldly goods, incite us to keep our souls and bodies pure, to live to God and eternity, and so attain everlasting salvation.”

*Longer Catechism of the
Eastern Orthodox Church*

IMPLICATIONS OF APOCALYPTIC SCRIPTURE

Some Bible scholars believe that most of the apocalyptic scriptures have been fulfilled already. They believe that the world will gradually become Christian by the successful spread of the gospel. However, some of the passages describe the kingdoms of the world being taken over by God (for example, Daniel 7:14, 27). Today many nations of the world still persecute Christians. We can say that God is sovereign over everything, but those nations are still in rebellion against God, which means those passages are not yet fulfilled.

- » A student should read Romans 9:28 for the group. What does it mean that God will accomplish something quickly on the earth?

Apocalyptic scriptures emphasize that the world will be permanently changed by the sudden intervention of God. They do not describe a gradual change of society.

Christians should be the salt and light in every society where they live. They should work to change their environment to be what pleases God. Nations have been changed and shaped by the progress of the gospel. However, scripture implies that until God's final intervention there will be evil human powers that continue to rebel against God.

Christian institutions accomplish much for the spread of the gospel, the establishment of churches, and the relief of all kinds of suffering. Nations have been changed and shaped by Christian influences. Therefore, Christians should work to establish churches and institutions that have long-term effects. However, we look for the return of Christ to bring the kingdom of God in its fullness.

Believers should patiently endure by faith that obeys God in all circumstances. Faith sees that in the end obedience is worthwhile, though it may bring suffering now. Complete, present understanding of why things happen is not necessary.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:12-15

The context of this passage is about the work of the ministry. In the earlier verses of the chapter, the apostle said that people in ministry have various responsibilities and God will reward them for their work. The church is like a farm or a building where we work (verse 9).

All ministry should build the church. The foundation is Christ, and ministers build a structure on the foundation. Some of them do work with good quality, and God will reward their work. Others do work that does not build anything well, and God will not reward that work.

Paul's point was that ministers should work faithfully and strategically to build the church, looking forward to a reward from God.

EXPECTING PREDICTED EVENTS

Apocalyptic scripture is prophetic, and often predicts specific events. We don't always know what specific events we should expect as the fulfillments of those prophecies. Some may have already been fulfilled; some fulfillments are still future.

It is not necessary for us to determine exactly what is predicted. The primary purpose of prophecy is not simply for us to be able to write history before it happens. The purpose of prophecy is to demonstrate God's sovereignty and faithfulness so that the hearer is motivated to trust and obey God. Full understanding of the details is not necessary.

Much prophecy was originally preached to people who would not see the predictions fulfilled, because the fulfillments were far in the future. Yet the purpose of the preaching was to motivate the hearers to trust and obey God. Likewise, today, whether the fulfillment of a prophecy is past or future, and though we may not understand all of the details, it is a demonstration of God's power and faithfulness that should encourage us to trust God.

We have a practical approach to interpreting prophetic scripture. Scholars may disagree on what specific event is predicted. Does that mean that the passage of scripture fails to communicate God's message? No. Even if we disagree on the details of the prediction, we can see the demonstration of God's power.

PAUL'S ESCHATOLOGICAL MESSAGE TO THE THESSALONIANS

» The group should look at 2 Thessalonians 1:6-12 together.

2 Thessalonians 2 is also eschatological, but we will study it in a different lesson.

This passage describes the return of the Lord as the time when sinners are punished with destruction and believers receive relief from suffering. The glory of God is the focus—notice the references to God and Christ throughout the passage.

Verses 11-12 begin with “wherefore,” giving the application of this eschatological passage. We should pray that God will be glorified by his work in our lives in the world. A right application of eschatology will cause us to live as better Christians, honoring God and blessing those around us.

LESSON 3 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Writing Assignment: How does apocalyptic scripture affect the way you view your ministry, your church, and any other Christian institution you support? Write a page (450 words) about what these should expect to accomplish in the world before the return of Jesus.
2. Passage Study: Study 2 Peter 3:1-14. The apostle describes the coming day of the Lord. His application to Christian living begins with the word *therefore*. Write an explanation of the message of this passage.

LESSON 4

THE GREAT THEMES OF ESCHATOLOGY

NOTE TO CLASS LEADER

You may want to have two or three students share about what they wrote for the Lesson 3 assignments.

In this lesson, many scripture references are provided in the footnotes in case they are wanted for further study. The class should look up the bolded references in the lesson.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions of prophecy often focus on minor questions instead of the major truths. Topics in prophecy are not all equally important.

There are some necessary truths in biblical prophecy. These doctrines affect Christian living and the whole system of Christian doctrine.

The ancient Christian creeds did not try to include all Christian doctrines, but only to state doctrines essential to the Christian faith. They do not say much about eschatology, but their statements are important.

The Apostles' Creed was written early in the second century to state the essential doctrines of the apostles. This creed includes this statement about Jesus: "[He] sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and dead."

The Nicene Creed was established at a church council in A.D. 325. The council intended to state what all Christians believe. The creed says of Jesus, "[He] shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead: whose kingdom shall have no end." Further on, "I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

In this course we will study many scripture passages and many details of eschatology, but in this lesson we will emphasize four important truths:

- The physical return of Jesus
- The bodily resurrection of all people
- The judgment
- God's eternal kingdom

These truths are foundational to eschatology.

THE PHYSICAL RETURN OF JESUS

Jesus will return visibly to this earth. Though he is spiritually present with believers on the earth now, he will return in his glorified, risen form in the sight of all the earth (**Revelation 1:7**).

» What are some things that will happen when Jesus returns?

The return of Christ will be the climax of earthly history. The kingdoms of the world will become the kingdoms of Christ. Those who have been faithful to him will be rewarded and honored. Those who have been in rebellion against him will be put down, and he will have power that will overcome all opposition (**Matthew 26:64**). Every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.⁷

Christians who have died will be resurrected to rule with Christ.⁸ They and the living believers will rise to meet the Lord when he appears.⁹

His return is the blessed hope of all Christians (**Titus 2:13**). Think of all that his return means to us: the end of persecution, suffering, and sorrow; reunion with saints and Christian loved ones; proof that our faith has not been in vain; the sight of Jesus himself; and entrance into heaven and the fullness of eternal life with God. None of these things depend on the time of his return, but simply on the fact that he will return as he promised.

Jesus said that he would return with power and glory.¹⁰ He promised to come and take his people to live with him.¹¹ The angels said that he would return in the same way that he had gone up into heaven.¹² The apostles preached repentance while waiting for Christ to return to establish God's ultimate plan for this world (**Acts 3:19-21**). That Jesus will return to this earth again in power and glory is one of the most taught truths in the New Testament.¹³

7 Philippians 2:10

8 2 Timothy 2:12

9 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

10 Matthew 24:30

11 John 14:3

12 Acts 1:11

13 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16; 2 Thessalonians 1:7, 10; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:28; James 5:7-8; 1 Peter 1:7, 13; 2 Peter 1:16; 2 Peter 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28

Though there are signs that will precede the second coming, we cannot know exactly when he will return. It is good for believers to always anticipate Jesus' coming and to live accordingly (**Mark 13:33-37**).

» Why is Jesus coming back?

We live in a world where most people are in rebellion against God. The whole creation suffers from the curse of sin. The world will never be made better by political action, social reform, improved education, or prosperous economies. Neither will the world's improvement occur gradually. Jesus will suddenly enter his creation as the returning king to set it right.

All people are sinners, but if they willingly join God's kingdom now, they can escape the coming judgment. God's kingdom is functioning already among those who repent and believe.¹⁴ That kingdom will come fully and openly at the return of Jesus.

» How should we live because we know Jesus is coming back?

"The glory of Christianity, as over against the ethnic religions, is nowhere more manifest than in its eschatology."

H. Orton Wiley

Christian Theology

We must remember the priorities that early Christians had. We are called to keep our faith and "endure to the end." We are warned not to let pleasures and the things of the world make us forget about the coming.¹⁵ We live according to eternal values since the things of this world will pass away. We are told to "watch," not gazing at the sky for his appearance, but staying on guard spiritually so that his coming will not catch us unprepared.¹⁶ We pray for purity and live a pure life because we want to be like him.¹⁷

Those who live today as though he is not coming will not be ready for his return.¹⁸ Jesus' coming will be like lightning,¹⁹ so sudden that nobody will have time to change anything after he appears.

We wait for his coming (1) by keeping eternal priorities, (2) living in purity, and (3) guarding ourselves spiritually by prayer.

14 Mark 1:14-15, Mark 9:1

15 Luke 21:34-36

16 Mark 13:33-37. The Greek term used for "watch" does not refer to looking for something but to staying on guard.

17 1 John 3:3

18 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 shows that those who are in darkness, living for this world, will be the ones shocked by the return of the Lord. For us, he will not return as a thief.

19 Matthew 24:27, 1 Corinthians 15:52

THE BODILY RESURRECTION OF ALL PEOPLE

All people will be physically resurrected from the dead.

We know that the body has eternal value because the Bible teaches the resurrection of all people.

The doctrine of the resurrection is necessary.²⁰ The apostle Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 15 that to deny the resurrection would be to deny the gospel. If there is no resurrection, then Jesus could not have been raised.²¹ If Jesus did not rise from the dead, the gospel cannot be true, and nobody is really saved.²²

- » Look at 1 Corinthians 15:19 together. What did Paul mean when he said without the resurrection believers are the most miserable people?

Every person will be resurrected, but not all people at the same time. At the return of Jesus, he will take up all Christians, resurrecting those who have died.²³

Those who died in their sins are not accepted for the first resurrection. They are raised at a later time for judgment.²⁴

Christians will be raised in glorified bodies like Jesus.²⁵ Sinners will be raised in some other form for eternal punishment.²⁶

- » If you did not believe that the body will be resurrected, what difference would that make for you?

The belief that we will someday be resurrected affects our lifestyle. We can see the practical effects of the doctrine by looking at the examples of people who deny it. Some people in the Corinthian congregation denied that the human body will be resurrected. Those who believed this error divided into two extreme positions. Some said, “Since the body will not be raised, the spirit is all that matters. That means that the sins we commit with the body are

20 This is shown by the fact that Paul wrote a passage of 58 verses (all of 1 Corinthians 15) defending the doctrine of the resurrection.

21 1 Corinthians 15:3

22 1 Corinthians 15:17

23 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, Revelation 20:6

24 Revelation 20:13

25 1 John 3:2

26 John 5:28-29

not serious. We can even commit fornication, because the body is going to be discarded anyway.”²⁷

Others said something like, “Since the body will not be raised, it must be worthless and evil. We should suppress all bodily desires, not eating anything that tastes pleasant or enjoying marriage.”

Both these errors came from denying the resurrection. The Christian doctrine of the resurrection puts value on the body. Value is shown in that the Christians’ bodies are redeemed, are temples of the Holy Spirit, are members of Christ, and will be resurrected and glorified (1 Corinthians 6:14, 15, 19, 20).

The doctrine of the resurrection is necessary because it means (1) that Jesus rose from the dead, (2) all people will be raised, (3) the body has eternal value, and (4) the gospel is true.

**The resurrection is
“an act of the almighty
power of God, by which
all bodies of dead men,
being reunited to their
souls, shall return to life,
and shall thenceforth be
spiritual and immortal.”**

*Longer Catechism of the
Eastern Orthodox Church*

THE JUDGMENT

Every person will be judged by Jesus.

- » Look at 2 Corinthians 5:10-11 together. What do these verses tell us about the future? How should we use the fact of the judgment in evangelism?

The judgment is truly the end for those whose names are not in the Book of Life. It is not the end of their existence, but it is the end of their making choices. The eternity that follows will be unending consequences of decisions that can never be reversed.

The judgment gives our choices significance beyond their immediate results. Some people think that as long as they can control the results of their actions, there is nothing else to worry about. They want to believe that their sin is not evil if it doesn’t really do any harm. In reality, all sin does harm; but even if it didn’t, it is serious because of the judgment. God’s Word says that people will be judged for their works (2 Corinthians 5:10, Romans 2:6-11).

27 See 1 Corinthians 6:13-14, where some seemed to have a slogan, “Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods,” meaning that the body is for nothing but indulgence of desires. The apostle said, “But God will destroy both it and them,” speaking of judgment for the misuse of the body. He went on to say, “The body is for the Lord.... And God both raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.”

At the judgment some will be sent to eternal punishment and others to eternal reward. Scripture describes one scene of judgment for sinners who are resurrected to face condemnation for their sinful works.²⁸ There is another judgment for Christians, where they will be rewarded for those works that had worthwhile, lasting results (**1 Corinthians 3:14-15**).

The fact that the judgment will happen tells us that someday sin will be ended. It is hard to imagine a world with no sin, but someday all rebellion against God will be ended.

God does not intend that we live in constant fear and that fear be our motive for living right. However, consciousness of the judgment ahead gives us a sense of accountability that guides our lives.

We must know about the judgment to understand (1) the significance of sin, (2) our accountability to God, (3) the importance of our choices, and (4) the end of all sin.

ERROR TO AVOID: EARTHLY FOCUS

There is a human tendency to live as though earthly life goes on forever. We try to improve our conditions, and solve our problems, and create an environment that makes us content. We need to be like Abraham who was expecting an eternal home while he lived in tents and moved often (Hebrews 11:8-10, 14-16). We need to remember that the things we build, the things we have, and conditions that we create are all temporary. We should work for the things that have eternal value.

GOD'S ETERNAL KINGDOM

God's rule of the universe is eternal and will someday be without resistance.

» The group should look at Philippians 2:10-11 together.

According to these verses, a time will come when all resistance to God and rejection of Christ will end.

According to some philosophies and religions, time goes on forever in cycles, with no beginning or end, and no events that make permanent changes.

28 See Revelation 20:11-15.

But according to the Bible, time has a beginning and a series of events progressing to a conclusion. The Bible describes creation, then the tragic fall of man, then the plan of salvation that God is working out through the centuries of human history.

In Genesis we find the beginning of sin. In Revelation sin is absolutely excluded from God's eternal city.²⁹ In Genesis we see the loss of the tree of life and the sentence of death. In Revelation we see restoration of the tree of life, names in the Book of Life, and invitation to a river of the water of life.³⁰

We know that there is one event that will come at the end of the schedule that God has revealed to us. This event will launch the universe into the eternity that God has planned. It will be the coming of God's complete and eternal kingdom.³¹

God has always been the ruler of his universe,³² but since the fall of man, most of humanity has been in rebellion against God's kingdom. That is going to come to a sudden end, and God will rule eternally without a rival. The world will be perfectly as God wants it, just as heaven is.

LIVING NOW FOR ETERNITY

- » The group should look at Philippians 3:7-16 together.

The apostle said that he is pressing forward with a single motive, and he calls on others who have this "perfect" motive to do the same. It is possible for a person to be perfect in the sense that he is completely devoted to God and refusing to let anything influence him to displease God. He said he does not yet have the perfection that will come at the resurrection, but he is motivated to do his best now so he can experience resurrection perfection in the future. So there is a perfection believers should have now, and another perfection we should expect at the resurrection.

- » The group should look at Philippians 3:17-21 together.

People of the world follow their own desires, focused on earthly things. A person who expects heaven lives by completely different priorities and follows different desires. We are guided by our expectation of the return of Jesus and the transformation of our bodies.

29 Revelation 21:27

30 Revelation 22:1, 2, 19

31 Revelation 11:15, Romans 14:11, Philippians 2:10, Revelation 22:5

32 Genesis 18:25

LESSON 4 ASSIGNMENTS

1. **Writing Assignment:** Write one sentence for each of the four great truths explained in this lesson, stating each. Then write a paragraph for each truth, explaining how it makes a difference for your philosophy of life. To gather ideas for this assignment, you could talk to several people, asking them what difference those truths make for them.
2. **Reading Assignment:** Before the next class session, carefully read Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21.

LESSON 5

THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

JESUS AND ESCHATOLOGY

During Jesus' ministry, his disciples did not understand many things. They did not understand about his coming death and resurrection. Even after Jesus' resurrection, they did not yet understand God's plan for Israel or how God's kingdom would come completely.

After the resurrection, the disciples asked Jesus if he would immediately restore the kingdom of Israel. The question shows that they did not yet understand God's plan for the church and kingdom. Jesus did not try to explain everything to his disciples, but he told them that God had not chosen to reveal to them the times when things would happen (Acts 1:7).

- » How does the question of the disciples show that they did not understand God's plan for the church and his kingdom?

Jesus did teach about eschatology. The disciples needed to understand certain things. Similarly, the apostle Paul said that believers were not in darkness and would not be surprised by the return of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:4).

“To preach the gospel and to bear witness of Christ is the supreme duty of the Church in this age, over against which idle and curious questions were regarded by our Lord as of little importance (Acts 1:7-8).”

H. Orton Wiley

Christian Theology

The Olivet Discourse is in three passages in the gospels: Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, and Luke 21. This is the longest passage of the teachings of Jesus on eschatology. The passages are very similar, but do not have all the same details.

In this passage, Jesus described events chronologically. He used terms like *then* and *after this*. This passage gives us more events of the last days in chronological order than any other passage of scripture.

In Matthew, the chronological series of events ends with 24:31. In the rest of chapter 24 and 25, Jesus gave several stories that each (1) illustrate a truth about the last days and (2) tell

us how we should live because of that truth. This message from Jesus gives us the perfect example of applying eschatology to practical living.

- » For each of the sections of the Olivet Discourse, a student should read the passage from one of the gospels for the group.

The Question

- » Have a student read one of the following for the class: Matthew 24:1-3, Mark 13:1-4, or Luke 21:5-7

Jesus told the disciples that the temple would be destroyed. This prediction made them think of many questions about the future. They asked about the time of the destruction of the temple, the return of Jesus, and the end of the age. Jesus had previously predicted the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37-38).

The disciples knew that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple would mean the end of everything that seemed normal to them. It would be the end of an age, and the beginning of a different world. They probably assumed that Jesus' return would be at the same time, and that God's kingdom would be fulfilled at that time.

The Tribulation Period

- » Have a student read one of the following for the class: Matthew 24:4-14, Mark 13:5-13, or Luke 21:8-19

Characteristics of the tribulation period are false christs, wars, all kinds of suffering, earthquakes, and persecution. The gospel will reach all parts of the world before the end comes.

- » What is the significance of the statement about the person who "endures until the end"?

Jesus told his disciples that they must endure and keep their faith. The person who does not lose his faith will be saved.

The Abomination of Desolation

- » Have a student read one of the following for the class: Matthew 24:15-22, Mark 13:14-20, or Luke 21:20-24

Aspects of this event include placement of an abomination in the temple, the destruction of Jerusalem by armies, and the beginning of the worst suffering ever.

Jesus referred to the prophecy of Daniel (Daniel 9:27, Daniel 12:11). Many details of Daniel's prophecy were fulfilled by the Greek king Antiochus, who put an idol in the temple (168 B.C.) and had a war with the Jews. He lived long before Jesus, but Jesus said that fulfillment of the prophecy was yet future.

Some scholars believe that Jesus' prediction was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The temple was destroyed, and bricks were pried apart. Thousands of Jews suffered and died. After a later battle, Jerusalem was destroyed as a city, and Israel no longer existed as a nation for centuries. Some scholars believe that this was the beginning of the "times of the Gentiles."

The angel that spoke to the prophet Daniel told him that the prophecies were sealed until the time of the end (Daniel 12:4, 9). Chapter 12 includes references to the worst tribulation ever, deliverance of those who are "written in the book," resurrection of the dead, the wise shining as stars forever, and the abomination temporarily placed in the temple. These references seem to mean the last days, not events already fulfilled in history.

It seems that there is an ultimate fulfillment of the passage yet in the future, because the passage ends with the return of Jesus and the gathering of believers by the angels. Some scholars believe that the ultimate fulfillment of the prediction of the abomination will be done by the Antichrist in the last days.

False Christs

- » Have a student read one of the following for the class: Matthew 24:23-26 or Mark 13:21-23

Jesus warned his disciples that they should not believe in a secret Christ. People will claim that Christ has come and is known only by a few. Christians should remember that there will be no secret coming of Christ, because he said he will come openly in the sky with the angels.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

We should watch for the points made by comparisons and contrasts. In this passage is a contrast between the false christs who gradually become known and Jesus who will come in full view of the world. Because of the contrast, we know that Jesus' return will not be anything like religious leaders who gradually attract followers.

- » What was the purpose of Jesus' warning about a secret Christ?

The Return of Christ and Gathering of Believers

- » Have a student read one of the following for the class: Matthew 24:27-31, Mark 13:24-27, or Luke 21:25-28

Jesus will come at the end of the tribulation that is described in this passage. The return of Jesus will be visible to the whole world. The sun, moon, and stars will be darkened, which is a sign the Bible often associates with the day of the Lord.³³ The angels gather believers from all over the world.

“Let no one, therefore, look for the Lord to come from earth, but out of Heaven.”

John of Damascus

The Illustration of the Fig Tree

- » Have a student read one of the following for the class: Matthew 24:32-35, Mark 13:28-31, or Luke 21:29-33

Jesus said that when these events begin, the period of time will not be long for all of them to happen. The fig tree illustrates this fact, because leaves are a sign that summer is coming soon.

Some scholars believe that the fig tree represents Israel (also in Luke 13:6-9 and Mark 11:12-14, 20). They believe that the blossoming of the fig tree symbolized the restoration of the nation of Israel in 1948. They believe that the events of the Olivet Discourse will be fulfilled before everyone dies who was alive in 1948.

A simpler interpretation is that just as the fig leaves show that summer is coming soon, the first events of this passage show that everything else will happen soon. Jesus' words, “When you see these things happen,” do not sound as if he were speaking of one specific event.

Exhortation to Careful Living

- » Students should read all three of these passages for the class: Matthew 24:36-51, Mark 13:32-37, and Luke 21:34-36

This passage is the conclusion of Jesus' message on eschatology. He told his disciples how they should live because of the predictions of the future. This is a model for application of eschatology, and we should never live contrary to what he said.

33 The day of the Lord is studied in Lesson 3.

Jesus told his disciples that they should always remember that he is returning, and that realization should guide their lives. He warned them not to follow the lifestyle of the people of the world who live like there will never be a judgment.

He did not tell them to be watching for his return, but to be on guard spiritually so they would be ready for his return. He did not say that he might come at any time, but that they could not know the time, and that he would come suddenly.

Many generations have passed since Jesus spoke those words. Believers have been ready for his return, but he did not return before they died. However, careful living is the right way to live because we all will stand before God someday, and we do not know when we will die.

We should live as if Jesus may come back today. That does not mean that we should not make long-term plans or work on projects that take a long time to complete. It means that we should be faithful every day so we would not be ashamed if he comes back suddenly.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

When a passage of scripture gives a story or prediction, look for the writer's own application before inventing your own. Sometimes the passage does not make a concluding application, but when it does, that application tells us the purpose of the passage. Often the application is introduced with the word *therefore*, or *because of this*.

- » What are some characteristics of a person who lives like he remembers that Jesus will return? What kind of behavior will we avoid if we are ready to meet Jesus suddenly?

Matthew 25

In the book of Matthew, chapter 25 seems to continue the Olivet Discourse beyond what is included in the other gospels. This chapter contains fewer details of prediction and focuses on practical application.

In Matthew 25 Jesus told three stories.

Note to class leader: As an optional class activity, the class could be divided into three groups. A story from Matthew 25 could be assigned to each group for discussion, then someone from each group could present the class with some applications of the story.

The story of the ten virgins (1-13) warns disciples to be prepared for the return of Jesus. They are not to become careless because his coming is not as soon as they expected. In the story, some took extra oil, planning to be able to endure a long wait. Others were not prepared with extra oil, were not able to wait, and were not present to meet the bridegroom when he appeared. They were excluded.

The story of the talents (14-30) tells the disciples to use resources for God. The talents were amounts of money. The mistake of the servant with one talent was that he did not think he could accomplish much, so he did nothing.

In verses 31-46, Jesus describes the day of judgment, when people will be judged or rewarded based on their responses to the needs of others.

Past or Future Fulfillment?

Bible scholars do not all agree about the time of fulfillment of the prophecies of the Olivet Discourse.

Some scholars believe that this passage was completely fulfilled in A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. This is sometimes called the “Preterist” view. The disciples asked about the destruction of the temple, which did happen in A.D. 70. The suffering and death of the Jews at that time could be described as the worst tribulation of all time, as Jesus said in verse 21.

Scholars who believe that the Olivet Discourse describes the last days give several reasons:

1. The disciples asked about Jesus’ coming.
2. Jesus said the gospel would be preached in all nations before the end, which had not happened before A.D. 70.
3. Jesus predicted an abomination in the holy place (Preterists say this refers to the Roman armies).
4. The sun, moon, and stars will be darkened (Preterists say these represent people of high positions).
5. The Son of Man will appear in the sky in contrast to false, secretive christs (Preterists say Jesus was represented by the destructive Roman army).
6. Angels will be sent by a trumpet to gather the chosen ones from all over the world, which sounds much like 1 Corinthians 15:52.

It seems that Matthew 24:30 is really talking about the return of Jesus, because verses 23-27 warn the disciples not to believe in a secret coming, then verse 30 says he will come in full view of the world.

Some scholars believe that the events of A.D. 70 may have been a partial, initial fulfillment, but that there will be a later, complete fulfillment. According to these scholars, the ultimate fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse will be in the last days, with events ending with the return of Jesus. According to several ancient historians, Christians in Jerusalem escaped the city because they remembered Jesus' warning and did not suffer the terrible tribulation that happened at that time (Luke 21:20-21). However, not all the predictions were fulfilled at that time.

Note to class leader: Allow the group to discuss these different views before proceeding.

OTHER PASSAGES IN THE GOSPELS ABOUT ESCHATOLOGY

Jesus made other eschatological statements besides the Olivet Discourse. These are described below.

Note to class leader: You may select several of these passages to examine and discuss in class. Another option is to assign each passage to a student ahead of time to present for discussion. The interpretations of some passages are difficult, and it is not necessary for the class to come to a definite conclusion about them.

- The world is like a field where wheat and weeds grow to be sorted at the judgment (Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43).
- The judgment will be like a net of various kinds of fish to be sorted (Matthew 13:47-50).
- Jesus said that he would come in glory with the angels and that some of his listeners would not die before seeing him come in his kingdom (Matthew 16:27-28, Luke 9:27).
- Jesus said the twelve apostles would rule Israel (Matthew 19:28-30).
- Jesus said that the high priest would see him at the right hand of power, returning in clouds of glory (Matthew 26:64, Mark 14:62).
- Cities will be judged for their rejection of Christ (Mark 6:10-11, Luke 10:12).
- A person who is ashamed of Christ in the presence of men will be rejected by Christ when he returns (Mark 8:38, Luke 9:26, Luke 12:8-9).
- Jesus said his disciples should be faithful like servants who faithfully serve their master while waiting for him to return at an unknown time (Luke 12:35-48).
- Jerusalem will someday accept Jesus (Luke 13:34-35).

- The coming of Jesus will not be secret, but visible all over the world. The world will be living in careless sin as in the time of Noah or Lot. Some people will be taken suddenly, and others will be left (Luke 17:22-37).
- People will call to the mountains to fall on them and hide them (Luke 23:28-31—compare to Revelation 6:14-17).
- The dead will be raised by Jesus (John 5:25-29, John 6:39-40, 44, 54).
- Jesus went to prepare a place for his disciples and will return for them (John 14:1-4).

LESSON 5 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Writing Assignment: Prepare a lesson or sermon about Jesus' teachings on eschatology. For this lesson, the goal is not to explain and describe future events. Explain Jesus' emphasis that believers should be spiritually alert. Select passages with the words of Jesus that make this point.
2. Passage Study: Look at the Olivet Discourse again and explain what is said about each of these: the temple, the gospel, the abomination, the tribulation, the fig tree, and the trumpet.
3. Reading Assignment: Before the next class session, carefully read Daniel 1-6.

LESSON 6

DANIEL (CHAPTERS 1-6)

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BOOK OF DANIEL

The book of Daniel is important to the study of eschatology for several reasons:

1. It is a large sample of apocalyptic writing.
2. It contains symbols that are also used in other parts of the Bible.
3. It contains much prophecy that may refer to the last times.
4. It strongly demonstrates the concerns and priorities of biblical prophecy.

Number 4 is the most important, because the original concerns and priorities of the biblical writers should be ours also.

FROM THEIR TIME TO OURS

Israel was a small nation that was conquered by the empire of Babylon in 597 B.C. Many Jews had been taken into other countries. Israel was unable to defend itself against the great powers of the world. Jerusalem was destroyed. Prayers for the nation seemed to be unanswered.

People struggled to keep faith. How could they continue to believe the promises God made to their nation? How could they believe that God still had authority over the world? Was there any reason to continue to pray? How could they

“But while ancient empires were vanishing and a new empire was writing its brilliant but brief history, Daniel’s own people, the people of the promise, were passing through a dark night of trial. Exiled from their homeland of promise, servants in a pagan land, they hanged their harps on the willows [Psalm 137:2] and hoped for the dawning of the day.”

Roy Swim

Beacon Bible Commentary

explain the conditions of the world to their children? The book of Daniel was written to people in these conditions.

In modern times Christians are persecuted; more Christians died for their faith in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined. Nations seem to be under the control of men who do not respect God. It seems that the church cannot change the direction of society. The message of the book of Daniel is relevant today.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

When we understand the situation addressed by a scripture passage, we can better understand how to apply the passage to our situation.

- » What things are happening in the world today that are similar to the time of Daniel?

THEMES OF DANIEL

The themes of Daniel are the themes of eschatology in general.

1. **God's sovereignty over the world.** God overrules kings when he chooses. Nobody can ultimately defy him. The actions of people cannot prevent him from accomplishing his purposes.
2. **God's ultimate justice.** Those who are faithful to God will ultimately be defended and honored. Those who fight against God will be punished.
3. **God's eternal kingdom.** God's kingdom will take over the entire world and rule forever without rebels.

LITERARY STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Both parts of the book of Daniel establish the three themes listed above.

Chapters 1-6 describe events that occurred in the life of Daniel. God revealed his power and wisdom in those events, showing that he could do the same with the events in the distant future. These chapters include some prophecies.

Chapters 7-12 give prophecies, and do not have events in Daniel's life except his experiences while receiving the revelations. Some of the prophecies were fulfilled in Daniel's lifetime, some were fulfilled through centuries of time, and some refer to the last days and have not been fulfilled yet. Some people believe that almost all of Daniel's prophecies are fulfilled in history, but the angel told Daniel that the words of the book were sealed until the time of the end, and that the wise would understand them then (Daniel 12:9-10). This statement would not make sense if most of the predictions were fulfilled in centuries before the last days.

The visions describe sequences of events. Some of them describe the same events with different details. The visions should not be considered chronological in the sense that a later vision gives later events than a previous vision. For example, the same series of empires is described in Revelation 2 and 7. As we will see later, the book of Revelation follows a similar structure.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

A vision or illustration in the Bible usually puts events into chronological order, but the events in separate visions and illustrations are not necessarily in order. In other words, a later vision does not necessarily show events that will occur after the events shown in a previous vision.

CHAPTER TITLES FOR THE BOOK OF DANIEL

In most books of the Bible, the passages to study are not exactly the same as the chapters, but the chapter divisions of Daniel are convenient for study.

Note to class leader: You can read the chapter titles to the group to build interest. It is not necessary to explain any material from the chapters at this point.

- Chapter 1: The Hebrews Exiled in Babylon
- Chapter 2: The Dream of the Statue
- Chapter 3: The King's Statue and the Furnace
- Chapter 4: A Beast for Seven Years
- Chapter 5: The Writing on the Wall
- Chapter 6: The Cage of Lions
- Chapter 7: The Vision of the Beasts and Horns
- Chapter 8: The Vision of the Ram and the Goat
- Chapter 9: Daniel's Intercession and God's Answer

Chapter 10: The Angel's Arrival

Chapter 11: Future Conflicts of Kings

Chapter 12: The River of Time

DANIEL 1: THE HEBREWS EXILED IN BABYLON

- » A student should read Daniel 1 for the group.

Note to class leader: Because many students are already familiar with this story, to summarize the chapter, ask the questions below and let various students answer.

1. Where were Daniel and his friends from? Why were they in Babylon?
2. What difficult situation did they face immediately?
3. What did Daniel propose to the man who supervised them?
4. What was the result of the trial period?
5. How did Daniel and his friends compare to the king's counselors in wisdom and knowledge? Why?

God promoted his faithful servants to positions of power and gave them wisdom above the highest wisdom of the heathen kingdom (1:15, 16, 19-20). The Babylonians believed that their important decisions should be guided by astrology and the interpretation of dreams. God gave his servants wisdom that was better than the best counselors in the empire.

Verse 17 says that they excelled because God gave them knowledge and wisdom. God was in control even in a time when his people had been conquered by a pagan empire. He gave honor and influence to his faithful servants even in a heathen government.

DANIEL 2: THE DREAM OF THE STATUE

- » A student should read Daniel 2:1-30 for the group. What was the problem that Daniel and his friends faced?

“When the captivity of Judah had been accomplished by the Babylonian power, the Babylonians would have thought that their gods were greater than the God of the people they had been able to capture.... God did not want this evaluation to stand, however, and worked through Daniel to change it.”

Leon Wood

The Prophets of Israel

The Chaldeans could not interpret the dream. They thought that no man on earth could do it (10).

The Chaldeans said that only the gods knew the answer. Apparently, they did not believe anyone could get the answer from the gods (11).

Verses 20-22 could be considered the key verses of the book of Daniel. They clearly emphasize the primary theme of eschatology. God is in control of the periods of human history. He changes conditions and controls the promotion and removal of rulers. He chooses people to receive his wisdom so they understand what he is doing.

Daniel told the king, “There is a God that reveals secrets and shows ... what will be in the last days” (28).

» A student should read Daniel 2:46-49 for the group.

The king said that God is greater than the gods and kings, and reveals secrets (47). The king promoted Daniel and his friends to the highest positions in the kingdom.

The description and interpretation of the king’s dream are in verses 31-45. The vision was of a statue with sections made of different materials. Each section represented an empire. Chapters 7-12 add more details about the empires.

The sections of the statue:

Gold = Babylon

Silver = Persia

Brass = Greece

Iron = Rome

Iron and Clay = the final human empire

Some scholars believe that the last human empire will be the Antichrist’s kingdom in the last days before Jesus returns.

In the vision a great stone smashed the statue then became a mountain. The stone represents the kingdom of God. God’s kingdom is not just another section of the statue. The stone was “not made with hands” which means it is not human-made.

» What does the vision tell us about God?

God knows what great powers will arise on the earth long before they exist. He will remove the empires of the world and take permanent authority over the earth when he chooses.

DANIEL 3: THE KING'S STATUE AND THE FURNACE

- » A student should read Daniel 3 for the group.

The king made this image after his dream. The gold part of the statue in the vision represented Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar made his statue entirely of gold. He rejected the prediction that other kingdoms would come after his because he wanted to believe that his kingdom was established forever. He demanded that all people worship his greatness by worshipping the image. He denied God's knowledge of the future kingdoms, and God's power to establish an eternal kingdom. There is continual repetition of the phrase, "image that he had set up."

- » Everyone should look at verses 14-15 together.

When the king confronted the Hebrews, he said, "Do you not serve my gods?" and "Who is the God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" (14-15).

The three Hebrews did not know whether God would rescue them or not, but they were committed to worship only God (17-18). The king remembered their unconditional loyalty to God, saying that they "yielded their bodies" (28).

The important officials the king had gathered for his glory saw God's glory instead (27).

The heathen gods could not deliver their worshippers from such a death. God came to be with them in the furnace. The king said, "There is no other God that can deliver like this" (29).

- » What faith should we have because of this history?

We cannot assume that God will prevent all harm from happening to us, but we should follow the example of the three Hebrews and be loyal to God. God will ultimately prove his power and reward those who are faithful.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

The direct quotations of the main people in the story usually emphasize the main purposes of the story. Notice that the king said, "Who is the God that can deliver you?" then later, "There is no other God that can deliver like this!"

- » Optional exercise: Look for other direct quotations in these stories and observe how they emphasize the main purposes of the stories.

DANIEL 4: A BEAST FOR SEVEN YEARS

Note to class leader: Rather than reading the whole chapter for the group, you could ask a student to summarize the story, then allow other students to add details.

The Chaldean magicians could not interpret the dream (Daniel 4:7). When Daniel interpreted it, they said that he was one “in whom is the spirit of the holy gods” (8-9).

This chapter is unique in the Bible because it is the testimony of a king of Babylon.

The king’s basic problem was pride, and the lesson for the king was for him to know that God rules (17, 25, 26, 30-32, 34-35). The king could have avoided the experience by repenting (27).

In verse 2 the king stated the purpose of his testimony and the reason for the event that happened to him. The glory of God was revealed in the event.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

If the writer states his purpose, that purpose usually should guide our use of the writing.

Other examples include 1 John 2:2 and 1 John 5:13, and Luke 18:1. When the writer addressed a specific situation, we may not have the same situation, but the principles explained by the writer are relevant to us. For example, Paul wrote to ask Philemon to forgive a runaway slave. The principle he stated was that Philemon and Onesimus were Christian brothers, and that relationship was more important than their statuses as master and slave.

Verse 3 is a wonderful statement of God’s power and eternal sovereignty. Like 2:20-22, this verse states the theme of the book of Daniel and of all eschatology.

- » How would you apply this passage in preaching?

DANIEL 5: THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Note to class leader: A student could read the chapter for the group, or you could ask a student to summarize the story, then allow other students to add details.

Drinking wine from the vessels of the temple was a deliberate disrespect to the God of Israel (Daniel 5:2-3). As they drank they honored idols (3). Within the same hour the light appeared to write on the wall (5).

The wise men could not read the words on the wall (8). They said that Daniel had “the spirit of the holy gods” (11).

Daniel reviewed the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s humbling (Daniel 4), showing that Belshazzar should have learned the same lesson (22). Belshazzar worshipped idols and ignored the God who controlled his breath (23). Belshazzar’s father was Nabonidus, who was still living, though not in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was not biologically the father of either of them but is called father as their predecessor.

Belshazzar was amazed at the revelation that came from Daniel, but still did not repent. He gave rewards and promotions as though his position would not fall (29). He maintained his composure in the presence of the 1000 rulers, but they all heard and later witnessed God’s judgment.

God showed his sovereignty over the powers of the world. He judges those who ignore his authority.

DANIEL 6: THE CAGE OF LIONS

Note to class leader: A student should summarize the story for the group. Other students may add important details.

Daniel’s enemies could find no fault in him except that he was loyal to God above all other authorities (Daniel 6:5).

They set up a trial that would test Daniel’s allegiance between the king and God (7). When they proposed the law to the king, he yielded to the same temptation that the previous ones had—to honor himself above the gods.

The key question was asked by the king: “Is your God, whom you serve continually, able to deliver you?” (20). There was no question about Daniel’s faithfulness. He was delivered “because he believed in his God” (23).

The king’s decree and honor of God (25-27) was similar to Nebuchadnezzar’s (Daniel 4:3, 37).

God again showed that people should be loyal to him rather than to human powers that compete against him.

- » What is an example of a similar test of loyalty that you have experienced or observed?

LESSON 6 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Writing Assignment: Prepare a lesson or sermon from one of the passages of Daniel. Don't just tell the story. Explain the significance of the story. Explain the themes of eschatology and show how they are important today. Explain what the story should do for our faith.
2. Reading Assignment: Before the next class session, carefully read Daniel 7-12.

LESSON 7

DANIEL (CHAPTERS 7-12)

NOTE TO CLASS LEADER

Take a few minutes to review the importance of the book of Daniel. Ask various students to explain what they learned in the previous class session.

DANIEL 7: THE VISION OF THE BEASTS AND HORNS

This chapter has a vision of four monstrous animals and other details. The animals represent a series of great kingdoms.

Remember, this passage describes the same kingdoms as the vision in Daniel 2, with different details.

First Beast: Winged Lion

The wings were removed, the lion stood as a man and received a man's heart. If this is the kingdom of Babylon, the change that happened to the lion could refer to the transformation of Nebuchadnezzar.

Second Beast: Bear

The Medes and Persians conquered the empire of Babylon in 538 B.C. Darius was a Mede who was established as governor of Chaldea under the Persian king Cyrus, who was the real emperor. Cyrus was considered a deliverer by many of the Babylonians, who were unhappy with Nabonidus's neglect of the religion of Marduk. Cyrus decreed that Jews be allowed to return to their homeland (Ezra 1), in fulfillment of the prophecy made by Isaiah (Isaiah 41:2, 25, Isaiah 46:11, Isaiah 48:15) 150 years before.

Third Beast: Four-winged and Four-headed Leopard

The Greek empire defeated the Medo-Persian empire in 330 B.C. It was established by Alexander. The empire was divided among his four generals when he died in 323 B.C.

Fourth Beast: A Monster with 10 Horns

This beast had iron teeth, corresponding to the iron section of the statue. Rome was the empire after Greece. It also had brass nails (19), combining features of the previous empire of Greece. Rome defeated Macedonia, a surviving Greek power, in 196 B.C.

There was not a fifth beast to correspond to the fifth section of the statue, but from the fourth beast's ten horns came another horn which became a great king. If the 10 horns are compared to Revelation 17:12, it seems that this king comes out of the ancient Roman kingdom.

THE TERM ANTICHRIST

This term is used in 1 John 2:18, referring to prophecies of a person called the Antichrist. John goes on to say that there were already many people opposed to Christ, but this does not contradict the assumption that a particular Antichrist would come in the future. Some scholars believe that person is the man in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 who demands worship in the temple, the person who places the “abomination that makes desolate” that Jesus mentioned in Matthew 24:15, the person predicted in Daniel 8:25 who will oppose the Messiah, and the beast in Revelation 13:4-8 who rules for 3 ½ years and demands worship from the whole world.

- » A student should read Daniel 7:9-14, 22, and 27 for the group. Notice how these verses again state the primary theme of Daniel.

Some observations:

- Verse 9: The vision of God is similar to the vision of Christ in Revelation 1, with reference to white hair and fire.
- Verse 10: The enormous number of servants is a sign of majesty and power.
- Verse 12: The ancient kingdoms continued to exist, though they lost their power.
- Verse 13: This reference to the “Son of Man” may be where Jesus drew the expression.
- Verse 14: The theme of Daniel is repeated here: God’s kingdom is total, final, and eternal.

- Verse 25: A particular king will try to reverse all established authority to bring it under himself. He will blaspheme God, as described in Revelation. His control will last for 3 ½ years. Compare the use of the word *time* to Daniel 4:16, where it meant “year.”

DANIEL 8: THE VISION OF THE RAM AND THE GOAT

This chapter gives more details about the transfer of power from one empire to another, then describes the actions of a specific future king.

A ram had two horns, then was defeated by a goat with one horn. After the goat became great, the horn was broken, and four horns took its place. The ram is the Medo-Persian empire (20), and the goat is the Greek empire (21). The four horns are the four generals that divided the empire (22).

Out of one of the four horns, a small horn arises (9). The person represented by the small horn exalts himself to heaven and causes the sacrifices in the temple to stop. A period of 3 ½ years passes before the temple is cleansed and sacrifices begin again.

Antiochus was a king that descended from one of the four generals of Alexander. He considered himself a god and demanded worship. He sacrificed a pig on the altar in Jerusalem to profane it and stop worship there. The Jews fought against him, starting in 168 B.C. Antiochus died in the war, and the Jews became an independent nation again. The war lasted 3 ½ years, then they purified the temple and started sacrifices again.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

Prophecies may be fulfilled more than once, and the later fulfillments are more complete than the earlier ones. For example, Antiochus fulfilled many of the predictions in Daniel 7, yet Jesus spoke of the fulfillment as being yet future (Matthew 24:15).

Daniel's prophecy was obviously fulfilled by Antiochus, but not in all details. Jesus spoke of this prophecy as being yet future (Matthew 24:15). The apostle Paul seemed to refer to the same prophecy in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4. Daniel said that this person would oppose the Messiah (Daniel 8:25). Apparently, Antiochus was a fulfillment, but there will be a greater fulfillment in the end times.

DANIEL 9: DANIEL'S INTERCESSION AND GOD'S ANSWER

Daniel found by study that the captivity was supposed to last for 70 years. That time had passed, so he prayed for the restoration of Jerusalem.

Daniel's prayer is a prayer of repentance as a representative of his people. It is a wonderful model of true repentance.

- » A student should read Daniel 9:4-19 for the group.

Daniel's prayer contains the following elements:

1. We sinned (sinned, committed iniquity, did wickedness, rebelled, did not listen, trespassed, disobeyed, departed). See verses 5-11.
2. We knew better (therefore, punishment is fully deserved). Nowhere in the prayer did Daniel make any excuse for sin. See verses 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, and 13.
3. God is just in all his actions. See verses 7 and 14.
4. God can deliver. Verse 15 refers to the great deliverance from Egypt and says that God can do it again.
5. The appeal is not on the basis of human merit but God's mercy (18).
6. The goal is not only mercy but God's glory (16-19).

A genuine prayer of repentance should include these elements. A person who denies his sin, makes excuses, or thinks he deserves something from God does not understand the seriousness of his sin and is not completely repenting.

The prayer also gives us instruction for gospel preaching. When we preach about repentance, we should explain genuine repentance so that our hearers will seek God properly.

- » What common misunderstandings of repentance have you observed?

Gabriel was sent to explain more of God's plan of restoration (verses 24-27). The whole process would take 70 "sevens." Verse 24 lists what is to be accomplished. This is not simply

"Palestine is doubtless a stage of divine action. But the whole earth and the heavens are the scene of God's final doings in this age. The point toward which history is moving is the culmination of the kingdom of God."

Roy Swim

Beacon Bible Commentary

to be a renewal of the probation of Israel, to inevitably end in defeat like the cycles of the Judges. This was to be an end of sin, a complete atonement for reconciliation of sinners to God, and anointing of the Messiah for his eternal kingdom.

The 70 sevens do not all happen without intermission. There are 7, then 62. At that point the death of the Messiah occurs. Then there is a long wait until the last 7.

There are at least two different interpretations of verses 26-27.

1. The “prince that will come” is the Antichrist, who will destroy Jerusalem and the temple. He will make a covenant with Israel but then break it in the middle of the seven-year period. He will do an abomination that makes the temple worship stop. We can understand that a “7” is seven years, because verse 27 tells us that the sacrifice ends in the middle of the 7. We know from 8:4 that the sacrifice ended for 3 ½ years.
2. The “prince that will come” is the Messiah as mentioned in verses 25-26. Christians by the spread of the gospel will make Jerusalem and the temple unimportant. The ministry of Jesus was 3 ½ years. The cross of Jesus is the abomination (so considered by the Jews) that ends temple worship. The second 3 ½ years are not a literal measurement but the centuries of the ministry of the church.

Note to class leader: The group may briefly compare and discuss the two interpretations. More information about this issue will be considered in the lesson about the tribulation.

DANIEL 10: THE ANGEL’S ARRIVAL

The prediction of this chapter was for far in the future (1).

The angel explained that the answer from God was delayed because of the resistance of evil spirits.

There are wicked angels called the Prince of Persia (13) and the Prince of Grecia (20). Michael is the angel who defends Israel (Daniel 10:13, Daniel 12:1).

DANIEL 11: FUTURE CONFLICTS OF KINGS

- » A student should read Daniel 11:1-4 for the group.

Verse 2 was fulfilled by Xerxes, the fourth Persian king of his dynasty. He was an enormously wealthy king who united forces against Greece in 480 B.C. but lost the war. He is the king who is called Ahasuerus in the book of Esther.

Verses 3-4 may refer to Alexander the Great of Greece. He did not fight Xerxes but defeated later Persian kings. The kingdom was divided among his four generals after his death, rather than being given to his descendants.

The chapter describes various conflicts among kings. Many of those prophecies were fulfilled in ancient times. It is not necessary for us to interpret all the details in the chapter.

- » Look at verse 31 together.

Verse 31 mentions the abomination that would be placed in the temple, probably an idol. Verses 21-45 are about the king who will place the abomination. Much of this passage was fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes, but the Antichrist may be the ultimate fulfillment of the details in verses 31 and 36-39 (Matthew 24:15). This king will not follow any established religion but exalt himself above all gods. He will not have women, for he will seem to be above humanity. He will worship a god of power that his fathers did not serve.

DANIEL 12: THE RIVER OF TIME

- » A student should read Daniel 12 for the group.

These prophecies definitely point to the last days. Verse 2 speaks of the resurrection of the dead. Verse 3 speaks of eternal glory.

Periods of time of approximately 3 ½ years are mentioned in connection to the abomination of desolation (7 and 11).

The prophecies of the book of Daniel are said to be sealed until the end (4, 9), which implies that they cannot be completely understood until the predicted events are near. Daniel himself said that he did not understand it all (8).

During these events many people will be tested and purified, while the wicked will continue in wickedness (10).

Verse 10 states a purpose of eschatology: the wicked will not understand what is happening, but the wise will understand. Those who know God's Word will recognize the fulfillment of the prophecies and will be strengthened in their faith.

- » If you lived during the time that these prophecies are fulfilled, what difference would it make to you to know about these prophecies?

LESSON 7 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Writing Assignment: Briefly write what the following represent in the book of Daniel: lion, bear, leopard, ram, goat, and the ten-horned beast.
2. Reading Assignment: Before the next class session, carefully read Revelation 1-5.

LESSON 8

REVELATION (CHAPTERS 1-5)

A BOOK ABOUT JESUS

The first words of the book say the book is given to reveal Jesus Christ. The contents of the book emphasize Christ.

Jesus is the ruler of the earth who accomplished the atonement. At the return of Jesus, every sinful tribe on the earth will be dismayed. He is the beginning and the end; the one who began everything and will bring it to its conclusion. He is the Almighty.

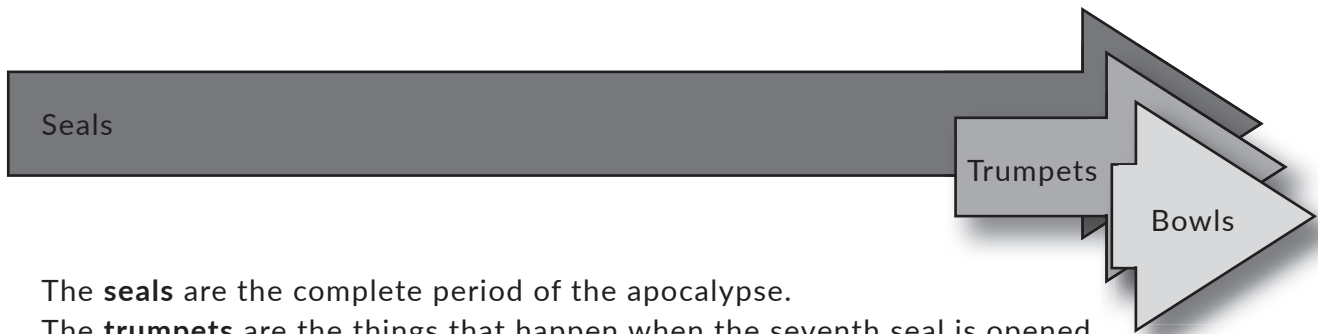
John saw a vision of Jesus with many figurative details that are mentioned again throughout the book. He is the one whose authority is irresistible.

Jesus gave messages to the seven churches. His authority over them is absolute. He knows all about them. He will give the crown of life; he will destroy false teachers; he will irresistibly open and shut doors; and he will give power over the nations. He is seated with the Father at the throne and gives that privilege to those who overcome.

The Lamb is the one who is worthy to open the seals of the scroll. The book represents the fulfillment of God's plan for the world. Events happen on the earth that seem chaotic and out of control, but they happen as Jesus opens the seals, showing God's complete control.

All sinners on the earth try to hide when Jesus appears. The army of God led by Christ comes to conquer the earth. The martyrs are resurrected to rule with Christ.

The primary purpose of the book of Revelation is to reveal Jesus in his ultimate victory as his kingdom is made complete in the whole earth.



The **seals** are the complete period of the apocalypse.

The **trumpets** are the things that happen when the seventh seal is opened.

The **bowls** are the wrath of God poured out on the earth after the seventh trumpet.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

Our use of a book of the Bible should always most emphasize what the writer most emphasized. A person who looks through Revelation for the predictions of the last days may realize that he is passing over many passages that do not contain predictions. The visions of Christ are foundational to the book.

» How does the book of Revelation present Jesus differently from the four Gospels?

A BOOK ABOUT THE END

Some people believe that the book of Revelation is not prophecy of real events at all, but simply symbolic descriptions of the victory of Christ. However, the book says that it is written to reveal things in the future (Revelation 1:1). John was told to write “the things you have seen, the things that are, and the things that will be after this” (1:19). Therefore, the symbols correspond to real events.

Some believe that the book of Revelation does not contain much prophecy of the end times. They believe that most of it was fulfilled soon after it was written or in the centuries following. This view is sometimes called the “Preterist” view.

There is reason to think that the book of Revelation has not all been fulfilled. Toward the end of the book we find the following events: Satan is bound for 1,000 years; martyrs are resurrected to rule with Jesus; all people are resurrected and judged; and a new heaven and earth are created. These are events that must be near the end of time.

So why does the book say that it predicts things that are “soon to come to pass” (1:1)? Why does it say that the “time is at hand” (1:3)? Some of the events were in the near future, such as the predictions about the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. In another sense, the age of the church, which would include persecution and opposition to Christ, had already begun.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter referred to the prophet Joel, who said that the Holy Spirit would be poured out before the day of God’s judgment. Even though there would be a long period of time until the judgment, Peter recognized that the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was the beginning of that period. See Acts 2:16-20.

The events in the book of Revelation are not in a single time period. Revelation 12:1-5 refers to the birth of Jesus. Chapters 2 and 3 make predictions about specific local churches that existed at that time. The closing chapters speak of things that must happen near the end of time. There may have already been fulfillments of some prophecies that will have greater, ultimate fulfillments at the end of time (like the prophecy in Daniel fulfilled by Antiochus yet spoken of as future by Jesus).

The book of Revelation is a book of conclusions. It concludes the Bible, and it concludes the long history of the process of salvation. For example, the story of salvation begins with the loss of the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-23) and ends with restoration of the tree of life (Revelation 22:2), invitation to the water of life, and names written in the Book of Life. The story begins with a curse of sorrow (Genesis 3:16-17) and ends with the end of all sorrow (Revelation 21:4). The story begins with separation from God (Genesis 3:8, 24) and ends with God’s people in his presence (Revelation 21:3 and Revelation 22:4).

We can also observe that Jesus, the center of the salvation story, died on a tree (1 Peter 2:24), was a man of sorrows (Isaiah 53:3), and is “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). The book is called “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.”

» How does the book of Revelation serve as a conclusion for the Bible?

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

A general outline of the book is given in 1:19. “Things you have seen” were John’s vision of Christ. “Things which are” were the messages to the seven churches. “Things which shall be” were the prophecies of the future. Chapters 4-5 are the introduction to the prophecies of the future (see Revelation 4:1). Prophecies of the future begin in Revelation 6.

One of the great challenges to understanding this book is the order that events are described. It is obvious that they are not described in a single sequence from the beginning to the end of the book.

Three series of sevens are described: seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. The three series do not seem to come one after another, as if they are a series of 21 events. Instead, the seventh seal does nothing but introduce the seven trumpets; therefore, the seven trumpets could be the content of the seventh seal (Revelation 8:1-2).

After the seventh trumpet (Revelation 11:15-19) are some passages that give description of things happening in the period, not necessarily in a sequence, but as inserted sections (Revelation 12-14). It is as if the sequence is paused while we look at some things that will be happening during that time.

Then come the seven bowls, which are clearly stated to be the wrath of God (15:1). They are introduced in Revelation 15 and poured out in Revelation 16. Apparently Christians are no longer on the earth at this point, because they are in heaven, on the sea of glass, with harps (15:2).

In Matthew 24-25 we have another example of a series of events described in order, then some descriptions of things that will happen during the series. We have a chapter of chronological events (chapter 24), then a chapter of parables (chapter 25) describing various aspects of what will happen during the period.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Note to class leader: Someone can read the passage titles for the group to build interest in the content of Revelation. It is not necessary to discuss the contents of the passages yet.

- I. Introduction and Vision of Jesus (1)
- II. Messages to the Seven Churches (2-3)
- III. The Scene at the Throne of God (4)
- IV. The Book and the Lamb (5)
- V. The Seven Seals (6:1-8:1)
- VI. The Seven Trumpets (8:2-11:19)
- VII. The Woman and the Dragon (12)
- VIII. The Beast and His Mark (13)
- IX. The Remnant in Heaven (14:1-5)
- X. The Three Announcing Angels (14:6-13)
- XI. The Two Harvests (14:14-20)
- XII. The Seven Bowls (15-16)
- XIII. Babylon and its Fall (17-18)
- XIV. The Coming of Christ (19)
- XV. The Millennium and Last Battle (20:1-10)
- XVI. The Final Judgment (20:11-15)
- XVII. The New Jerusalem (21:1-22:5)
- XVIII. Closing Exhortations (22:6-21)

SYMBOLISM IN REVELATION

Some of the symbols in Revelation are used elsewhere in the Bible.

- » A student should read Revelation 12:1, then Genesis 37:9 for the class.

Comparison of these two verses shows us that Revelation 12:1 refers to Israel. Of course, another indication of her identity in the passage is that she gave birth to the Messiah.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

A later biblical writer may use a symbol that was used by an earlier biblical writer. The earlier use may help us understand the later use. This should not be considered an absolute rule for all biblical symbols. Wind represents the Holy Spirit in Ezekiel 37:7, 14, John 3:8, and Acts 2:2. However, yeast represented sin in 1 Corinthians 5:8, false doctrine in Matthew 16:6, and the spread of God's kingdom in Matthew 13:33.

Many symbols in Revelation are explained in the book itself so that we do not have to guess.

- » For an example of symbols explained in the book, look at Revelation 1:20 together.

The book may seem hard to understand, but the writer did intend to communicate a message, and God intended to communicate with this book. We can understand the truth revealed in Revelation.

PASSAGE I: INTRODUCTION AND VISION OF JESUS (REVELATION 1)

- » A student should read Revelation 1 for the group.

The book is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. It begins with John's vision of Christ and describes Christ's ultimate triumph over all the earth.

John's vision of Jesus is full of symbols. The symbols in the vision of Jesus occur throughout the book, especially in the messages to the seven churches.

Notes on specific verses:

- Verse 4: Seven is the biblical number of perfection. Some scholars believe that the Holy Spirit is called a “seven-fold” Spirit here. Others believe that the words refer to seven angels, because angels are spirits.
 - Verse 5: Jesus is called “prince of the kings of the earth.” This is important to the theme of eschatology—the fact that God has ultimate control even when the rulers of the world are in rebellion against him.
 - Verse 6: We rule with him, though the kingdom has not fully come. We may seem insignificant in this world’s system, but we are rulers in the future kingdom.
 - Verse 7: The world that has rejected Christ will be afraid when he comes to judge.
 - Verses 8, 11, 17-18: In these verses, Jesus is identified as God. The emphasis of “first and last,” stated three times, shows God’s control over history. He was the one who began everything by creation, and he will conclude this age with judgment and the establishment of his kingdom.
 - Verse 13: Jesus frequently called himself the “Son of Man.” The term *Son of Man* is probably a connection to the use of the term in Daniel 7:13.
 - Verse 14: The hair white as wool and the reference to fire are like the description of God in Daniel 7:9-10.
 - Verse 16: The sword symbolizes the power of his words. Compare to 19:21.
 - Verse 18: Jesus’ possession of the keys is another emphasis of his absolute power.
 - Verse 19: This verse is a general outline of the book. What John has seen is in chapter one; the present conditions were addressed in Revelation 2-3; and the future is in the remaining chapters (see Revelation 4:1).
 - Verse 20: The candlesticks and stars are explained. The angels of the churches are probably the pastors, since the word *angel* can be used to mean messenger. It would not really make sense that the letters were sent to heavenly angels. In 22:8-9, a person identified as a prophet was also called an angel.
- » Briefly list some things that are said about Jesus in this chapter.

PASSAGE II: MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (REVELATION 2-3)

The message to each church was addressed to the “angel” of each church, which probably means the pastor. The word *angel* means messenger, and sometimes refers to a human in scripture (see Revelation 22:8-9).

The messages to the seven churches apply to the church everywhere in any age, just as any other New Testament epistle. There is no reason to think that the seven churches represent seven periods of church history. They do not correspond well to historical periods, and there is no indication in the book that John intended such an interpretation.

The whole book of Revelation was written first to believers who lived at that time, even though the end-time predictions would not be fulfilled during their lifetimes. Christians in any period should live lives consistent with the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom. It doesn't matter whether it comes in our lifetime or not; we want to be on the right side, living for eternal priorities.

- » Why would prophecies of the last days be important for people who lived in a period long before the prophecies would be fulfilled?

THE DISTANT FUTURE GIVES STRENGTH TODAY

The book of Hebrews was written to encourage Christian Jews who were suffering persecution. The writer used eschatology to encourage them to endure, even though they would not see the fulfillment of the events during their natural lives. He showed that people in the past with faith endured for the sake of things they would not see. For example, Abraham lived his whole life in tents, waiting for the city with foundations, built by God (Hebrews 11:10). Many people of faith left their home countries, waiting for a heavenly country (11:16). He described those that endured hard trials and died in faith, not having seen the fulfillment of God's promises, but happy because of knowing that the promises would be fulfilled (11:39-40). He told the Christian Jews that the time would come when heaven and earth would be shaken, and all creation would perish, but they should stay faithful waiting for a kingdom that cannot perish (Hebrews 12:26-28). In Hebrews 13, the word *therefore* is used often, pointing to the reasons for our faithful endurance. He said that on earth we do not have a permanent city, but we look for one that is coming (Hebrews 13:14).

We will not study the messages to the seven churches in this course. However, they are valuable for study and application just as other letters to churches in the New Testament.

HOW TO STUDY THE MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

In each message notice the way Jesus is identified, the commendation of each church, the criticism of each church, the special circumstances, the command given, and the promise given.

PASSAGE III: THE SCENE AT THE THRONE OF GOD (REVELATION 4)

- » A student should read Revelation 4 for the group.

Verse 1 states that the predictions of the future are about to begin. The vision of God and his throne is given to show the perspective of the prophecies. The events on the earth are not from the perspective of a person on earth trying to survive. The perspective is the throne of God.

The vision of God shows he deserves the worship of his entire creation. The chapter emphasizes that God has absolute power and authority over his creation. This understanding is the foundation of eschatology. God has the right to do whatever he chooses with his creation, and his power cannot be defeated.

The 24 elders may represent the total people of God (from Jews and Gentiles), since the number 12 was used of Israel and of the church. 5:8-9 seems to confirm this. That does not mean that all believers are in heaven at the beginning of this period; it simply means that they are represented there.

The beasts have details comparable to the beasts in Ezekiel 1:5-11.

The throne of God is mentioned often throughout the book.

- » Try to imagine how a person would understand the suffering and chaos of the world if he did not know about the throne of God. What would be his philosophy of life? How is a Christian different because of knowing God's power?

PASSAGE IV: THE BOOK AND THE LAMB (REVELATION 5)

» A student should read Revelation 5 for the group.

The passage describes a book that should be opened. The author is not named, but we can assume that God has produced the book. In the vision, the book is in the hand of God (7). In ancient times, a person's will for an inheritance was written on a scroll and sealed with seven seals. The book represents the kingdom of God, his inheritance for his people.

The seven seals must be opened before the book could be opened; therefore, the seals represent the whole apocalypse, its events and results. The apocalypse is the necessary process to bring in the will of God described in the book.

To break the seals and open the book means to make it all happen. Only the Lamb was worthy to open the book. He was worthy because of His work of atonement (9-10). Because he is both human and divine, and has made salvation for those who will be spared judgment, he is the only one in the universe qualified to be the agent of God's judgment and salvation in this period.

We should see the apocalypse not just as the actions of men or natural calamities; the apocalypse is the process of bringing in the eternal kingdom of God.

Jesus' full divinity is shown in the worship that is fully equal to the worship given to the Father (12-13). The greatest worship imaginable is given to him just as it is given to the Father.

Jesus will be the main character throughout the book (the Revelation of Jesus Christ), so it is important for the reader to realize that the authority described in Revelation 4:11 also belongs completely to Jesus. He comes as the rightful and invincible Lord over all the earth.

People think of the apocalypse as a terrible time that should not happen. However, the real tragedy would be for the world to go on without the apocalypse. John wept much when it seemed that nobody would be able to open the book (4).

» How is it possible to think of the period of the apocalypse as necessary?

**“What is in that book
[the scroll] shall not be
known until there shall
be known to the powers
and authorities in the
heavenly places, by the
Church, the manifold
wisdom of God
[Ephesians 3:10].”**

Henry Alford

The New Testament for English Readers

LESSON 8 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Writing Assignment: Explain the chronology of the book of Revelation. This does not mean that you must list all the events in order. How is the book organized? Instead of assuming that it is chronological from beginning to end, how should we approach it?
2. Reading Assignment: Before the next class session, carefully read Revelation 6-22.

LESSON 9

REVELATION (CHAPTERS 6-22)

NOTE TO CLASS LEADER

Review the importance of Revelation.

PASSAGE V: THE SEVEN SEALS (REVELATION 6:1-8:1)

The seven seals seem to provide a view of the entire period of the apocalypse. The order of events seems to correspond to the one Jesus gave in Matthew 24.

Persecution is emphasized after the fifth seal, which fits with what we know about the second half of the tribulation. The cosmic signs given after the sixth seal fit with other passages that describe such signs at the end (Matthew 24, Acts 2).

As each of the first four seals are opened, a horseman comes. The identities of the riders are not revealed and are not important to the description. The riders and horses represent the progression of events.

The **first seal** shows a white horse. The rider has a bow and a crown. He spreads his kingdom by conquest.

The **second seal** shows a red horse. Peace ends. He has a great sword, which could represent an advanced weapon or great military power.

The **third seal** shows a black horse. The rider has scales like those that are used for selling food. Severe famine comes.

The **fourth seal** shows a pale horse. The rider is called death. 1/4 of earth's population die.

The **fifth seal** shows a vision of people who have died as martyrs. Severe persecution has begun.

At the **sixth seal** is an earthquake, the sun is dark, the moon looks like blood, stars fall, heaven is opened, sinners hide from God, and the wrath of God is coming. This description

occurs elsewhere in the Bible to refer to the end, when the wrath of God comes on the earth. Examples include Matthew 24:29-30, Mark 13:24-26, and Luke 21:25-28.

Revelation 7 is a description inserted between the sixth seal and the seventh seal. Events are paused, symbolized by the wind being stopped (7:1). The pause is so that the servants of God, twelve thousand from each tribe of Israel, can be sealed. The seal is a mark of God's ownership, so that they will be protected from the wrath of God (compare to Ezekiel 9:4-6). This group can be called the "remnant." The remnant are those of Israel who truly follow God. They will be saved from destruction and become the new, purged nation. Romans 11:26 says that all Israel will be saved. That does not mean that every Jew will be saved, but that those who survive of the nation will be believers, which will make Israel a Christian nation.

Then an innumerable crowd from all over the earth is seen in heaven. It is not the same group, for the first group was numbered. They are from all the ethnic groups of the earth. They have endured great tribulation. It is the worldwide church. Verses 15-17 are very much like Revelation 21:1-4. These Christians are in heaven, and their suffering is over.

HARD QUESTIONS

There are questions that are not easy to answer. What is the significance of 12 times 12? Does it represent the complete remnant of Israel rather than a literal number? What about the fact that most of the tribes are now lost? Will there literally be thousands from each tribe, or is that a symbol? Why immediately after the sealing of Israelites is the church seen in heaven? Are the 144,000 sealed for protection on the earth through something that the church will not go through?

At the **seventh seal** there was silence for half an hour. Nothing happened immediately, except that John saw seven angels with trumpets. Apparently the seven trumpets announce the events of the seventh seal.

PASSAGE VI: THE SEVEN TRUMPETS (REVELATION 8:2-11:19)

Note to class leader: It is not necessary for the group to read this complete passage together. Sections may be selected for examination and discussion as the group studies the information below.

The seven trumpets announce the events of the seventh seal.

Before the trumpets, a censer containing the prayers of the saints is thrown into the earth. The prayers for the coming of God's kingdom are about to be fulfilled.

The trumpets announce acts of God. God is in control of everything that happens in the apocalypse, but throughout the period, the actions of wicked men also cause conditions on the earth. The trumpets announce events that are obviously powerful acts of God.

First Trumpet: Hail, fire, and blood fall on the earth, destroying much of the vegetation.

Second Trumpet: A burning mountain falls into the sea. $\frac{1}{3}$ of sea becomes blood. $\frac{1}{3}$ of sea creatures and ships are destroyed.

Third Trumpet: A burning star falls on the rivers. $\frac{1}{3}$ of waters are poisoned.

Fourth Trumpet: $\frac{1}{3}$ of the light from the sun and stars is darkened.

Fifth Trumpet: Creatures come from the bottomless pit that look like locusts and sting like scorpions. They torment the people of the earth for five months. They are led by Apollyon, an evil angel. People try to kill themselves but cannot.

Sixth Trumpet: Four angels are released from the Euphrates River which cause an army of 200 million to attack the people of the earth. $\frac{1}{3}$ of the population of earth is killed. The survivors do not repent.

Revelation 10 is an inserted description of an angel that announces the end of time. The passage says that in the events of the seventh angel, final prophecies will be fulfilled (10:7).

Revelation 11:1-13 is another inserted description. The Gentiles take Jerusalem for 42 months, and two witnesses preach in Jerusalem for the same period. This does not mean that this period of time occurs between the sixth trumpet and the seventh trumpet. It is an inserted description of the second half of the seven-year tribulation period.

The witnesses are miraculously protected by God until their ministry is finished, then they are killed, but are resurrected and taken to heaven. Their names are not given. Some people believe that they are Moses and Elijah because of the kind of miracles they do (11:6). The simplest explanation is that they are two believers living on the earth at that time, chosen by God for this special ministry.

Seventh Trumpet: There is an announcement that the kingdoms of the world now belong to Christ and that the time of judgment has come.

BELIEVERS AND ISRAEL

Will believers be on the earth during the sounding of the trumpets? There is no mention of believers except in the vision that shows them in heaven. Nobody repents after the sixth trumpet (Revelation 9:20), which could imply that believers are no longer on the earth. However, the apostle Paul said that believers will be taken up at the “last trumpet” (1 Corinthians 15:52). Was he referring to the same series of trumpets in Revelation?

What about Israel? The locusts sting the people who do not have the seal, which could imply that the sealed people are still on the earth and protected by God (9:4). The sealed people are believers from Israel (Revelation 7:4) and are still on the earth at the time that they are sealed. The seal identifies them as the ones protected by God on the earth while these things are happening (7:3).

PASSAGE VII: THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON (REVELATION 12)

» A student should read Revelation 12 for the group.

The symbols in verse 1, compared to Joseph’s dream, indicate that the woman represents Israel. The child she delivered was Jesus. The dragon (identified as Satan later) wanted to eat the child but could not. Then the woman was taken to a place where she was protected for 3 ½ years, the second half of the tribulation. The woman protected could be the remnant of Israel, called the 144,000.

After the woman is taken to the protected place, the dragon persecutes those who follow Christ (17). This indicates that believers are still on the earth into the second half of the tribulation.

PASSAGE VIII: THE BEAST AND HIS MARK (REVELATION 13)

John saw a beast which was a combination of several animals (compare to Daniel 7:7). This beast represents a kingdom, similar to the way that beasts represent kingdoms in the book of Daniel. The dragon, Satan, puts his power into this kingdom. The people who serve this kingdom worship the dragon. The kingdom lasts 42 months. The kingdom is worldwide. He makes war with the “saints and overcomes them,” which means persecution of believers.

A second beast leads the world in worship of the first beast. The first beast was cured of a deadly wound, an imitation of the resurrection of Jesus. All worship him, whose names are not in the Book of Life. That statement implies that believers are still on the earth and refuse to worship him.

An image is built which is used for worship. Those who refuse to worship are killed.

The mark has commercial use, yet is connected to worship (Revelation 14:9-10).

The number of his name is 666. There have been many theories about the meaning of this number. We may not know for sure what the number means in advance; however, we can expect to recognize the fulfillment of the prophecy when it appears.

PASSAGE IX: THE REMNANT IN HEAVEN (REVELATION 14:1-5)

» A student should read Revelation 14:1-5 for the group.

The sealed Israelites are now at the throne of God; their time on the earth is finished.

We know that they were not saved by the Old Testament law or Jewish religious customs, because they are redeemed and are followers of the Lamb, who is Jesus. They are holy and righteous.

PASSAGE X: THE THREE ANNOUNCING ANGELS (REVELATION 14:6-13)

This vision describes a time before believers are taken from the earth.

The first angel preaches the gospel to every ethnic group on the earth and calls upon everyone to worship the true God. This implies that people can still repent and be converted at that time.

The second angel announces the fall of Babylon. Babylon is described extensively in Revelation 18. Babylon is used symbolically in scripture to refer to a powerful and developed institution of evil. There are various theories about what Babylon represents in the book of Revelation.

The third angel warns of the eternal damnation of those who worship the beast and take his mark.

The faith and patience of the believers is seen in their refusal to submit to the beast (12). This shows that believers are still on the earth, and there will still be martyrs after this point (13).

PASSAGE XI: TWO HARVESTS (REVELATION 14:14-20)

» A student should read Revelation 14:14-20 for the group.

Neither harvest has many details or explanation included within the passage.

The first harvest (verses 14-16) is done by Jesus, wearing a gold crown. Clouds are mentioned (as in Revelation 1:7, Daniel 7:13) to emphasize that his kingdom is heavenly and not earth-based.

The second harvest is done by an angel. The harvest is thrown into the wrath of God.

It seems that the first harvest is the removal of believers before the wrath of God. (Compare to the parable of the wheat and tares in Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.)

PASSAGE XII: THE SEVEN BOWLS (REVELATION 15-16)

This series of seven bowls is clearly identified as the wrath of God (15:1, 7).

Those who were victorious over the beast are in heaven before the wrath of God is poured out onto the earth.

1st bowl: A disease on those who had the mark of the beast.

2nd bowl: The sea is turned to blood, and all sea creatures die.

3rd bowl: The rivers are turned to blood.

4th bowl: The sun scorches the earth. People blaspheme and do not repent.

5th bowl: Poured at the throne of the beast. There is darkness and pain, but men do not repent.

6th bowl: The river Euphrates is dried to prepare for the passage of armies, and evil spirits gather the armies of the world for the battle of Armageddon.

7th bowl: The announcement is made, "It is done." The greatest earthquake of all time occurs, along with thunder, lightning, and extremely large hail.

PASSAGE XIII: BABYLON AND ITS FALL (REVELATION 17-18)

A woman in this vision is called Babylon. She is called a prostitute. She is drunk on the blood of Christians. She represents the city that rules over the kings of the earth (17:18). At the time of the writing of Revelation, the city that ruled the earth was Rome.

The woman sits on an animal with seven heads and ten horns. The animal represents a kingdom that existed before, ceased to exist, then arises again (17:8). The seven heads represent seven mountains where the city is built, which is Rome. The ten horns represent kings. The kings will eventually turn against the woman and destroy her (17:16).

Revelation 18 describes the wealth and influence of Babylon. The rulers of the earth had a relationship with her compared to fornication (18:3). Her business was so great that it made kings and businessmen wealthy in many nations. She was guilty of all kinds of established evil, and leaders everywhere participated in her evil for profit.

She will be destroyed in one day, and the rest of the world will be amazed and grieved (18:8).

PASSAGE XIV: THE COMING OF CHRIST (REVELATION 19)

- » A student should read Revelation 19 for the group.

The chapter begins with praise to God for his justice, demonstrated in his judgment of Babylon and avenging of his servants. Remember this is a primary theme of prophetic scripture.

Then a feast of celebration is announced, called a marriage feast.

Christ returns on a white horse, followed by the armies of heaven on white horses. A white horse represented conquest (see Revelation 6:2).

- » Are the armies of heaven angels or Christians?

An enormous army is gathered on earth to fight against Christ, but they are killed by his word.

- » Are the horses figurative or literal? Why do you think so?

PASSAGE XV: THE MILLENNIUM AND LAST BATTLE (REVELATION 20:1-10)

- » A student should read Revelation 20:1-10 for the group.

During a 1000-year period, Satan is confined, and the earth is ruled by those who were killed by the beast for their faithfulness to Christ.

At the end of the 1,000 years, Satan is released and gathers the nations again to rebel against God.

There is much debate over whether this passage refers to a literal period of 1,000 years and whether or not it is future or present. One indication that it is future is that it follows a resurrection of those who died for their faith.

We will study the millennium more thoroughly elsewhere in this course.

PASSAGE XVI: THE FINAL JUDGMENT (REVELATION 20:11-15)

- » A student should read Revelation 20:11-15 for the group.

Every person will stand before God to be judged for his works. Whoever is not in the Book of Life will be judged for his sins recorded in the other books.

Other references to the final judgment are 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Hebrews 9:27.

Those who are condemned are thrown into the lake of fire.

“...at [Christ’s] coming all men shall rise again with their bodies and shall give account of their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.”

Athanasian Creed

PASSAGE XVII: THE NEW JERUSALEM (REVELATION 21:1-22:5)

This passage describes eternal conditions when all sin has been removed and God’s will for the universe is fully accomplished.

A new Jerusalem descended from the sky, showing that God’s kingdom in its fullness comes from God above and is not created on the earth by human effort.

The curse that began with the first sin will be over for those who are saved. There will be no more sorrow, aging, pain, or death. Everything will be new.

Sinners who did not find salvation are excluded and are condemned to the lake of fire.

The city is square, with three gates on each side. It is of enormous measurements. It is as high as it is wide and long. It is made of jewels, showing the beauty of God’s design and also showing that his resources have no limits.

The glory of God is present throughout the city, lighting it so that no other light source is needed.

All nations will be subject to this city.

No sin will ever enter the city.

There is a river of the water of life and a tree of life. This shows a restoration of the life that was lost when Adam and Eve sinned.

The most important fact about the city is that it is the place where God's people live with him (21:3, 22:4).

PASSAGE XVIII: CLOSING EXHORTATIONS (REVELATION 22:6-21)

The apostle found out that the messenger speaking to him was a human prophet like himself.

Verse 10 says that the fulfillment of the predictions will be soon. The prophecies were written 2,000 years ago, and some of them are not yet fulfilled. In what sense was the fulfillment soon? There are at least two possible explanations.

1. The message had immediate application to the hearers.

They were enduring persecution already, and would see God's deliverance, though not the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecies. The book was not just for the people who live in the last days, but for the people who first read it. The age of the church had begun, persecution had begun, and the processes of history described in the book had already begun. They were in the last age, in which the prophecies would be fulfilled, but they lived early in the period.

PRINCIPLE FOR BIBLE INTERPRETATION

Scripture has application to every time, even if it contains predictions that will not be fulfilled soon. Therefore, we can benefit from a scripture passage even if we do not completely understand what event is predicted.

2. There would be soon fulfillments of the prophecies that were not the ultimate fulfillment.

For example, when Jerusalem was surrounded and destroyed by armies, many of the prophecies were at least partially fulfilled. Many Christian Jews at that time probably thought they were seeing the fulfillment of Revelation. So the time was soon, though there will be ultimate, more complete fulfillments in the final days.

Verses 11-12 speak of the suddenness of the Lord's coming. The person who is holy at that time will be found holy; the person who is unclean will be found unclean—there will be no time for someone to change when he sees the Lord returning.

Verse 13 mentions the title of Alpha and Omega that belongs to Jesus, first mentioned in 1:8. These terms refer to the first and last letters of the alphabet, meaning that Jesus is the beginning and end of human history, from creation to the apocalypse.

Verses 14-15 say that people have the choice of being one of God's rewarded people or a judged sinner. Those who obey God enter the city and have access to the tree of life; sinners are excluded.

Verse 17 gives an invitation. Grace is offered freely.

Verses 18-19 are a warning against changing God's words revealed in the book. Though the warning speaks specifically of the book of Revelation, it could be extended to all of scripture, because nobody has the authority to change the Word of God.

LESSON 9 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Passage Study: Make a chart of the seals, trumpets, and bowls, listing what happens with each one.
2. Writing Assignment: Revelation describes the actions of wicked people, yet also describes the control of God. How does Revelation show that the Apocalypse is God's action? Look for the centrality of God and the signs of his control. How is the control of God central to eschatology?

LESSON 10

THE MILLENNIUM

NOTE TO CLASS LEADER

Ask several students to describe what they wrote for the writing assignment as a way of re-viewing the most important aspects of the book of Revelation.

INTRODUCTION

- » A student should read Revelation 20:1-6 for the group.

This passage describes a specific 1000-year period. It is the last period of human history on the earth before the judgment. The judgment ends all sin and marks the beginning of the new heaven and earth.

In eschatology, this period is called the millennium. According to the passage, those who died in persecution during the tribulation period are resurrected to rule with Christ on the earth. Satan is confined during this time. At the end of that period Satan is released, and there is one more great rebellion of the nations against God.

For other examples of passages about the millennium, see Isaiah 2:2-4 and Isaiah 60:9-12, and Micah 4:1-3. It does not seem that these prophecies have yet been literally fulfilled in history.

Note to class leader: The course has not yet prepared the students to answer the question below, but the question will introduce the following section.

- » Should we expect that this is a literal period of time in the future, or should we understand these passages a different way?

EARLY CHURCH BELIEFS OF THE MILLENNIUM

The statements below are from people who lived very early in the church. They show the beliefs that were common in the church during the first few centuries.

Epistle of Barnabas (1st Century) “After 6,000 years of human history Christ will come, destroy the Antichrist, and set up his kingdom.”

Polycarp (70-155) “If we live for him in the present age, we will be raised and reign with him in the age to come.”

Papias (80-163) “After the resurrection of the saints will be the personal rule of Christ on the earth.”

Justin Martyr (100-164) “After the resurrection of the saints they will rule 1,000 years in a literal Jerusalem, then will come the judgment.”

Irenaeus (130-202) “The Antichrist will rule 3 ½ years in Jerusalem, Israel will be restored, after the resurrection of the saints they will rule.”

Tertullian (160-220) “After the resurrection will be a literal 1,000-year reign in Jerusalem.”

OLD TESTAMENT PREDICTIONS OF THE MILLENNIUM

Several Old Testament passages seem to describe the millennium period. We will study some of them in this part of the lesson.

- » Work together to look at each passage and write down a list of the most important details. Some details for each passage are printed with the references.

Zechariah 8:22, Zechariah 14:9, 16-17. The Lord will be king over all the earth, and no other Lord will exist. All nations will come to Jerusalem to worship.

Isaiah 11:1-10. Christ will provide justice for the poor of the world and kill the wicked. Animals will not be harmful in the “holy mountain.” The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

Jeremiah 3:17. Jerusalem will be called the “throne of the Lord” and all nations will come and will not follow their own ways.

Micah 4:1-5. Jerusalem will be the capital of the world. Nations will go to Jerusalem to learn about God. There will be no more war.

Jeremiah 23:5. Christ will accomplish justice as the ruler of the earth.

Isaiah 60:1-16, Isaiah 61:6. All nations serve Israel and give offerings to Jerusalem.

Isaiah 65:17-25. Jerusalem will be filled with joy and no more weeping. All will live to an old age. Wild animals will not be harmful.

DIFFERING CONCEPTS OF THE MILLENNIUM

Christians do not all interpret the passages about the millennium the same way. The differences are not just small details, but radically different concepts.

In this lesson we will look at three different concepts of the millennium.

Note to class leader: Try to avoid having much debate about the three concepts of the millennium as each is studied. The students can debate opinions later, but in this part of the lesson, focus on understanding each concept.

Postmillennialism

The prefix *post* means “after.” It refers to the idea that the return of Christ will come at the very end of human history, rather than at the beginning of a literal 1,000-year period.

According to this concept, the societies and governments of the world will gradually be completely Christianized by the spread of the gospel and the work of Christian reformers. All nations will become Christian nations. In that sense they will be ruled by Christ through Christian leaders. Satan is confined figuratively in the sense that he cannot stop the gospel from transforming the world.

The period is not necessarily a literal 1,000 years, but simply a very long time. At the end of this period, Christ will return.

Postmillennialism has been believed by some great revivalists and social reformers in the past because they expected the work of the gospel to win complete victory over the world.³⁴ People who defend this concept say that it is consistent with the way God works with people, desiring to convert them with the gospel rather than coming to take over a rebellious world by force.

Other Christians disagree with postmillennialism because of the apocalyptic scriptures, which describe Jesus coming with power, destroying evil forces in a great battle after his faithful people have been persecuted. (1) Apocalyptic scripture does not seem to be consistent with gradual transformation of the world. (2) Apocalyptic scripture seems to describe Jesus as a conqueror of a rebellious world rather than a king coming to a Christian world. An example of an apocalyptic passage is Revelation 19:11-21.

Another reason for disagreement with postmillennialism is that some of the details of the millennium provided in scripture do not seem to fit this view, even if they are explained figuratively. For example, what does it mean that the martyrs of the tribulation are resurrected to rule?

34 Examples are William Booth and Charles Finney.

Amillennialism

The prefix *a* means “not,” meaning that there is not a millennium. Those who have this belief do not believe that the millennium is a literal 1,000-year period.

Amillennialists believe that the predictions of the millennium are being fulfilled spiritually in the church. Christ is ruling through the work of the church, and Satan is figuratively confined because he cannot resist the church.

In amillennialism Israel is no longer significant in the plan of God because the church is now the people of God. The promises to Israel of an earthly kingdom are fulfilled spiritually in the church.

The biblical details of the millennium are all interpreted figuratively and spiritually by amillennialists. The promises made to Israel are fulfilled for the church, but spiritually instead of physically. The church rules the nations by evangelizing them.

Amillennialism resembles postmillennialism in some aspects. However, there is at least one large difference. Postmillennialism teaches that many of the prophecies will ultimately be fulfilled literally by the work of the church, such as world peace and the Christianizing of all nations. Amillennialism must find ways to explain that the prophecies are being fulfilled right now in the world as it is.

Some people object to amillennialism because it rejects almost all literal interpretation of the prophecies. This means that those who received the Old Testament promises could not have understood what they meant, even partially.

Another objection to amillennialism is that even when the promises are spiritualized, it is difficult to understand how their fulfillment is already reality, especially the claim that the saints are ruling and Satan is confined.

Premillennialism

The prefix *pre* means “before,” referring to the idea that Jesus will return to earth before the millennium.

According to premillennialists, Christ will return physically and establish a worldwide kingdom for 1,000 years. They interpret literally the details of the predictions of this period. They believe that Israel is still important in God’s plan. They believe that Jerusalem will be the center of Christ’s kingdom on earth, and that martyred Christians will be resurrected to rule with him.

- » Look at the details listed for each passage (above) and consider how the passage would be interpreted by a postmillennialist, an amillennialist, and a premillennialist.

A good interpretation (1) will be a meaning that was significant to the first hearers and (2) will expect a fulfillment that is truly consistent with the description given by the passage.

DISPENSATIONALISM VERSUS COVENANT THEOLOGY

Theologians have tried to understand the relationship between Israel and the church.

Questions include these: Were people in the Old Testament saved a different way from the people of the New Testament? Do God's promises to Israel apply to the church also? Is Israel still special in God's plan?

One explanation of the relationship between Israel and the church has been called "dispensationalism." Other theologians have disagreed with dispensationalism and have developed an explanation that has sometimes been called "covenant theology."

Dispensationalism

The term *dispensation* comes from the concept that there are different periods of human history where God deals differently with people, providing salvation through different means. A period of time when God uses a specific plan of salvation is called a dispensation.

Some theologians divided human history into many dispensations. The two periods that most affect biblical interpretation are based on a distinction between Israel and the church. According to dispensationalism, Old Testament Israelites were saved by following the Mosaic law and system of sacrifices, and New Testament believers are saved by grace through faith. The church is completely distinct from Israel, and God deals with them differently.

Dispensationalists think that because the two systems of salvation are so different, both could not go on simultaneously on earth; therefore, they believe that the church will be removed from the earth for a period of seven years. During the seven years, God will restore the previous system of salvation with Israel. Israel will accept Jesus as their Messiah. After the seven-year period will be a thousand-year period when Jesus will visibly rule in Jerusalem. Dispensationalists believe that all of God's promises to Israel about land and the kingdom will be literally fulfilled.

Dispensationalism makes the Old Testament less useful for Christians, because they believe it was addressed to Israel under a different dispensation. They use the stories of the Old Testament to illustrate truths, but they often reject any teaching that is based on Old Testament passages and try to follow only the New Testament. They also believe that much of Christ's teaching in the Gospels does not apply to Christians because it was addressed to Jews.

Many people who do not know the term *dispensationalism* have been influenced by its ideas. Often people refuse to accept the authority of the Old Testament even though the New Testament writers obviously considered it to be their authority.

Covenant Theology

According to covenant theology, Israel is no longer the people of God and has little significance in eschatology. They believe that because Israel rejected Christ, God has formed a new nation called the church.

The church is now the people of God and receives the promises given to the people of God, including the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament. The nation of Israel has no rights to the promises of God now. In Galatians 6:16, the church is called the “Israel of God.”

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God (Romans 2:28-29).

Know you therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, in thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.... That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.... There is neither Jew nor Greek.... And if you be Christ's, then are you Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:7-9, 14, 28-29).

1 Peter 2:5-10 describes the church as the priesthood that offers spiritual sacrifices, a holy nation, and the people of God.

Hebrews 12:22 says that believers enter the “heavenly Jerusalem.” Galatians 4:25-26 says that believers enter the Jerusalem that is above instead of the Jerusalem on earth.

Because covenant theology says that the promises made to Israel are transferred to the church, they think that the promises are fulfilled spiritually instead of literally. Promises of the throne of Christ established in Jerusalem, peace, Israel as leader of the world, all nations being taught by Israel, eternal possession of the promised land, and tameness of wild animals must all be spiritualized in order to be fulfilled in the church. The promises are all interpreted to have spiritual meaning instead of literal meaning.

Most people who believe this theology do not believe in a literal rule of Christ on the earth for a thousand-year period. They believe that Christ and the saints rule now spiritually through the influence of the gospel. They believe that the promise to Abraham that his descendants

would possess Canaan forever is fulfilled by present believers possessing salvation. They believe that instead of Jerusalem, the church teaches the nations.

A Balanced View

Many theologians today have tried to come to a balance between dispensationalism and covenant theology.

There are problems with dispensationalism. The apostle Paul told Timothy that the scriptures (the Old Testament) taught salvation (2 Timothy 3:15). Jesus said that Nicodemus should already know about the new birth because he was a teacher of the Old Testament (John 3:10). The New Testament says that a believer is now the true Israelite and child of Abraham (Romans 2:28-29, Galatians 3:28-29). Romans 4:1-8 says that we have the same salvation that Abraham and David had. The Old Testament sacrifices did not take away sin (Hebrews 10:4). Therefore, it seems wrong to think that the Old Testament and New Testament provided different ways of salvation.

There are also problems with covenant theology. To say that the Old Testament promises are fulfilled spiritually is to allow imaginary interpretations that cannot be proved. Also, this interpretation loses the original meaning. If covenant theology is right, Abraham and others could not understand the promises, even though they thought they did. For example, God promised Abraham that his children would possess land forever, but it really meant that Gentiles would be saved.

In the prophets are numerous promises of restoration and salvation for Israel. An example is Jeremiah 30-32, three chapters that describe God's promise to regather Israel and rebuild them (30:18). God reassures them that he will be their God (30:22); he will never give up until it is accomplished (30:24); he loves them everlastingly (31:3); he remembers Ephraim as a son and will have mercy on him (32:20); he will write his laws on their heart (32:33); and all will know him and they will be forgiven (32:34). God's conclusion in 31:35-37 is that it is just as impossible for him to reject Israel for their sin as it is for the sun to fail or for heaven to be measured. Can this passage be consistent with the idea that God will take these promises from Israel and give them to someone else?

“By his action, through the mediation of his servant, God will realize [bring to reality] the salvation of his covenant people. His people will dwell securely in the land God will give them and exhibit the righteousness of their Lord.”

William Dyrness,

Themes in Old Testament Theology

Covenant theology denies that Israel is still significant in God's plan, but the apostle Paul said that Israel as a nation would someday be saved and that God's covenant with them would be fulfilled (Romans 11:26-29). He is not talking about the church, because throughout this chapter he distinguishes between Israel and the church.

A balanced view of Israel and the church will include an understanding of the various promises in the Old Testament.

PROMISES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. Promises of Spiritual Blessings

Salvation is by grace and is obtained by repentance and faith by Jew and Gentile in any period of history. The basis of God's acceptance of an individual was always the same (Isaiah 60:1-7). There is no need for Israel and the church to have separate turns on the earth, because the plan of salvation is the same for both. Romans 4:9-16 says that believers become the children of Abraham because they believe the gospel like he did; therefore, in every age true believers are the children of God. The covenant of grace was given to Israel (Jeremiah 31:33-34). We share in the blessings of Abraham just as any other believer, whether Jew or Gentile. The promises are not taken from Israel but only extended also to Gentiles, and those who are converted are the church.

2. Promises of Principle

Many promises describe God's usual way of taking care of the people who are in obedient relationship with him. An example is Psalm 23. These promises show the nature of God revealed in relationship. These principles are the same in any time and place, with Israel or the church.

3. National Promises

Jesus was the Messiah of the Jews. Someday Israel as a nation will turn to Christ (Romans 11:26). God promised that he would not reject the nation permanently (Jeremiah 31:35-37). He will fulfill his promises to them.

LESSON 10 ASSIGNMENTS

1. **Passage Study:** Study the scripture passages provided in the section of this lesson called “Old Testament Predictions of the Millennium.” Explain what you think fulfillment of the predictions would be, based on your view of the millennium.
2. **Writing Assignment:** Explain which of the three views of the millennium you believe is right and provide reasons.

LESSON 11

THE GREAT TRIBULATION

NOTE TO CLASS LEADER

In this lesson the students will study the biblical description of the period called “the tribulation” in eschatology. The issue of when Jesus will return for believers will be discussed later. Try to avoid debate of that question in this lesson.

THE CONCEPT OF THE TRIBULATION

The word *tribulation* is generally used to refer to suffering and does not always refer to a specific period, even when the word occurs in the Bible.

In eschatology, the term is used to refer to the concept of the specific seven-year predicted period. Sometimes the term used is *great tribulation*.

Some scriptural passages that use the term *tribulation* to refer to this specific period are Matthew 24:21, 29, Mark 13:24, and Revelation 7:14.

Not all theologians agree that the tribulation is predicted in scripture, and theologians do not agree on the order of prophetic events in relation to the tribulation.

The seven-year tribulation is described as a period of world-wide suffering. People will suffer conditions that are manmade, such as war and famine, and also conditions that come from the judgment of God. There will be war among various groups of nations. War will affect the whole world. Human governments will be wicked and will persecute the people who are faithful to God, killing many. The world will unite under an evil leader called the Antichrist who will demand worship. The Antichrist will attack Israel. During the tribulation, Israel will recognize that Jesus is their Messiah and find salvation.

BIBLICAL REFERENCES TO A SEVEN-YEAR TRIBULATION

This section describes the biblical passages that refer to a period of seven years or a period of three and a half years that could be half of a seven-year period.

Daniel 9:24-27

The word *week* in this passage simply means seven. Verse 24 states the purpose of the seven—to end the sin of Israel and make them a righteous nation. A future prince will make a seven-year covenant but break it in the middle. The sacrifices of the temple will stop. With abominations (idols implied), he will make the temple desolate until the “consummation.” Consummation means fulfillment of the purposes stated in verse 24. According to this interpretation, the prince is the Antichrist.

Long after the prophecies of Daniel were written, many of them seemed to be fulfilled by a ruler called Antiochus Epiphanes. He was a foreign conqueror who put an image of himself in the temple to be worshipped (168 B.C.). The Jews rebelled and fought a war for 3 ½ years. During that time, the sacrifices in the temple stopped. These events seem to fulfill the prophecies of Daniel. However, Jesus lived long after those events and implied that the prophecies of Daniel had not yet been fulfilled. See Matthew 24:15.

An alternative interpretation is that the prince is the Messiah. He confirmed the covenant of salvation by his death. He was cut off after the first half week, which was his ministry of 3 ½ years. The second half of the week is the church age, which is not a literal 3 ½ years. The desolation of the temple means that he made the sacrifices unnecessary. The present condition will continue until the consummation at the end of the church age. The abomination is his death on the cross, because it was so perceived by the Jews.

» What problems do you see with the alternative interpretation?

There are several problems with the alternative interpretation. According to this interpretation, the first half of the week is a literal 3 ½ years, but not the second half, which is inconsistent. The passage does not give any reason for us to think that the “abomination” is actually something good that wicked people called an abomination. See also Daniel 11:31, which seems to say that the abomination is a thing placed in the temple.

Daniel 11:31

The sanctuary is polluted, the sacrifices stop, and something placed in the temple is an abomination that makes desolate.

Daniel 12:6-7, 11

From a certain point in time until the end will be a time, times, and half a time. This seems to mean 3 ½ years, especially when compared to verse 11.

From the time that the sacrifice ends and the abomination is set up until the end will be 1290 days, which is approximately 3 ½ years.

Revelation 11:2

Jerusalem will be possessed by Gentiles 42 months. Two witnesses preach during that period.

Revelation 13:4-5

The Antichrist demands worship and continues 42 months.

Revelation 12:6, 14

The woman who represents Israel is protected and provisioned for 1260 days, which is approximately 3 ½ years.

Verse 14 says that she is provisioned for a time, times, and a half a time, which seems to mean 3 ½ years, especially compared to verse 6. Notice the similarity to Daniel 12:6-7, 11.

The scripture passages in this section are some of the evidence that theologians use to teach that the Bible predicts a specific seven-year period.

THE PASSAGES IN THE GOSPELS

Three of the Gospels are called the “synoptic Gospels” because they describe the life of Jesus similarly. They record many of the same events and teachings.

Jesus told his disciples that the temple would be destroyed. They assumed that it would happen at the end of the world. Jesus’ disciples asked him to tell them about the time of his return and the end of the world. His description is in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21.

- » Read Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. List the things that will happen during the period described in these chapters. List the events in order. The following paragraph lists some of the details of these chapters.

Jesus described war, famine, and persecution. There will be false prophets and false messiahs. The gospel will be preached throughout the world. The abomination predicted by Daniel will occur. The Gentiles will invade Israel, and Israel will suffer severely. At that point will begin the worst tribulation that the world will ever experience. There will be signs in the sky, with the sun, moon, and stars. Then Christ will return, visible to all the world, and the angels will gather his people from everywhere in the world.

Some theologians teach that the predictions of these passages were already fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem. That was a period of severe suffering, and the temple was destroyed. These theologians point out that the disciples were asking when the temple would be destroyed.

- » Should we think that these predictions have already been fulfilled? Use evidence from the passages to support your opinion.

Note to class leader: After the group begins discussion, help them notice the following observations of the passage.

We can see the following in Matthew 24. Jesus seems to answer the question about his coming and the end of the world. Jesus mentioned the “end” in verses 6 and 14. Jesus said he was talking about the greatest tribulation that would ever happen in the history of the world (21). After these events, all nations of the world will see the return of Jesus (30). The series of events ends with the coming of the Lord and the gathering of his people by the angels (27, 30-31).

- » If desired, the group could look at Luke 21 and Mark 13 to make similar observations.

THE ANTICHRIST AND THE ABOMINATION

In the preceding sections of this lesson we studied some details about the seven-year Tribulation. Some of those details were about the idol called the “abomination that causes desolation.” In this section we will look at further biblical references to the abomination without reviewing what has been studied already.

Daniel 11 describes a series of international conflicts. Much of the chapter describes the wars of a king who seems to be the Antichrist. Much of this chapter was fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes. However, Daniel 12:1-2 says that at that time will be a time of trouble greater than ever before, but the Jews who are “written in the book” will be delivered. It also says there will be a resurrection. Apparently the ultimate fulfillment of this passage will be in the last days.

Jesus implied that the abomination predicted by Daniel was still in the future (Matthew 24:15-16). He said it would be something that will “stand in the holy place.” The placement of this thing will be followed by an invasion of Jerusalem. A terrible period of suffering for Israel will begin at that time (Luke 21:20).

The apostle Paul referred to a person that will come before the coming of the Lord and will claim to be God and expect worship in the temple (2 Thessalonians 2:1-9). He will perform miracles that will deceive the world. He will be destroyed at the return of Christ.

Even if the Jews at first think the Antichrist is their messiah, they will not be willing to worship him, for God commanded a strict distinction between king and priest; and their strict view of monotheism would not allow them to worship even the messiah anyway. Their refusal to worship him causes him to break the covenant that he made with them (Daniel 9:27).

- » Look at Revelation 13:7-8, 13:15-17, and Revelation 14:9-11 together.

In Revelation 13 the kingdom of the Antichrist is symbolized by a monstrous animal. The passage then calls the Antichrist the “Beast,” because he is the ruler of this kingdom. Satan is called the dragon in this passage and elsewhere in the book of Revelation. The whole world, except for Christians, worship the Antichrist (13:8). The world is deceived by miracles (13:12). The world worships an image of the Antichrist (13:12-15).

These verses say that the Antichrist will become ruler over the whole earth and be worshipped by everyone except Christians. Those who refuse to worship him will be killed. Business is made impossible for those who do not take his mark, which represents worship of him.

Loyalty to the Antichrist is rebellion against God, and anyone who takes the mark is condemned to eternal punishment.

We should not assume that the authority of the Antichrist is absolute or that his laws are completely enforced everywhere in the world. Daniel 11:21-45 describes the Antichrist in constant international conflict. He never succeeds in establishing world peace. That means that some nations will not be under his complete control.

- » A student should read Zechariah 14 for the group.

Zechariah 14 seems to describe the last days (especially verses 9 and 16-17). People from all nations will come every year to worship God at Jerusalem. But Revelation 14:9-11 says that any person who takes the mark of the beast is condemned to eternal punishment. The Antichrist will make a law requiring everyone to take the mark and worship him, but apparently he does not succeed in implementing the mark for every person everywhere.

“By means of [the Antichrist] as viceroy, Satan makes one last attempt to establish himself finally and immovably as master of this planet and the race upon it.”

Purkiser, Taylor, and Taylor

God, Man, and Salvation

ARMAGEDDON

- » A student should read Revelation 16:13-16 for the group.

A great battle occurs at the end of the tribulation. All the armies of the world gather for the battle. It happens at the “day of God Almighty,” which seems to be a variation of the term *day of the Lord*.

It is hard to understand the intentions of leaders who would gather to fight God. Do they know that they are fighting God? Some scholars have said that maybe armies will gather to fight each other for control of the earth, and then God's army will be the last one to come. If that is correct, then a series of battles may occur, and Christ will be the victor of the last battle.

Daniel 11:40-45 may describe conflicts that happen near the end. The passage seems to predict events of the last days, because the events are followed by the resurrection and eternal reward (Daniel 12:2-3).

» A student should read Revelation 19:11-21 for the group.

The return of Jesus with his army is described in Revelation 19:11-21. Verse 19 says that the Antichrist and the armies of the world gather to fight against Christ, which implies that this is the battle of Armageddon.

The battle will not be a typical conflict between armies. Christ will destroy his enemies by his spoken word (verse 21).

The battle of Armageddon will be a demonstration of the power of God over the earth, beyond any demonstration in history. The faith of Christians will be proved true after centuries of living in a world that seems to be controlled by the power of men who ignore God. The time will come when God will not be ignored by anyone.

THE THESSALONIAN CONCERN

In an earlier lesson we looked at 2 Thessalonians 1. Now we will look at the continuation of that eschatological message.

The Thessalonians were worried that the day of the Lord was going to happen soon. Some thought it may have passed already. They didn't know how the expectation of that event should affect their lives. That issue is very relevant to people who expect that the last days could be soon.

» The group should look at 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17 together.

Notice that the first three verses talk about a misuse of eschatology. Someone was confusing the church. They were not sure what they should do. The apostle said that this wrong teaching was deceiving them.

Verses 3-9 describe a person called "the man of sin" who demands worship in the temple and will be destroyed at the coming of Christ. The apostle told them that they should not expect the day of the Lord before those things happened.

The conclusion is in verses 15-17, starting with the word *therefore*. Paul told them to continue in the Christian life they had learned. They were to continue to speak the words and do the works that pleased God.

LESSON 11 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Writing Assignment: Does the Bible predict a specific, future, seven-year period called the tribulation? Prove your answer from scripture.
2. Passage Study: Prepare a lesson or sermon on 2 Thessalonians 2. You can add eschatological material from other places in scripture. Be sure that you make the same main point at the end that the apostle made.

LESSON 12

THE RAPTURE

OVERVIEW

The term *rapture* refers to the event when Christ returns to take believers from the earth. Scripture does not use the term *rapture*, but it describes the event.

We will begin this lesson by looking at two passages that describe the rapture.

- » Look at 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 together. Ask some students to describe what happens in the passage.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 says that the Lord will return with the sound of a trumpet, and at that time believers who have died will rise. All believers will rise together in the air to meet the Lord.

- » What does verse 13 show that the Thessalonians were worried about?

It seems that the Thessalonian believers were anticipating the return of Christ, but they were worried about believers who had already died. Maybe they thought that someone who died before the return of Christ would not be included in Christ's kingdom. The apostle assured them that the believers who died will be resurrected and included. Therefore, Christians do not grieve without hope for believers who have died.

- » Look at 1 Corinthians 15:50-53 together. Ask some students to describe what happens in the passage.

1 Corinthians 15:50-53 says that the Lord will come very suddenly, at the sound of the last trumpet. At that time the dead will be raised in glorified bodies, and living believers will also be changed.

- » What does verse 50 say is the reason that believers must be changed into an immortal form?

This passage comes in a chapter about the resurrection. Some of the Corinthian Christians did not understand

“Man’s ultimate perfection demands the reunion of soul and body.”

Thomas Aquinas,
Compendium of Theology

that the doctrine of the resurrection is necessary for the Christian faith. Throughout the chapter, Paul gave many reasons that this doctrine is important. In these verses he said that a person in his natural form cannot enter into the eternal conditions of the kingdom of God. Whether a believer is alive or dead at the return of Christ, he will be changed into an immortal form.

» What are some reasons that Christians will rejoice at the return of Jesus?

We will rejoice at the end of our persecution and other suffering (2 Thessalonians 1:7). We will rejoice about those who found salvation through our ministry (1 Thessalonians 2:19).

» Look at 1 John 3:1-3 together.

1 John 3:1-3 says that because we are already the sons of God, we are different from the world. However, believers are not yet in the physical form they will have in eternity. At the return of Christ we will see him in his glorified form, and we will be changed to be like him.

A person who lives with this anticipation will be spiritually and morally pure because he wants to be like Jesus. It would not make sense for a person to say that he wants to be like Jesus in heaven but not want to be like him in his purity on earth.

Another passage that makes a connection between holy living and our expectation of a change at the return of the Lord is Philippians 3:20-21.

Paul prayed that the Thessalonian believers would be established in love so that they would be blameless in spirit, soul, and body at the return of Christ. His prayer was not that they would be made holy at the return of Christ, but that they would be made holy for Christian living and found holy at the return of Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

» Different students should read Matthew 24:30-31, Mark 13:26-27, and Luke 21:27-28 for the group.

The coming of the Lord and gathering of his people are described in these passages in the gospels. Not all theologians believe that these verses describe the rapture, for at least two reasons:

1. They believe that the rapture will occur before the tribulation, but the passages in the gospels put the return of Christ at the end.
2. They believe that the rapture will be seen only by believers, but these passages say that everyone in the world will see Christ's return.

In this lesson we will study the controversy of whether Christ will return before, during, or after the tribulation. It is important to remember that a person's opinion in this controversy

does not determine whether or not he is a true Christian. The return of Christ is a necessary Christian doctrine, but the time of his return is not. A Christian may have a strong opinion based on his understanding of the Bible's statements, but he should not break fellowship with a believer who has a different opinion.

EARLY CHURCH BELIEFS ABOUT THE RAPTURE

The Didache³⁵

This writing warned believers not to fall away from their faith during the rule of the Antichrist.

There “shall appear the deceiver of the world as a Son of God, and shall do signs and wonders, and the earth shall be given over into his hands ... and many shall be offended and be lost, but they who endure in their faith shall be saved ... then shall the world see the Lord coming on the clouds of heaven.”

The Shepherd of Hermas³⁶

The writer warned believers of a great future persecution. He said that if the church is warned to keep its faith, the trial will be as nothing.

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr was a defender of the Christian faith who ultimately died for his witness. He wrote of the return of Christ, “He shall come from heaven with glory when the man of apostasy, who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful things on the earth against us Christians” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 110).

Irenaeus

Irenaeus was a bishop in the 2nd century. He spoke of the ten kingdoms represented by ten horns in Daniel, who “shall give their kingdoms to

“While tradition does not provide authority, it would nevertheless be difficult to suppose that God had left His people in ignorance of an essential truth for nineteen centuries.”

George Eldon Ladd

The Blessed Hope

“Every church father who deals with the subject expects the church to suffer at the hands of Antichrist.”

George Eldon Ladd,

The Blessed Hope

³⁵ *The Didache* was a summary of Christian doctrine written in the 2nd century.

³⁶ *The Shepherd of Hermas* was used in churches as devotional material from approximately 150 A.D.

the beast and put the church to flight. After that they shall be destroyed by the coming of our Lord” (*Against Heresies*, 5-26-1). “And for this cause tribulation is necessary for those who are saved... that they may be fitted for the royal banquet” (27-4). He refers to believers who survive the tribulation as “those whom the Lord shall find in the flesh, awaiting him from heaven, and who have suffered tribulation, as well as escaped the hands of the Wicked one” (35-1).

Tertullian

Tertullian described the day of Lord, identified by signs and wonders, the destruction of the earth, and war among nations. He then quoted the verse that tells believers “Watch therefore and pray always that you may be considered worthy to escape all these things and stand before the Son of Man,” and then said that this salvation will be after all of those things have happened.

Lactantius

Lactantius was a Latin church leader in the third century. Describing the rule of the Antichrist, he predicted that two thirds of believers will die as martyrs during that time. God will send the “Great King” to rescue them and destroy the wicked (*Divine Institutes*, 7).

Hippolytus

Hippolytus was bishop of Rome in the 3rd century. Describing the rule of the Antichrist, he said, “We ought in fear to keep faithfully what has been told us by the blessed prophets, in order that when these things come to pass we may be prepared for them, and not be deceived.” He said that after the abomination of desolation, “what remains but the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ from heaven, for whom we have looked and hoped.... For the Lord says, ‘And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption comes near.’” He believed that the coming of Jesus at the end of the tribulation is the coming that believers are waiting for.

THE DOCTRINE OF A PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE

The doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture was first taught in 1827 by John Darby, a pastor in a group called the Plymouth Brethren, in Ireland.

According to the doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture, the rapture will occur before the tribulation, and believers will not be on the earth during this period. The rapture will be sudden and secret, seen only by Christians. The world will know only that the Christians are suddenly gone.

Jesus will return at the end of the tribulation as a conquering king, bringing judgment to the world. This coming will be visible to the whole world. This coming is called the “day of the Lord.”

During the tribulation period, God will punish the world and will deal with Israel to bring that nation to repentance. Some who believe this doctrine believe that the Holy Spirit will not be active on the earth during this time, and it will be impossible for a sinner to repent and be converted.

Below we will consider reasons that people hold the doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture. Not all people who hold that doctrine would use all of these reasons. After each reason, we will consider how people would respond who do not believe the reason to be valid.

1. God always removes his people before punishing the wicked. For example, Noah was removed before the flood, and Lot was removed before the destruction of Sodom.

Response: Noah and Lot were not removed from a period of suffering, but from a time when everyone else would be destroyed. Noah was not taken from the earth but protected on the earth.

2. God does not want believers to suffer his wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

Response: Many of the conditions of the tribulation are manmade and not directly God's wrath. In all ages, Christians have suffered earthly conditions. Events near the end of the tribulation are specifically the wrath of God (Revelation 15:1, 7). God could protect his people on the earth or remove them near the end of the period before his wrath is poured onto the earth.

3. In Revelation 4:1 a door is opened and John is taken into heaven. This symbolizes the rapture happening before the tribulation.

Response: This is making the author a symbol in his own writing. John mentions himself several times throughout the book and could not symbolize the church each time.

4. The word *church* does not occur throughout most of the book of Revelation. That means that the church is not present during those events.

Response: The word church also does not occur in the passages about the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, 1 Corinthians 15:51-52), but we know that the church will be there. Believers are mentioned several times in the book of Revelation (Revelation 13:14).

5. In Revelation 4:4, twenty-four elders are before the throne. They represent the church, showing that the church is in heaven before the tribulation.

Response: Even if they symbolize or represent the church, it is not necessary that the church is there. John did see the church as a great crowd in Revelation 7:9-14.

6. In 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8, we read that the Holy Spirit must be removed before the Anti-christ is revealed. If the Holy Spirit is gone from the world, the church must be gone also.

Response: It is not reasonable to think that the Holy Spirit must leave the world in order to allow something to happen. God often chooses to allow something to happen. God is present everywhere always. If the Holy Spirit were not present during the tribulation, Israel could not be converted.

7. Jesus promised the believers at Philadelphia that they would be protected from the hour of temptation that is coming upon the whole world. Therefore, faithful believers will not go through the seven-year tribulation period.

Response: Faithful churches have suffered in many periods of history. The Greek term translated protected occurs elsewhere in scripture. In John 17:15 Jesus prayed that believers would be protected from evil while in the world. Galatians 1:4 says that we are protected from this evil age, though we still live in it. Obviously, it is not necessary for someone to be removed from the world to have God's protection.

» How could the same reason and response be seen in Luke 21:36?

After listing tribulation events in Luke 21, Jesus told believers that these were signs they would see (verses 28 and 31). Apparently believers would be on earth to see these things.

8. Matthew 24:22 promises that the time will be shortened for the sake of the elect. That means that God's people will be taken out early.

Response: The passage says that because of the conditions on the earth, nobody would survive if God did not bring it to an end. He will bring it to an end for the sake of his people, which would not be necessary if they were not still on the earth.

9. Jesus said we cannot know the time of his return. That would not be true if we will know that he will come seven years after the tribulation begins.

Response: We still do not know when the tribulation will begin. Even during the tribulation, we may not know exactly when it began. Therefore, we will not be able to predict exactly when Jesus will return. However, Jesus said that we can recognize when his return is near because of events on the earth (Luke 21:31).

10. Dispensationalism believes that Israel and the church are completely separated in God's plan, with different plans of salvation. Therefore, the church must be taken off the earth while God deals with Israel.

Response: There is only one way to be saved, by grace through faith, for Jew or Gentile (Romans 3:22, 29-30). It is not necessary for the church to be gone from the earth while God deals with Israel.

11. Jesus said for us to watch and be ready for him to return at any time. The doctrine of imminence is that there is no event that must happen before we expect the return of Christ.

Response: Jesus told the disciples that Jerusalem would be destroyed (Luke 13:35), Peter would get old and die (John 21:18-23), and the gospel would be preached throughout the world (Matthew 24:14). Therefore, they did not expect him to return before those things happened.

The purpose of the Gospels passage (Matthew 24, Luke 21, and Mark 13) is that the church be able to recognize the last days.

Paul told the Thessalonian church that several events must happen before the return of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4).

WHY ARE WE TOLD TO WATCH AND BE READY?

The New Testament exhortations to watch always use the Greek words that mean soberness, alertness, and vigilance, instead of the Greek word that means to focus attention on something specific. We are not commanded to watch for Christ's coming but to be spiritually alert when his coming seems delayed.

Here are some scriptural examples of times when people were supposed to be on guard.

- Official guarding is mentioned in Matthew 14:25, Matthew 27:65, Matthew 28:11, Mark 6:48, and Luke 12:38.
- In Matthew 26:38 the disciples were not told to watch for something in particular, but to stay awake and alert.
- In Luke 2:8, shepherds were keeping watch over their flock.
- In Acts 20:31, Paul warned the church to watch because deceivers would come after his departure.
- Hebrews 13:17 says that pastors watch for the souls under their care.
- In Revelation 3:2-3, their failure to watch was allowing spiritual things to die.
- In several scriptures, believers are told to watch but are not told to watch for something in particular (1 Corinthians 16:13, 1 Peter 4:7, and Colossians 4:2). In all these examples, they were not to watch for a future event but to guard against a present danger.

So why are we supposed to be watchful because we expect the coming of the Lord? His coming will be unexpected for those who become oriented to this world during the delay (Matthew 24:42-51 and Luke 21:36). If a person is spiritually asleep instead of watchful, the day of the Lord will come unexpectedly (1 Thessalonians 5:6). Servants were not ready for the master's return because they failed to guard their responsibilities (Matthew 25:13 and Mark 13:33-37).

What are we supposed to watch? We are not looking at the sky waiting for him to come. We are guarding ourselves spiritually so that we will be ready to face him when he returns.

In 2 Peter 3:10-14, the apostle tells believers that they must be spiritually alert because of the coming day of the Lord, even though he describes details that must be at the end of the tribulation. Believers know that the day of the Lord is not coming immediately, but they should live holy lives now because they know it is coming.

BELIEFS ABOUT THE TIME OF THE RAPTURE

The rapture is an event when Christ returns for His Church,³⁷ and the true believers shall be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Like the word *trinity*, the term *rapture* is not mentioned in the Bible. This term is a transliteration of the Latin word found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and translated in English as “caught up.”

The rapture will occur instantaneously in the “twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). The Bible does not teach us to determine the date of Christ's return. Instead it teaches us to “keep watch because we do not know when He will return” (Matthew 24:42).

The timing of the return of Christ has been debated since the beginning of Christianity. Many beliefs or theories have been taught through the history of the church. We will notice four main ideas that are still prevalent today.

Pre-Tribulation View

The pre-tribulation view, the standard dispensational view, teaches that the rapture will take place at the beginning of the seven-year Tribulation. This is based on the teaching that Christians are not destined to suffer the wrath of God that will be poured out during the Great Tribulation (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

37 This section was written by Sidney Grant.

Mid-Tribulation View

The mid-tribulation view is that the rapture will occur half-way through the tribulation period, which is when the antichrist will be revealed (Daniel 12:7; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12), and the Holy Spirit is taken out of the world.

Post-Tribulation View

The post-tribulation view is that the rapture will happen at the end of the tribulation period. This view will be explained later on in this chapter.

Covert or Secret View

The covert or secret view says it is possible that all these viewpoints could be wrong, and that God in His sovereignty has other plans for the future.

None of these different theories of eschatology should not be considered heresy because they do not define salvation or contradict essential doctrines. However, our view of future events does influence our decisions about time, money, and lifestyle. We all live with some view of future events. Regardless of our beliefs on eschatology, the key to eternal life and salvation centers on our belief and faith in Jesus Christ alone. Our relationship with Christ is the absolute priority.

Questions that we should study include:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different views of the rapture?
2. Are the rapture and the second coming of Christ the same event or different?

THE DOCTRINE OF A MID-TRIBULATION RAPTURE

According to the doctrine of a mid-tribulation rapture, Jesus will return for believers, including believing Israelites, in the middle of the seven-year tribulation period.

Scripture says that believers will not suffer God's wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:9). The wrath of God comes on the earth especially in the second half of the tribulation period (Revelation 15:1, 7, 16:1). Believers will be taken from the earth before the wrath of God comes. Revelation 14:14-19 describes the harvest of believers then the harvest of sinners. Revelation 15:2 shows Christians from the tribulation in heaven before the wrath of God is poured on the earth. Believers are present on the earth before the time of the wrath of God, but not during the wrath. Sinners do not repent during the time of wrath (Revelation 16:9, 11, 21).

According to mid-tribulation doctrine, the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3-12 represent the church. They witness during the first half of the tribulation, then are taken to heaven.

Mid-tribulation doctrine teaches that the woman in Revelation 12 who represents believing Israel will be raptured at the same time as the church.

The apostle Paul explained that believers would see the Antichrist demanding worship. That will happen at approximately the middle of the tribulation. According to mid-tribulation doctrine, Christians will be raptured shortly after the Antichrist is revealed.

Mid-tribulation teaching does not have supporters in early church history. Only in modern times have people developed these ideas. People who reject mid-tribulation ideas say that if they were true there should have been people in the church who believed them long ago.

The gospel passages (Matthew 24, Luke 21, and Mark 13) show a long series of events with no mention of the Lord's coming in the middle. The only return of Christ mentioned is near the end, and Christians are told to expect it then.

THE DOCTRINE OF A POST-TRIBULATION RAPTURE

According to the doctrine of a post-tribulation rapture, Jesus will come for believers at the end of the tribulation. Until the coming of Jesus, believers on the earth will suffer persecution but will be protected from the wrath of God.

Below are reasons for belief in a post-tribulation rapture.

1. The Bible seems to describe only one return of Christ.

Those who believe in a pre-tribulation or mid-tribulation rapture believe that Jesus comes back two times. They try to divide the biblical descriptions of his coming into two events. Those who believe in a post-tribulation rapture believe that all of the descriptions of the return of Christ seem to describe the same event.

The Gospels passage (Matthew 24, Luke 21, and Mark 13) gives the most thorough series of events in the tribulation. Only one coming of the Lord is mentioned. It is at the end, and believers are told to expect it then.

Three Greek words are used in the New Testament to refer to the coming of Christ. *Parousia* means coming. *Apocalypsis* means revelation. *Epiphany* means appearing.

Below is a list of the scripture passages where these terms describe the coming of the Lord.

Parousia

- 1 Thessalonians 3:13: He returns with the saints.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17: He returns for the believers, living and dead.

- 2 Thessalonians 2:8: He destroys the Antichrist when he returns. The term *epiphany* also occurs in this verse. The Thessalonians were worried that they had missed the coming of the Lord. Paul assured them that the coming had not happened and would not happen until after the Antichrist was revealed.
- Matthew 24:27: At the end of the tribulation period, he returns as suddenly as lightning to gather his chosen ones from all over the world. He is seen by the whole world.

Apocalypsis

- 1 Corinthians 1:7: Believers are waiting for it.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7: Believers receive rest and the wicked are destroyed at the coming of Christ.
- 1 Peter 1:13: Believers are enduring until it happens.
- 1 Peter 4:13: Our suffering will end then.

Epiphany

- 1 Timothy 6:14: Believers are to keep his commands until he appears.
- 2 Timothy 4:8: Crowns will be given to the righteous, who love the appearing of Christ.
- 2 Thessalonians 2:8: The Antichrist will be destroyed at that time.
- Titus 2:13-14: The believer's blessed hope is the coming of Christ.

If all these descriptions are put together they seem to describe one event. Christians are waiting for this event. Apparently Christians should not be expecting a rapture that happens years before the Lord comes in judgment and destroys the Antichrist.

2. All passages that give an order of events put the coming at the end.

Some rapture descriptions provide no order of events at all. For example, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 does not say anything about what happens before or after the return of Christ and resurrection of believers. Therefore, this passage does not make a statement about the time of the rapture.

Another passage that describes the rapture without providing a chronology is 1 Corinthians 15:52. The only implication of chronology in that verse is that the return of Christ is at the "last trumpet."

In Revelation 1:7, the apostle wrote to give hope to suffering believers, and mentioned only the coming of the Lord that is visible to the world and brings judgment, as if that is the event they should anticipate.

The Gospel passages (Matthew 24, Luke 21, and Mark 13) give a long series of events and describe the coming at the end.

Jesus said that he would resurrect believers on the “last day” (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54).

In 2 Thessalonians 2, the Antichrist is destroyed at the coming of the Lord, which would necessarily be at the end of the tribulation.

Every passage in scripture that provides a chronology of tribulation events puts the coming of the Lord at the end and does not mention any other coming.

3. Biblical descriptions of the tribulation imply that believers are present.

The Gospels passage is spoken to believers as if they will be in that period (Matthew 24:4, 6, 9, 15, 33). Jesus said that the ones who endure to the end will be saved (24:13). The gospel will be preached in every nation (24:14).

Paul said that believers can be sure that the day of the Lord will not come until they have seen the Antichrist revealed. They will recognize him by his fulfillment of prophecies.

While describing the tribulation period, Peter said, “Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:19-21).

Revelation 6:9-11 refers to people who have died for their faith and predicts that there will be more martyrdoms. Revelation 7:9 and 14 describe a crowd that cannot be counted, saved from all nations, who have come to heaven from great tribulation. In Revelation 12:17 the dragon persecutes believers after failing to completely destroy Israel. In Revelation 13:7-8 the dragon makes war with the saints and everyone worships him except those who are written in the Book of Life. Revelation 14:13 says that there will be more who will die for their faith after the Antichrist is in power.

DIFFICULTIES WITH MID-TRIBULATION AND PRE-TRIBULATION

Those who believe in a mid-tribulation or pre-tribulation rapture have certain difficult questions to answer. Will the children of believers be raptured with their parents or be left in the tribulation? Will the children of unbelievers be raptured or left? What about children who are born during the tribulation period?

4. Pre-tribulation doctrine was not the belief of the ancient church.

Pre-tribulation doctrine was first taught in 1827. Mid-tribulation doctrine came later. It seems unlikely that God would not reveal important truth to his people for many centuries.

If believers in previous centuries expected a rapture to prevent their suffering of persecution, they were all wrong, because it did not happen. The Christian hope is to keep faith through a life of suffering until being delivered at the coming of the Lord.

Those who believe in a pre-tribulation rapture believe that the Bible teaches Christians to expect the coming of Christ at any moment. However, in describing the events of the last days, the Bible describes Israel as a nation with territory that is conquered by the Antichrist. But for centuries Israel did not exist as a nation until it was restored in 1948. During that time, Christians should not have expected Jesus to return at any time.

Early church writers understood that the tribulation period would be an intensification of conditions they already were suffering. “Every church father who deals with the subject expects the church to suffer at the hands of the Antichrist.”³⁸ They taught believers to be spiritually careful and patient, much like the biblical writers. They emphasized that a person would not be ready for the return of the Lord if he became intimidated by persecution or distracted by the things of the world.

LESSON 12 ASSIGNMENT

Writing Assignment: This lesson covered a very controversial topic. Write about the time of Christ’s return in relation to other events of the last days. Give reasons for your position and respond to reasons that are given for other positions.

38 George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and the Rapture*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 31

LESSON 13

THE ISSUE OF SUFFERING

INTRODUCTION

If God is good and all-powerful, why do people suffer? If God is just and all-powerful, why does he not make sure people always get what they deserve?

Many atheists say that they cannot believe in God because of the suffering in the world. They often have an attitude of anger against God, though they say they do not believe he exists. They choose to deny the existence of God because they do not approve of him.

A Christian chooses to believe in God because he trusts him without understanding all of God's actions. The Christian has a personal relationship with God that develops his faith. However, that faith is tested in a time of suffering. It is common for a Christian to struggle with the question of "Why?"

The church must explain the Christian view of suffering for people who are angry at God. The church must give an explanation that also comforts those who want to keep faith in God in a time of suffering.

A theological term: An explanation of suffering that supports faith in God is called a *theodicy*.

» What is the issue of suffering? What is a theodicy?

NON-CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE ISSUE

How can a God who is good and all-powerful allow suffering? A non-Christian response to this problem is to either deny that God is completely good or to deny that he is all-powerful.

Many people who deny that God is good also deny his existence and become atheists. They refuse to believe in God because of the condition of the world.

Some philosophies believe in a God whose character is mixed with good and evil. They believe he is capable of doing good or evil. Some people who have this belief claim to be Christians, but this is not a Christian belief.³⁹

39 1 John 1:5, Isaiah 6:1-5, Psalm 119:137

Some people try to solve the problem of evil by denying God's absolute power. They believe that God tries to make the world better but has limited success because his power is limited. Some believe that God is developing. The idea that God is not perfect, but developing, is called "process theology." This idea is not biblical.⁴⁰

As we saw in our study of the book of Revelation, God is holy and all-powerful. He is not struggling to bring in his complete kingdom. He gives orders from his throne, and nothing can stop his will from being accomplished.

For a person who denies either the goodness or power of God, suffering is easy to explain. Suffering is a difficult issue for the person who has Christian faith. To deny either the goodness or the power of God is not an option for a Christian.

- » What are some wrong ways people try to solve the issue of suffering?

A DIFFICULT ANSWER

We should not expect that our explanation of suffering will remove the challenge for faith.

- » Why is it difficult for an unbeliever to accept an explanation of suffering?

An unbeliever is unlikely to see life from God's perspective. An unbeliever may think that he should be guaranteed a good life if he lives right. He puts little value on eternity and too much value on earthly life. He puts little value on spiritual things and too much value on material things. Therefore, he finds it difficult to accept suffering for the sake of the eternal and spiritual.

A believer may not be able to imagine how his suffering can ever have good results, even though the Bible promises that God will bring good from all that happens.⁴¹ He may grieve for the suffering of others and wonder why God does not intervene. There is not an explanation that can make us feel comfortable with every case of suffering. The believer has faith in the love and justice of God without understanding why God did not prevent a particular case of suffering.

We are promised that those who suffer with Christ will reign with Him and that the righteous will shine as the stars forever. We are promised that redeemed people will share the throne of God above the rest of creation, including angels, though we cannot fully understand that promise. Scripture tells us that this present suffering is small in comparison to that great privilege.⁴² In God's ultimate purpose, the significance of no redeemed individual will be lost, even if his life on earth seemed insignificant and tragic.

40 Malachi 3:6, James 1:17

41 Romans 8:28

42 2 Corinthians 4:17

THEODICY AND EVANGELISM

For Christians the question of theodicy is different from the question asked by unbelievers. Christians believe in God's love and providence. They also have the promise of scripture that all works together for good for the believer. Therefore, the question is, "How can I keep faith even though I do not understand God's ways or how some things can work for good?" The end of the discussion is already assumed. The believer does not approach this issue with an open mind in the sense that all his assumptions may change.

The ultimate solution to suffering is its abolition. That will ultimately happen for Christians in the eternal state. For the present, for believers, the practical solution is not removal of suffering but persistence in faith in spite of suffering. This practical issue is daily addressed and ministered to by the church. The church is the present solution to the issue of suffering.

Unbelievers tend to reject a theodicy because they demand satisfaction of temporal and self-centered values. A person usually does not accept a theodicy until he has a desire to be reconciled to God. A person who wants to be a believer also wants to believe a theodicy.

We cannot expect that a theodicy alone will persuade a person to become a Christian (1) because a person usually will not accept theodicy until he is open to the gospel, and (2) because even if a person believes the theodicy he may not be ready to repent and be converted. However, a theodicy helps the work of the gospel, because if a person wants to know God, he is glad to hear an explanation that removes his objection to God.

» Why does a theodicy not always persuade a person to become a Christian?

PARTIAL EXPLANATIONS

Natural Causes

Sometimes people try to explain suffering on the basis of natural causes. For example, a person may die of a disease because certain bacteria entered his body. A family may starve because a storm destroyed the crop they were raising.

This explanation really does not explain much. The problem is that we know God could intervene, and for some reason he allowed the suffering to happen.

This explanation is useful when a person suffers the consequences of wrong choices. For example, if a person drives a car carelessly, he is more likely to have an accident. However, much suffering cannot be explained this way.

Personal Responsibility

Some suffering is a result of personal decision: carelessness can cause danger; bad eating habits can cause loss of health; and self-injury and suicide are possible. Therefore, any explanation of suffering must not ignore the fact that our choices do matter. However, since much suffering is unavoidable, personal responsibility is not the complete answer to the problem.

Suffering in this world is not measured out fairly. It is not possible that those who suffer somehow deserve all that happens to them while those that enjoy good things have somehow earned them.

The justice of God does not mean that everyone will receive what they deserve during their earthly life.

Benefits of Suffering

Suffering may strengthen a person's character, teach him a truth, and draw his attention to God. Even when we do not know the purpose of pain we must not assume that it accomplished no purpose. The purpose may be achieved even without our understanding. However, this does not solve the problem of suffering entirely, especially in the cases of mass tragedy. It is difficult to believe that the 90,000 people killed by an atomic bomb were all benefited by dying at that time, or that the millions of relatives were all benefited by the bereavement.

What about a child who dies? How did he benefit by not having time to live?

Suffering has made some people cynical. Suffering has caused some people to become cruel, and they cause suffering for others.

We are promised in scripture that all things work out for the good of the Christian. The suffering of the unbeliever may not have good results.

Even for the believer, the good that comes from suffering may be spiritual and eternal, not visible to everyone, and difficult to imagine.

Mystery

We cannot expect to completely explain why a particular case of suffering occurs. Also, we cannot expect that a person will become a Christian only because he accepts an explanation of suffering. Therefore, theodicy has limitations. Some Christians give up any attempt to respond to the problem of suffering.

However, the church has a long list of thinkers, beginning with the apostle Paul, who addressed the philosophies of their day with the reasonableness of scriptural claims. If we fail to give answers, we fail to address the issues of our generation with the gospel.

GOD'S ORDER OF PRIORITIES

The world is in its present condition because it is fallen from God's original design. Suffering is a result of sin. Not all personal suffering is the result of one's own sin, but suffering is to be expected in a world fallen into sin. If God were simply to end all suffering without ending sin, the implications of that action would be disastrous.

To end suffering before ending sin would imply that suffering is a more serious concern than sin. We know that sin is the significant issue because it necessitated the atonement and because suffering is the result of sin and not vice versa. If God removed all suffering before dealing with sin, man would not see the consequences of sin and would see no need of salvation. That would be a serious problem since the gospel calls for a volitional response. The same problem would exist if God alleviated suffering to a lower degree of severity. Men already see sin as less significant than they should; if suffering were less, sin would be taken even more lightly.⁴³ The most atrocious acts best show the hopelessness of man's fallen nature apart from salvation.

The fact that sin must be dealt with first explains why suffering must continue for the present. Sin cannot be dealt with as simply as suffering could. God could give money to the poor, health to the diseased, or food to the starving, and hardly any would reject his gifts. In contrast, many reject the offer of salvation, and God will not forgive sin against the will of the sinner.

It is God's will to end suffering, but it is even more important to end sin. Sin cannot end immediately because God has designed that people be saved willingly. Suffering continues for the present as a result of sin.

» What does it mean that suffering continues for now because of God's priorities?

GOD'S PERMISSION OF HUMAN WILLS

God's nature includes not only benevolence and omnipotence but also holiness. He desires that his creatures be not only happy but holy and that their happiness derive from holiness. Since human suffering is a result of sin, God's plan is to deal with sin before rectifying its consequences.

43 Of course, we must keep in mind that we do not know to what extent God has alleviated suffering already from what it naturally would have been.

The world does not exist in the state that God originally designed. There was a great calamity in our past called the fall. This calamity was possible because God in his sovereignty chose to create free wills and to let them have genuine choices with consequences.

It is impossible that there be free creatures that are unable to choose, just as it is impossible that there be a round square. The real question is not why there is undeserved suffering but why there is man. Man would not be man unless he had the freedom to act. This exercise of free will does not violate God's ultimate sovereignty. God wills that men make decisions, even if they do not always do what God would wish. A parent who takes his child to a restaurant and lets him choose what he wants may have preferred that the child order something else. Can it be said that the parent's will was thwarted? No, because the parent willed that the child choose. It was more important to the parent that the child choose than that he order properly under compulsion. God wills that nobody sins, but his highest value apparently is that men choose whether or not to sin.

**“Man therefore sinned
by his free will, his own
proper motion being
allowed by God...”**

James Arminius,

Seventy-Nine Private Disputations

God is secure enough in his sovereignty that he does not fear the operation of free wills. No sane king would feel his sovereignty threatened by his subjects' choosing the colors of carpet in their own homes. In a greater sense, God's sovereignty is unthreatened, not only by such personal choices, but by any choice man can make.

God's ultimate purpose will be accomplished in spite of anything any creature can do. His ultimate purpose does not depend on human choices. However, specific acts of God are responses to willful acts of man; otherwise, numerous statements of scripture are meaningless. To say that God could not allow a space within which to allow a creature's free will to perform is to limit God.

Scripture teaches that God does intervene in particular situations as he pleases. Man's free will means that God no longer has the authority to stop any particular action of man. To prevent a particular action of a person would not take away that person's ability to choose between right and wrong. However, to regularly block all courses of action that are wrong or to take away the consequences of every wrong act would be to destroy free will.

God is able to alter the results of any choice at any time. However, to do it always would be to make men unable to choose, for they would know that their decisions had no true consequences. To do it unexpectedly upon occasion does not take away the significance of even that choice. To prevent all suffering caused by the abuses of free will would be to negate

free will, which God will not do. God values the existence of free-willed moral creatures so much that he allowed the possibility of suffering.

God may permit an act of sin or occasion of suffering because to relieve it immediately would interfere with his plan of ultimate restoration. In that sense, all sin and suffering may be said to be his will, though it is all in a sense contrary to his will. These events are no threat to God's sovereignty. They take place in the pocket within his will where he is allowing free wills to operate within limitations.

Some thinkers believe that sin is essential to the process of developing a free creature into a person who freely chooses to do the will of God. This is not the picture that the Bible gives. According to Genesis, the first people were perfect, and sin was not the misstep of a creature who scarcely knew better, but deliberate rebellion against God. The first sin did not start man on a process of upward development but plunged him into depravity and brought the curse upon all creation. The fall must be regarded as a tragedy, in no way essential to God's plan or beneficial to mankind. However, since sin is the act of a free will, time is involved for the persuasion and decision of wills. In that sense, the world is now a place where God is developing our faith and character. God uses the situation that exists to bring his creation toward ultimate recovery, but he did not need sin for his original plan.

Mutually exclusive options exist even for God. For example, he could not choose both to create and not to create. Therefore, he could not both intervene in all cases of suffering and also allow suffering to show the consequences of sin and the need of salvation.

» How does God's permission of human will make suffering possible?

THE PARADOX OF SUFFERING AS EXPLOITED EVIL

Sin was contrary to the stated will of God. Sin is contrary to the will of God even though he made it possible by the creation of free creatures, allowed it to occur, and exploits it to bring good from it. Therefore, both original sin and presently committed sins are evil.

To recognize that God today works out his purpose partially through suffering does not contradict the fact that it was not his original intention. He did not design that suffering be a part of his creation, but he uses suffering now to help bring us back to his perfect plan.

Since suffering is not good, we are right to try to avoid it. We should try to relieve the suffering of others. It is normal for us to grieve about suffering, according to scripture. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus even though he knew he would raise Lazarus from the dead. Even though we know God will accomplish good through suffering, we sorrow because of it now.

As C.S. Lewis said,⁴⁴ in the present condition of the world we observe:

44 Paraphrased from C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*. (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

1. The good that comes from God,
2. The evil produced by rebellious creatures,
3. God's use of evil for his redemptive purpose, which produces
4. Good that comes partially from suffering and repented sin.

THE PROMISES OF SCRIPTURE

God seems to promise protection, provision, and long life for the righteous, yet the righteous suffer. How can we understand biblical promises when we compare them to experience?

The Bible fully recognizes that suffering is real, even for righteous people. The book of Ecclesiastes says that justice in this life is a vain hope. The book of Revelation says that suffering and persecution are to be expected until the return of Christ. The book of Job demonstrates that undeserved suffering may come to the righteous, and that they must be content to trust God without knowing the reason for their suffering. The Gospels predict persecution for believers.

How can the promises of scripture be consistent with the fact that the righteous suffer? Since God in scripture acknowledges the fact that suffering will happen to all, why did he make such promises? These promises occur most in the Psalms. However, the Psalms also recognize the reality of suffering and injustice. They accuse God of hiding himself (Psalm 10:1) and of forgetting his servant (Psalm 13:1), and they lament the fact that righteous men are oppressed and the wicked exalted (Psalm 12:1, 8).

The fact that the Psalms are poetry may be a clue to understanding these promises. Many of the Psalms are prayers. The supplicant is pouring out the feelings of his heart. Often the feelings expressed are not consistent with the person's actions. For example, David prayed for severe judgment on his enemies, yet treated them with mercy and forgiveness. Likewise, the prayers that accuse God of injustice or negligence are expressions of feelings not to be taken as an actual declaration that the speaker has lost his faith. Often even in the same Psalm the speaker will make such accusations and later make a declaration of faith. The Psalms teach that we are to trust God even when we don't understand him.

To be consistent with the genre, the Psalms that contain promises should be interpreted the same way. They should be taken as expressions of praise, as testimonies that God does intervene, but not as guarantees that allow no exceptions.

Promises of God's protection occur in the New Testament also. In 2 Timothy 4:18, Paul said, "And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom." This statement could be taken to mean that Paul expected to be protected from physical harm, but he was imprisoned at the time, and earlier in the same passage he clearly stated that he expected to lose his life for his faith. Obviously, Paul's expectation of deliverance and preservation was something other than physical protection. It seems

evident that Paul meant that his faith would survive and that his soul would be preserved. Spiritual preservation was so much more important than physical survival that Paul could face certain martyrdom and still feel protected by God.

A similar statement is found in Luke 21:16-19:

And you will be betrayed by parents, and brothers, and relatives, and friends; and they will cause some of you to be killed. And you will be hated by all men for my name's sake. But not one hair of your head will perish. Keep your souls in patience.

These words of Jesus predict both death and protection. Obviously, Jesus is referring to a protection that is more essential than physical protection.

When a person without faith suffers severely, there is a fear that something essential about the person may be destroyed. Suffering may feel like the soul is being crushed or pulled apart. This fear is almost like the fear of death. God promises the believer that neither death nor suffering can destroy him. He is preserved in God's kingdom with eternal life.

LESSON 13 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Writing Assignment: Describe a time when God gave comfort and brought good results from suffering in your life. Describe a time of suffering that you still do not understand.
2. Writing Assignment: How would you answer a person who says he does not believe in God because of the suffering in the world?

LESSON 14

A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF PERSECUTION

INTRODUCTION

- » Read 1 Corinthians 15:30-31. What did the apostle Paul mean when he said that he died daily?

The context helps us to understand that Paul was not talking about dying to sin daily. When he said he died daily, he meant that he risked his life every day for the sake of the gospel. Verse 30 said that he was in danger all the time. He daily surrendered his life to the dangers of his ministry.

TO CARRY THE CROSS

Christianity was founded by Jesus Christ, who died for his witness to the truth. From the beginning, the Christian community has had conflict with enemies of truth. Sometimes that conflict has caused violent persecution. Jesus said that to be his follower was like taking up a cross to follow him to death (Matthew 16:24). He said that if we are ashamed of him before the world, he will be ashamed of us (Mark 8:38). He said that the world hates believers for the same reason that they hated him (John 15:18).

Jesus told his disciples to expect persecution (Matthew 10:19, 23, Matthew 24:9).

Because of the inevitable conflict between Christians and the world, the apostle Paul said, “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12).

“From the outset the early church was persecuted first by the Jews, then the Greeks, then the Romans, then the barbarian hordes. In the modern period Christians of various traditions have continued to be persecuted, Armenian Christians by the Turks, Orthodox Christians by the Stalinists, evangelicals by Castro, Catholics by the Pol Pot genocide, and both Jews and Christians by the Nazis. Unfortunately, the list goes on, and seems to continue endlessly among Christian minorities in Ethiopia, Mozambique, South Africa, North Korea, Iran, Nepal, and Burma.”

Thomas Oden,

Life in the Spirit

The apostle Peter said that believers should not be surprised at persecution as if it is a strange thing to happen (1 Peter 4:12).

The apostle John said that believers should not be surprised that the world hates them (1 John 3:13).

Paul considered his own suffering for the gospel to be a continuation of the suffering of Christ (Colossians 1:24). Christ suffered and died to provide the means of salvation; Paul suffered to carry the gospel so sinners could believe and be saved.

A GLANCE AT HISTORY

Jews were the first persecutors of Christians; they especially persecuted Christian Jews. (Acts 7, Acts 8:13).

In the first generations of the church, Gentile converts in various countries experienced persecution from friends, family, and local governments because they would not worship local gods.

In AD 250, the Roman Emperor Decius ordered the persecution of any who would not worship Roman gods and the emperor. Roman persecution happened in various places and at various times until 313, not always throughout the whole empire. Christians were punished with imprisonment, loss of property, exile, and sometimes death.

Throughout the centuries of the church, Christians have suffered in many places. Sometimes persecution was because Christians would not participate in the worship of other religions. In other places governments demanded absolute loyalty and did not accept any religion.

Persecution and martyrdom have increased in modern times. Statistics of martyrdom are difficult, because war and other violence are not always easy to distinguish from persecution. Estimates range from 10,000 to 150,000 martyrs per year. Some scholars estimate that a total of 70 million Christians have died for their faith throughout history, including all professed Christians of any denomination.⁴⁵ The majority died because of government persecution; millions of others have died because of persecution from other religions, primarily Islam. Millions have been killed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

45 Todd M. Johnson, "Christian Martyrdom: A Global Demographic Assessment," 2012. Accessed at <https://archive.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/research/documents/TheDemographicsofChristianMartyrdom.pdf> June 24, 2020.

THE ULTIMATE WITNESS

The Greek word *martyr* literally means witness. Over time, the church came to believe that the ultimate act of witnessing was to die for the faith, so those who died in persecution were called martyrs in a way that other witnesses were not.

Martyrs were considered heroes of the early church. The writer of the description of Polycarp's death says, "We can never forsake Christ... nor can we ever worship any other... but we love the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord."

Cyprian (A.D. 200-258) said, "There is no greater blessing than to die as a martyr; to confess Jesus, in death itself, before executioners." Cyprian himself suffered martyrdom.

Sometimes a believer realized in advance that God had chosen him to be a martyr. Often the revelation was a moment of transformation, inner peace, and spiritual exaltation.

Bishops Latimer and Ridley were burned in England in 1555 for preaching the gospel. As they waited for their trial, they were grieved when they heard of people giving up their faith. When they heard of a person being executed for his faith, they considered that event a victory for the gospel. A historian writes that before burning, Latimer said, "Be of good cheer, master Ridley, and play the man, for today by the grace of God we shall light a candle in England that shall never be put out."⁴⁶

The Bible tells us that Stephen had a face like an angel at his trial (Acts 6:15). Through history there were numerous cases of people who faced torture with such courage and joy that observers were converted. Some people who suffered for Christ said that they felt so much of the presence of God during torment that they were reluctant to see it end.

Many suffering believers told about dreams, visions, and experiences of the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165), who wrote in defense of Christianity and finally died as a martyr, said this about the effectiveness of a martyr's witness: "Now it is evident that no one can terrify or subdue us who have believed in Jesus over all the world. For it is plain that, though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but the more such things happen, the more do others and in larger numbers become faithful, and worshippers of God through the name of Jesus."⁴⁷

46 John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (1883 edition)

47 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter 110

Tertullian (approximately A.D. 150-230) said, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”⁴⁸ This statement is often quoted as, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

- » Does persecution always help the growth of the church, or does it also hinder the spread of the gospel?

Jizya is a tax that many Muslim nations through history collected from people in their nation who were not Muslims. The idea of the tax comes from the Koran. The tax meant that people who were not Muslims did not really belong in the nation and had to pay for the privilege of living there.

- » What do you think would be the effect of *jizya* on evangelism?

For centuries, Alexandria in Egypt was the intellectual center of Eastern Christianity. It was the city of Athanasius, one of the greatest ancient defenders of Christian truth.

A Muslim army from Mecca invaded North Africa in A.D. 639. They later founded the city of Cairo in Egypt. Christians were required to pay high taxes and could not hold government positions, but they were not killed. Within a few generations, the percentage of Christians in Egypt was small.

- » What does this history tell us about the possible negative effects of persecution?
- » Does persecution benefit the church in any other way, besides possibly causing more conversions to occur?

Many of the ancient church fathers wrote that persecution has the effect of purifying the church. When church membership brings material benefits and status in society, a person may have the wrong motives for joining the church. When the church is persecuted, people join because of spiritual priorities.

Marvin Newell made these observations about the impact of martyrdom on other believers. “It [martyrdom] causes most to pause and ponder anew the extreme cost of discipleship. It forces many to question whether they themselves measure up to the highest standard of devotion to Christ and his cause. It motivates still others to abandon selfish plans and ambitions and turn to serve Christ in hard and difficult places. It creates a baseline for the Church from which to measure its worth—whether its activities are meaningful and truly important in light of eternity.”⁴⁹

48 Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, Chapter 50

49 Marvin Newell, “The Missionary Martyr: What We Learn from Those Who Gave Their Lives for the Cause of Christ.” Accessed at <https://missionexus.org/the-missionary-martyr-what-we-learn/#myaccount> June 24, 2020.

ETHICS OF MARTYRDOM

- » What would you think of a person who purposely tried to get himself killed as a martyr? Why?

The church admired the martyrs. Some people wanted to be martyrs and purposely tried to get themselves killed. The church did not approve of a person's seeking martyrdom. If a person was not chosen by God to be a martyr, he might not have the strength from God to keep his faith.⁵⁰ Also, a person who provoked persecutors to kill him would bring danger to others.

Jesus told his disciples, "When they persecute you in one city, flee to another" (Matthew 10:23). This command tells us that it is right to avoid persecution.

The church believed that a martyrdom should be similar to the death of Christ. A Christian should not try to get himself killed, but be betrayed by others. The martyr's behavior during suffering was to be like the Lord's. Also, the cause of the persecution should be right. "It is not suffering, but the reason for it that makes a martyr" (Augustine). The cause of martyrdom was to be a Christian's witness or convictions.

Forgiving Persecutors

"I'm not angry at the one who did this. I'm telling him, 'May God forgive you, and we also forgive you.' Believe me, we forgive you."

These words were spoken by the widow of Naseem Faheem, after her husband was killed outside St. Mark's Cathedral on Palm Sunday by a terrorist's bomb (April 9, 2017).

CONTEXT OF ESCHATOLOGY

Note to class leader: Ask the group to give examples of New Testament scriptures about persecution. List the examples on a writing board if it is available. After they have listed many, teach the following material.

The New Testament was written to believers who knew the reality of persecution. The many references to persecution show that many Christians had experienced persecution and knew that it could happen to them in the future.

The book of Acts describes many events of persecution. Stephen was stoned, and persecution scattered believers from Jerusalem. Paul was a persecutor before his conversion.

The apostle Paul in his epistles sometimes mentioned the fact that he was a prisoner for the Lord (Ephesians 3:1, Ephesians 4:1, 2 Timothy 1:8), said that he "fought wild beasts at

⁵⁰ See the case of Quintus the Phrygian from the writing about Polycarp's death.

Ephesus” (1 Corinthians 15:32), and that he risked his life constantly (1 Corinthians 15:31). Timothy spent time in prison (Hebrews 13:23).

The apostle Peter told his readers to make sure that they were never guilty of crimes, but to be glad if they suffered for righteousness (1 Peter 3:14).

The writer of Hebrews told his readers to remember those who were imprisoned (Hebrews 13:3).

» Look at 1 Corinthians 1:8-10 together.

The apostles thought they would be killed, but they had already surrendered their lives to God, knowing that he would ultimately raise them from the dead.

We can imagine that believers in New Testament times often saw persecution or heard of persecution happening to believers in other places. To be a Christian was to live with the possibility (and sometimes the certainty) of persecution.

Though Christians anticipated the return of Jesus, they were told to expect persecution before that event. Prophetic passages of scripture constantly reminded believers that persecution would be a reality in the last days (Matthew 10:17, Matthew 24:9, Luke 12:11-12, Revelation 6:9-11, Revelation 12:17, Revelation 13:15). A purpose of eschatology is to explain God’s sovereignty in a world where his people are persecuted, so that they can keep faith in him until his plan is finished.

LESSON 14 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Writing Assignment: The Bible tells us to rejoice and be glad when we are persecuted (Matthew 5:12), yet we are to pray for quiet and peaceable lives (1 Timothy 2:2). How would you explain that apparent contradiction with principles from this lesson?
2. Writing Assignment: How does persecution both help and hinder the church?
3. Passage Study: Study 2 Corinthians 4:8-18. The apostles endured suffering, following the example of Jesus. They could endure because they experienced inner strength and renewal. They were willing to endure because they received spiritual life and looked forward to eternal glory. Write a summary of this passage.

LESSON 15

A NEW EARTH

THE PREDICTION OF A NEW EARTH

The Bible tells us that God has a plan for a new earth that will be very different from the present earth.

The apostle John saw a future new earth that would exist after the present earth. There was no more sea, which implies great changes in design of the earth (Revelation 21:1).

The apostle Peter said that the present earth will be burned up and completely destroyed. He said that Christians are waiting for a new earth (2 Peter 3:10-13).

The writer of Hebrews said that the earth will become old, will perish, and will be changed (Hebrews 1:10-12). He said that the earth will be shaken and removed by God so that only eternal things will remain. He said that we are waiting for an eternal kingdom (Hebrews 12:26-28). The apostle Peter mentioned the time when everything will be renewed (Acts 3:21).

These scriptures tell us that Christians should not be attached to things of the world that will not endure. We should be working for eternal values. Our families and friends can be saved and share eternity with us. Our material possessions will be destroyed.

- » A student should read Hebrews 12:25-29. What did the apostle say about Christian living, based on eschatology?

THE FAULTS OF THE PRESENT EARTH

Why must God change the earth completely? Because the present earth is not appropriate for God's perfect plan for life in the future.

The earth has been under the curse of sin since the first human sins were committed (Genesis 3:17-19). Because of the curse, the earth is less productive of good things and produces things like thorns. Living creatures conflict with each other and survive by killing and eating others. Living creatures experience physical deterioration, pain, and death.

The earth shows the results of thousands of years of the curse. Many of the species of animals God created no longer exist. The earth has been abused and neglected by sinful man, who could not properly fulfill his role of managing the earth (Genesis 1:28).

Since the worldwide flood (Genesis 7:11-24) 71% of the earth has been covered by water. Large areas of the earth are covered with deserts, rocky wastelands, or ice. That means that a small percentage of the surface of the earth is useful and habitable for people.

God will make a new earth because the present earth is far from what he originally designed it to be.

» The group should look at Romans 8:17-23 together.

All of creation groans under the curse of sin. Christians still have physical bodies that suffer from the curse. We are waiting for the time when we will be completely delivered from all the effects of sin. We are willing to suffer with Christ now because of the glory we will experience later. Paul's immediate point was that Christians endure because of the promise of a renewed creation and eternal glory.

THE ORIGINAL EARTH

The Bible tells us that before the worldwide flood there was no rain (Genesis 2:5-6). The earth was watered a different way.

There was a large river that divided into four rivers. This is different from the present earth, where rivers join one another and become larger until they flow into the sea. Apparently, the rivers originally were supplied by an underground source.

Apparently, the original earth had a large amount of water in the sky (Genesis 1:7-8), perhaps in the form of vapor. Many Christian scientists believe that this vapor could have caused a stable climate worldwide, making the entire earth habitable and productive.

During Noah's flood, rain fell heavily for forty days, which would not be possible in the present earth. This amount of rain during the flood was possible because of the water canopy. Water also came from under the ground (Genesis 7:11-12). After the flood, the canopy no longer existed, and almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the earth's surface continued to be covered with water.

The large amount of evaporation from the oceans makes possible the rain and flow of rivers that we have today. Before the flood there may not have been seas and oceans like we have today, and the present water cycle would not have existed. The fact that there will be no sea on the new earth (Revelation 21:1) implies that there will be another great change.

In the early centuries after creation, people lived for hundreds of years (Genesis 11:10-32). The numbers declined, especially after the flood. The changed conditions of the earth and the accumulated effects of the curse over time shortened human life.

We should not assume that God will make the new earth exactly like the original earth. However, the original earth helps us to understand that God's design is very different from the earth we see now. The contrast between the original earth and the present earth shows us the effects of sin.

AMAZING THOUGHT

Less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the surface of the earth is habitable for people, and life is difficult in much of that area. If the new earth will be entirely habitable and friendly for people, that is a multiplication of land area by four. Imagine all the continents of Africa, North America, South America, Europe, and Asia and all other lands being multiplied by four!

THE NEW WORLD AND ETERNAL LIFE

How can we describe life on the new earth? The Bible gives descriptions of the millennium, the period of Jesus' rule on the earth (see the lesson about the millennium). Scholars do not agree on the interpretation of those details, and we don't know if the description of the millennium also describes the new earth.

God will design a new structure for the universe. For example, right now the earth orbits around the sun. If the sun continues as it is, it will eventually be consumed and no longer provide a center for the orbit of the earth. The new heaven and earth will not wear out; therefore, God has a new design that we do not understand yet.

Revelation 21:27–22:5 describes a city coming down to the earth from God. It is lighted by the glory of God. The passage gives measurements and describes walls and gates. Scholars do not agree about whether the details should be considered literal or figurative. We know that the most important fact is that it is the home where we will live in the presence of God (21:22, 22:3-4). We know

**“Whatever remains
after the world is
renewed will remain
forever, generation
and corruption
being done away.”**

Thomas Aquinas

Summa Theologica

that it is a place of beauty because of the description of gems. We know that it is safe, because the people there never need to close the gates (21:25). We know that no sin ever enters the city (21:27).

The curse of sin will be completely ended. There will be no more death, or sorrow, or crying, or pain (21:4).

All our ideas about life are based on the natural life on earth that we have known. We have never lived without the presence of sin and its results. We have never lived without the reality of suffering. We are not able to imagine eternity as God has planned it, and he has not revealed many details to us.

What will be our occupation for eternity? Whatever it is, it is the purpose for which we were created. The centuries of human history on earth were preparation for God's ultimate plan, and sin caused an interruption of God's plan. God has not chosen to reveal very much about eternity. We do know that worship of God is central to our purpose.

The saints will rule with Christ (2 Timothy 2:12). We don't know exactly what it will mean to rule. The Bible also says we will rule over angels (1 Corinthians 6:2-3).

The apostle Paul contrasted earthly conditions with eternal conditions in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18. People who are focused on the earth think that the things they see and feel are more real than spiritual and eternal things. Paul emphasized that the things we see will pass away. He even calls our suffering "light" and refers to the "weight of glory."

We cannot imagine what it will be like to be in the presence of God. Moses asked to see God, and God said that a man could not survive a direct vision of God (Exodus 33:20). The mortal human body is too weak to experience the glory of heaven. Paul said that the mortal body would be changed for the experience of heaven (1 Corinthians 15:50-51). We cannot imagine the joys and pleasures of heaven, because they are beyond what our present bodies could experience. In the presence of God is fullness of joy and pleasure (Psalm 16:11).

Imagine a child who thinks that romantic love is not interesting because it is not like chocolate or ice cream. He cannot imagine something that is beyond his experience, especially because he is incapable of experiencing it. To persist in sin is the awful mistake of holding to something earthly because we cannot imagine that God offers something better.

**"If one can believe
that the world
has been created
and exists in all its
complexity, one
can believe that the
resurrection can occur
in all its complexity."**

Thomas Oden,
Life in the Spirit

Created in the image of God, the redeemed person will live forever. We are not accustomed to living without the limitations of time. Empires decline and fall, but a soul never dies. Even the stars will eventually be consumed and disappear unless God renews them, but a soul never ceases to exist. Jesus said it would be a foolish choice if you could gain the whole world but lose your soul (Mark 8:36).

Near the end of God's Book is an invitation (Revelation 22:17). Everyone can receive the water of life. God offers to every person the opportunity to be part of his eternal kingdom.

» The group should look at Acts 2:14-21 together.

Peter said that Pentecost was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel, but not all the details were fulfilled that day. The Holy Spirit filled the disciples, but the darkening of the sun and other heavenly signs did not happen. Pentecost began the period that would end with the heavenly signs and the day of the Lord.

The activity of the Holy Spirit through the church would change the world. Peter's immediate point was that the work of the Spirit, as he worked at Pentecost, should be expected in the last days.

If we live in the last days, we can expect persecution and difficulties. However, we should remember that God promises to do great things by his Spirit in the last days.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Each of the books below makes a strong case for a particular position of eschatology.

Pentecost, Dwight. *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1965.

This book is a very thorough dispensationalist presentation of the doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture and pre-millennialism.

Reasoner, Vic. *The Hope of the Gospel*. Nicholasville: Fundamental Wesleyan Publishers, 1999.

This book is a very thorough presentation of amillennialism from a Wesleyan perspective.

Rosenthal, Marvin. *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990

This book presents a view similar to the view of a post-tribulation rapture and makes a case against the other opinions of the time of the rapture.

Ladd, George Eldon. *The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and the Rapture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.

This book is a study of the origins of the doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture and makes a case for a post-tribulation rapture.

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