

What the Bible ACTUALLY Says About the Future

—Sam A. Smith

Does the Bible tell us what the future will be like? Most Christians believe it does, but differ widely as to what the Bible's promises and prophecies mean. In the following paragraphs we will look at what the Bible actually says about the future. After all, until we know what the Bible actually says about the future, we can't possibly know what its message *means*.

From what we know of the apostles' teaching from the New Testament, they accepted at face value the Old Testament promises of a coming, literal messianic kingdom. The Old Testament describes this kingdom as an actual physical kingdom on earth, ruled by God's Anointed One—the Messiah. According to the Old Testament, it will be through the Messiah and his kingdom that God will fulfill the promises he made to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants. In the gospels Jesus taught his listeners that the kingdom was “at hand” and “in your midst” (Matt. 4:17; 10:7; Lk. 17:20-21); when debating with the Pharisees, he told them that the kingdom of God had “overtaken” them (Matt. 12:28). Although such statements indicated only the nearness of the kingdom—not its actual inauguration (with the King seated upon the throne of his kingdom)—some misinterpret them to mean that the physical kingdom promised in the Old Testament isn't to be a physical kingdom after all, but rather a “spiritual” (immaterial) kingdom. However, this view would place the New Testament into the position of contradicting the clear teaching of a large part of the Old Testament, and as a result it does great damage to both the Old and New Testaments. Those who hold to such a view are then forced (for consistency's sake) to revise the teaching of the Old Testament (*via* allegorization) in order to reconcile it with what they misunderstand Jesus' statements to mean. But, Jesus never said that the kingdom would not be a literal, physical kingdom; he simply said that the work of spiritual renewal (a prerequisite necessary for the manifestation of the visible kingdom) had already begun with his own ministry; hence, the only thing that hindered the kingdom program was the response of those who heard the message of the gospel. That being the case, the kingdom was, quite literally, “at hand,” or “upon them.” Obviously unregenerated people could not inherit the kingdom of God, so it was necessary for a preparatory work of reconciliation to precede its inauguration. This initial preparatory work was (literally) predicted in the Old Testament (Isa. 44:1-5, 21-23; Jer. 3:15; 23:14-18; 31:1, 27-34; Ezek. 11:19-20; 20:1-44; 36:25-32; 37:11-14, 21-28; Hos. 6:1-3; 14:4-8; Joel 2:12-17, 28-32; Mic. 7:18-20; Zech. 13:7-9); thus, there is no inconsistency between what the Old and New Testaments actually (literally) say about the nature of the kingdom. Misunderstanding what Jesus meant in saying that the kingdom is “at hand” has resulted in a great deal of confusion about the nature of the kingdom. The mistake made by many seems to be confusing “the part” (the initial preparatory spiritual basis—which is what Christ's ministry accomplished), with “the whole” (the full expression of the kingdom in its outward visible and material form when Christ returns). While some might reason that a spiritual kingdom would be superior, that is simply not true. First, such a view is clearly anti-cosmic (viewing the material creation as “inferior” to the spiritual) and this doesn't fit with the biblical view of the material world. Second, since the visible manifestation of the kingdom is linked to the progress of redemption, the final physical expression of the kingdom represents nothing less than the zenith of God's work of redemption and renewal (both of mankind, and of creation). Christian theology has long suffered under the false notion that the material creation is inferior to the spiritual. This concept, which was derived from Greek philosophy—primarily Platonism—in the early second and third centuries A.D., has hampered biblical interpretation for almost nineteen hundred years, and although it has been massaged into the theology of virtually every commentary ever written, it is long past time to recognize this for what it is—pagan thought in Christian garb. While the Bible recognizes that the world has been under the curse of sin since the time of the fall, the world as it came from the hands of the Creator was pronounced by him to be “*very good* (Gen. 1:31);” and it will be so again once the work of

redemption is completed (Rom. 8:18-25). We must not forget that sin and evil have affected the spiritual realm as well as the material realm (Satan and the fallen angels are evil, spirit beings; and fallen men have as part of their nature a fallen spirit). Since it is only in the material realm that we can actually see the effects of evil, there is a tendency to assume that the material realm is morally inferior to the spiritual (immaterial) realm; but the Bible does not support such anti-cosmic thinking. The failure of many of the church's leading thinkers down through history in assuming the moral inferiority of the material creation is the single greatest source of confusion over the meaning of future prophecy. An anti-cosmic presupposition leads invariably to the denial of the Bible's clear teaching of a future, visible kingdom of God on earth; and in turn has resulted in the allegorization of major portions of the Bible that has obscured biblical truth in other areas as well.

Jesus did say that the kingdom was "at hand," but he also confirmed the Old Testament understanding that the full expression of the kingdom is to be a literal kingdom as prophesied in the Old Testament (Matt. 25:31-46). Consequently, since Jesus did not begin his reign during the time of his first advent, the apostles and the early church expected him to return and inaugurate his kingdom rule at some time in the future. Even the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray, viewed the kingdom not as present, but as a future reality (Matt. 6:10). The book of Revelation, the final word of the New Testament, confirms that the concept of the kingdom presented in the New Testament is the same as that prophesied in the Old Testament. Thus, while the details concerning the kingdom were progressively revealed as Scripture was recorded, the basic concept of a literal, visible kingdom is uniformly taught from Genesis to Revelation. This view—that Christ will return to establish a visible (physical) kingdom—is called "premillennialism."

By the early second century A.D. it became popular to deny the normal/literal meaning of the Old and New Testament promises of a visible kingdom. There were several reasons for this. First, by the early second century the church, and its leadership, had come to be overwhelmingly Gentile. The late first century transition from a Jewish church to an overwhelmingly Gentile church had a profound impact on how Christians viewed their place in God's revealed plan, and indeed how they viewed the plan itself. The Old Testament writers, Christ, and the apostles all taught that the coming kingdom was to center upon a redeemed nation of Jews (Israel), with the Gentiles being blessed too, but as secondary rather than primary beneficiaries of the promises of God to Abraham (Rom. 11:11-32). However, as the Church became almost entirely Gentile, it became unpopular for Gentile Christians to think of the Jews as the primary beneficiaries of the promises of God. After all, hadn't the Jews rejected their Messiah? And, didn't God allow the Jewish nation to be destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70? And were not the Jews, for the most part, hostile to the gospel? Surely, they reasoned, God didn't still intend to fulfill his promises to the Jews. This rationalization resulted in an error that has dogged the church even to the present day. It is the error of "replacement theology." Replacement theology views the church as having replaced Israel in the kingdom program. Of course the Bible nowhere teaches that the church replaces Israel. Quite to the contrary the church is viewed as a distinct instrument that God will use to provoke Israel to faith in their Messiah and bring about their conversion so the promises can be fulfilled (Rom. 11:1-31). Nevertheless, we have been saddled with this erroneous teaching for almost nineteen hundred years. Replacement theology has been the view of the Greek Orthodox Church since the second century, and the view of the Roman Catholic Church since the fifth century, and from them it was passed to the reformation churches and into the mainstream of protestant Christianity where it remains to this day. Replacement theology sees no place for Israel (in the form of a messianic Jewish kingdom) in the plan of God. Those who accept replacement theology reinterpret the Old Testament prophecies of future blessings to Israel as applying to the Church (spiritually). Thus, Catholic and Reformed Christianity routinely engage in the practice of allegorical "interpretation" in which the actual statements of the Bible are "reinterpreted" to mean that God will bless the church. It is important to understand that this process isn't really interpretation at all; it's merely a form of revisionism—conforming the Old Testament message so it is consistent with replacement theology.

Second, also coinciding with the rise of replacement theology in the early second century was a widespread heresy called, “Gnosticism.” The Gnostics believed that Jehovah (“Yahweh”) is not the true, eternal God, but only a created being (an angel) who because of his ignorance of the true God, thinks himself to be God. The Gnostics viewed the Old Testament as the record of a false religion (since it came from a false “God”); they also viewed the material world as an inferior, perhaps “evil” realm to be escaped from, rather than the object of redemption as taught by Paul in Romans 8:18-21. With such a view of the material world and of the Old Testament promises to Abraham and Israel, they naturally rejected the Bible’s teaching of a future earthly kingdom of God. It appears that the Gnostics were among the first (possibly the very first) within Christendom to hold to an entirely spiritual view of the kingdom of God. This view has come to be called “realized eschatology,” or “amillennialism” since it denies that there is to be a literal, visible kingdom, declaring instead that the kingdom has been spiritually present since Christ’s ascension into Heaven. While the early Church rejected most of the beliefs of the Gnostics as heresy, the idea of a spiritualized kingdom gained considerable following in the early church. It was first adopted in the eastern (Greek Orthodox) churches, where Gnosticism was strongest, in the second century. For a short while, this resulted in the eastern churches denying the inspiration of the book of Revelation, which clearly presents the picture of an earthly, physical, premillennial kingdom. The Roman Catholic Church continued to espouse premillennialism—albeit mostly a replacement form of premillennialism—with a future physical kingdom, but focused on the church rather than Israel. Replacement premillennialism can be seen as early as the writings of Justin Martyr, c. A.D. 140. It was Augustine (354-430 A.D.) who influenced the Roman Catholic Church to abandon premillennialism for an entirely spiritual view of the kingdom. Of course the Bible does not teach the amillennial view of the kingdom; so it became necessary for Augustine to revise the Bible’s message in order to conform it to a spiritualized view of the kingdom—a task which he accomplished (*via* allegorization) in his famous work, “The City of God.” The big problem for Augustine, and for all non-premillennialists, was (and still is) the book of Revelation. Both Revelation’s message, and its place as the final word of the New Testament make it problematic for any non-premillennial view. Revelation was the last message of the New Testament to be written (c. A.D. 87-93) and, when taken at face value, it unequivocally communicates the same premillennial view of the kingdom as the Old Testament. It became obvious that in order to sustain amillennialism, Revelation’s premillennial view of history would have to be altered. After all, if the literal kingdom promised in the Old Testament somehow mutated into a spiritual kingdom in the gospels (as amillennialists suppose), one would have a difficult time explaining why Revelation, written long after Jesus’ death (and by one of the gospel writers) unquestionably presents a premillennial view of the kingdom. To deal with this problem Augustine adopted an entirely allegorical view of Revelation. (If you have attended an amillennial church, you may have wondered why the book of Revelation is seldom taught.) Largely as a result of Augustine’s influence, amillennialism took root in the Roman Catholic Church, and continues to be the predominate view of the modern-day church—both Catholic and Reformed. More recently, since the sixteenth century, an entire hermeneutical and theological system, called “covenant theology” (or simply, “covenantalism”) has evolved in order to bolster support for the allegorical revision of future prophecy. Dispensationalism stands in stark contrast to covenant theology in that it represents a return to a pre-replacement worldview and hermeneutic, and therefore accepts the biblical teaching of a literal, visible kingdom built upon a redeemed Israel in the future. The differences between these two views cannot be overstated; they lead to entirely different views of the church, the meaning of Scripture, and the overall plan of God for the future. Only the dispensational view accepts the biblical statements as they are, without theologically biased revision of the message. Dispensationalists believe that the biblical writers, when allowed to speak for themselves, unquestionably present a premillennial view of the future. Dispensationalism views amillennialism (and postmillennialism) as theological distortions that resulted largely from the church’s early acceptance of replacement theology.

First things first

Not only does the Bible describe a coming visible kingdom of God upon earth, it also describes a number of events that will take place in connection with the unfolding of that kingdom. Some of these events will occur before the rule of Christ is inaugurated, and some will happen afterward. In the paragraphs below we will look at some of these events. For a more complete presentation of premillennialism you may wish to consult *What the Bible Says About the Future**, by Sam A. Smith, or *Things to Come*, by J. Dwight Pentecost. Some of the major events we will survey are (in the order they will occur): the regathering of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, the reemergence of a Roman European confederation of nations, the rapture of the church into heaven, the seven years of tribulation that will precede the inauguration of the kingdom rule of Christ, the second coming of Christ to the earth, the resurrection of the righteous dead, the first phase of the kingdom (the millennium), the dissolution of the present heavens and earth, the resurrection of the unrighteous dead, the judgment of the unholy angels and unredeemed men, the renewal of the physical creation, and the second phase of the kingdom (eternity).

The regathering of Israel

The first major prophetic period of the future is the seven-year “tribulation” period. The tribulation period will prepare the way for the return of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. Since the tribulation will begin with the making of a treaty between the nation of Israel and a group of nations once part of the Roman Empire (Dan 9:24-27), it cannot begin until Israel is reestablished as a nation. (Which after almost nineteen hundred years of dispersion is now occurring.) Naturally this involves at least a partial regathering of Jewish people to their ancient homeland before the tribulation period begins. Dispensational premillennialists have long asserted that Israel must be reborn as a nation, even before the modern Zionist movement began. Prior to the rebirth of the modern state of Israel, replacement theologians (both amillennial and postmillennial) rejected the idea that Israel would be reborn as literally predicted (Isa. 11:11-16; Hos. 3:4-5; Jer. 31:30-31; Ezek. 37:1-29; Amos 9:8-15; Mic. 4:6-8). However, in May of 1948 Israel was reborn—the only occurrence in history in which a nation dispersed for almost two thousand years has returned to its native land to resume its ancient language and national identity. Amillennialists have claimed that these and other passages predicting a return were fulfilled long ago when the Jews returned from Babylonian captivity (in the sixth century B.C.); however, since many of these passages link the rebirth of Israel with an enduring (eternal) spiritual rebirth and the inauguration of the visible kingdom and personal rule of Messiah, it is apparent that the return from Babylonian captivity could not be the fulfillment of these prophecies.

One of the most interesting prophecies of the regathering of Israel is found in Ezekiel 37:1-29. In the first part of this passage Ezekiel prophesies the rebirth of the Jewish nation after a long period of exile.

[Ezekiel 37:1-14] The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to thee bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.’” So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no

breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’” [NIV]

Ezekiel continues by saying that when Israel is finally regathered, it will no longer be a divided kingdom—as was the case with Israel and Judah; rather, it will be a kingdom united both politically and spiritually, with Jehovah dwelling in the midst of Israel, and His servant “David” (referring to the Davidic Messiah—*i.e.*, Christ) ruling as King. Ezekiel records the following description of the future unity of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the reign of Messiah.

[Ezekiel 37:15-28] The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, ‘Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.’ Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, ‘Ephraim’s stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him.’ Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand. When your countrymen ask you, ‘Won’t you tell us what you mean by this say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to take the stick of Joseph—which is in Ephraim’s hand—and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah’s stick, making them a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand.’ Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.’”

The rapture of the Church

The New Testament tells us that sometime during the seven years of tribulation preceding the inauguration of the kingdom, God will pour out wrath upon the world for its rejection of the truth and its unbelief, and its persecution of the saints. This period of wrath is referred to in both the Old and New Testaments as, “the day of the LORD.” Since the church is promised that it will not suffer the wrath of God (1 Thess 5:9), it is apparent that the church must be removed from the earth prior to the beginning of the day of the LORD. In fact, this is precisely what the New Testament teaches (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:35-58). One problem we face in understanding the timing of the rapture is that we

do not know at what point during the tribulation the day of the LORD begins. Some view all of the tribulation as the day of the Lord. Consequently they place the rapture of the church prior to the beginning of the tribulation period. This very popular view is called, “pretribulationism.” Other premillennialists view the day of the LORD as starting sometime during the tribulation period, either at the midpoint, or sometime in the second half of the period. Our lack of ability to pinpoint the precise beginning of the day of the LORD has led to several views on the relative timing of the rapture; however, all dispensational (*i.e.*, non-replacement) premillennialists view the rapture as occurring prior to the time of God’s wrath. Because of the lack of definitive evidence as to when the day of the Lord begins, we can only say with certainty that whenever the wrath begins, the church will already be gone. Although it is natural to want to suggest theories as to when the rapture might occur, we must be careful not to go beyond what the Bible clearly teaches. While the Bible does reveal some facts concerning the nature, and even the timing of the rapture, all views that attempt to place the rapture at a particular point in relation to the tribulation are speculative—including pretribulationism.

Even though we don’t know exactly when the rapture is going to occur, we do know that Christ’s coming for the church is “imminent;” that is to say, it could happen at any time. This leaves a window in which the rapture could occur—anytime from the present, to the time that the day of the LORD beings (whenever that happens to be). Scripture indicates the rapture will happen almost instantly. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul provides the following description of the rapture.

[4:13-17] Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left to the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

The rapture will involve the bodily resurrection of those who have died in Christ and the transformation of living believers. The Old Testament saints and those saved after the church is removed will be resurrected at the beginning of the millennium (Rev. 20:4). The raptured saints, in their glorified, eternal bodies, will be taken to Heaven to appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Paul gives a sobering account of this judgment in 1 Corinthians 3:10-17, when he says...

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each mans work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

It is not the purpose of this judgment to determine one’s eternal destiny; everyone appearing at this judgment is redeemed—since only redeemed people will be raptured. The subject of this judgment is “faithfulness,” in order that each one might give an account of their stewardship of the grace of God since the time they believed in Christ. Each individual will be rewarded—or not—based upon what is revealed at this judgment. As Paul indicated in the passage above, there will be some who merit no reward, though they will be saved. The marriage of Christ and the Church will take

place after this judgment is completed. John gives the following picture of the Bride of Christ at the second coming—note that the Bride (the church) appears to have already received her rewards.

[Rev. 19:7-9] “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints).

Preparation for the kingdom: the tribulation on earth

The tribulation will be a seven-year period of great distress that will precede the inauguration of the kingdom. The tribulation will involve natural disasters, wars, persecutions, and divine judgments; as a result of the distress of this period the Bible indicates that most of earth’s population will perish before it is concluded at the second coming of Christ. The question arises as to why God would allow such horrible things to happen. The answer is that the tribulation represents the climax of man’s rebellion against God, and the things that will happen, are the result of that rebellion. During the tribulation God will purge the earth of rebellious men, and purify a people, both Jews and Gentiles, to enter into the kingdom when Christ returns (Zech. 13:7-9).

Christ gave this summary of the tribulation period in his Olivet Discourse.

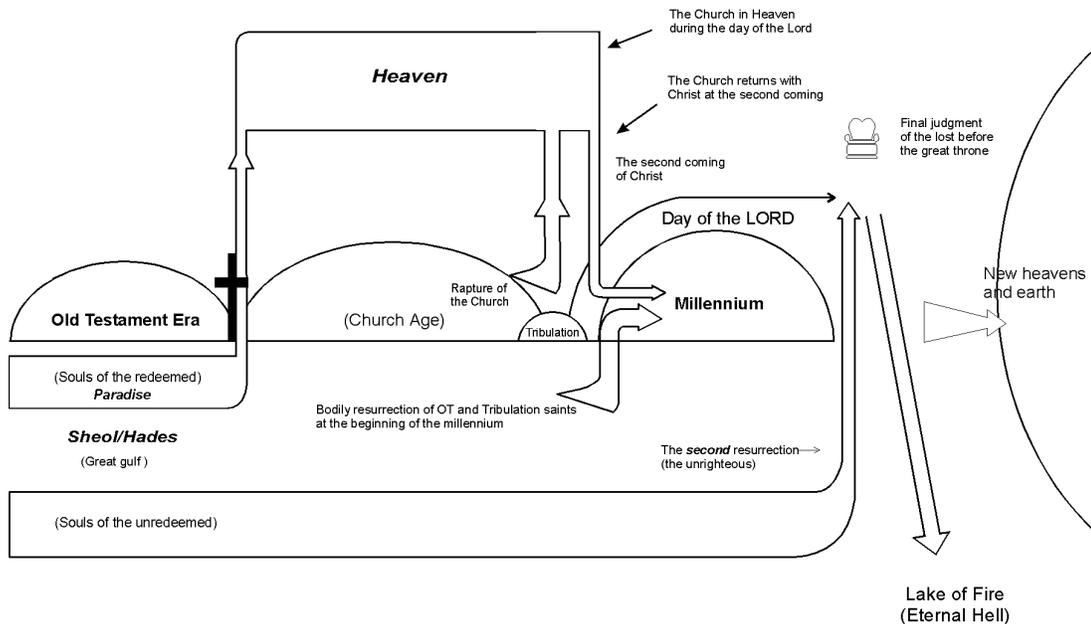
[Matthew 24:3-31] As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, I am the Christ, and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, Look, here is the Christ! or, There he is! do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time. So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the desert,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather. Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud

trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”

The tribulation begins with the making of a seven-year treaty between Israel and a European confederation of nations that were once part of the Roman Empire (Daniel 2 and 7; cf. 9:24-27). A leader will emerge from this confederation, who in the book of Daniel is referred to as, “the Prince to come” (Dan. 9:26, AV), and in the writings of the Apostle John as, “the Antichrist” (1 Jn. 2:18,22) and, “the Beast” (Rev. 13:1-10). This satanically enabled person will use the first three and one-half years of the tribulation to come to power over a global empire. The first half of the tribulation will consist of wars, famines, physical disturbances and great loss of life—one quarter of the world’s population will perish (Rev. 6:8); yet it will be far less intense than the second half of the period. Since numerous passages indicate that the Jewish temple (the third temple in Israel’s history) will in operation by the midpoint of the tribulation (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15; Rev. 11:1-2; 2 Thess. 2:3-4), the reconstruction of this temple will likely begin early in the first half of the period, though it is certainly possible that construction could begin even prior to the period.

Several important events occur at, or near the midpoint of the tribulation period. As a result of angelic warfare in the heavens, Satan and his host of fallen angels will be confined to the earth (Rev. 12:7-17); and God will send two, rather unique prophets who will prophesy throughout the remainder of the period until they are killed—probably just prior to the second coming (Rev. 11:3-13). At the midpoint of the period, Satan’s prince (the Antichrist) will enter the Jewish temple, proclaiming himself to be God and demanding that all the peoples of the world worship him (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:3-4). Satan will raise up a false prophet who will perform great signs so as to deceive the unredeemed into worshiping the Antichrist (Rev. 13:11-18); a great persecution of believers will begin. This will be the most severe persecution of Christians in history (Matt. 24:15; Rev.12:13-14). As the second half of the period progresses, spiritual deception will increase (Matt. 24:11; Rev. 13:11-18, cf. 17:1-18; 2 Thess. 2:8-12) and the moral condition of the world will greatly degenerate (Matt. 24:12).

An Overview of the Future



The most severe of the tribulation events will occur in the last half of the period. All of the distress of the first half of the tribulation is described under the first four “seals” of Revelation 6:1-8. The “seals” in the book of Revelation are not judgments—though a seal may contain judgments; rather, the seals represent the major movements of the period. The fifth seal, which allows the Antichrist to persecute and kill a great number of Christians, will occur shortly after the midpoint of the period (Rev. 6:9-11 cf. Matt. 24:9,15-22). Well into the second half of the tribulation, the sixth seal—an object from space hitting the earth (Rev. 6:12-17)—likely serves as a warning of what is about to take place with the opening of the seventh seal (Rev. 8:1).

We cannot be certain when the day of the LORD begins; however, there is no doubt that the events of the seventh seal are divine wrath (Rev. 6:16-17; 15:1-16:21). During the time of the seventh seal (Rev. 8:1-6) a manifold judgment composed of seven “trumpets” is unleashed. Under the divine judgment of this period most of the world’s remaining population will perish (Rev. 8:7-13). Following the judgments of the first four trumpets, which are cosmic in nature, there will be demonic affliction, war, and another set of judgments referred to as the “bowls” of God’s wrath (the seventh trumpet is comprised of the seven bowls). The first five judgments in the bowl sequence are plagues poured out upon the earth (Rev. 16:1-11). The sixth and seventh bowls involve war, widespread destruction, and preparation for Armageddon—the final conflict of the period (Rev. 16:12-21). At the close of the period, the Antichrist will be involved in a conflict to maintain his global empire (Dan. 11:36-45). The destruction from this warfare will be of a magnitude never before seen in human history. It is only the personal return of Christ in the midst of this conflict that ensures the survival of God’s elect (Rev. 16:12-19:21). At His second coming, Christ will descend to the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:1-4) and go forth to defeat the armies of the Antichrist. The Antichrist and his false prophet will be thrown into the Lake of Fire (Hell) and their armies will be destroyed by Christ (Rev. 19:19-20; Zech 14:1-15, esp. v. 12). Zechariah gives this account of the coming of Christ:

[Zechariah 14:1-5] A day of the LORD is coming when your plunder will be divided among you. I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city. Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

John, in Revelation, gives the following account of Christ’s second coming; it is the most detailed account of this event contained within the pages of Scripture.

[Revelation 19:11-21] I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, “Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.” Then I saw the beast and

the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

The interlude between the tribulation and the millennium

There will be a brief interlude between the tribulation and the millennium of about forty-five days (Dan. 12:11-12). Two events take place during this time. The first event is the confinement of Satan and his host of angels to the Abyss (Rev. 20:1-3). Little is known of the Abyss; it is distinct from Hades, the interim abode of the dead, and the Lake of Fire (Hell); it appears to be a place of temporary confinement for evil spirits (fallen angels) until they are permanently consigned to the Lake of Fire at the final judgment (Lk. 8:31; Rev. 9:1-12). The second event that will take place during this interval is the judgment described in Matthew 25:31-46. This judgment, which is often referred to as “the judgment of the nations,” is necessary in order to ensure that none of the unredeemed enter into the millennial kingdom. Since the redeemed and the unredeemed will be separated into groups by angels at Christ’s second coming, it is likely that this judgment will be a summary (group) judgment. Each unrighteous (unredeemed) person will, of course, be resurrected and judged individually after the millennial phase of the kingdom is completed, before the eternal phase of the kingdom begins.

The kingdom: phase one—the millennium

The millennial phase of the kingdom is the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises God made to Abraham and to his descendants (Israel) in the Old Testament. Actually, the millennium is only the first of two phases in which the visible kingdom of God will unfold. As the name suggests, the millennial phase of the kingdom will last for approximately one thousand years. After the millennium is concluded, the eternal phase of the kingdom will begin (Rev. 21:1-5). The major difference between these two phases is that the millennium will take place on the present (unrenewed, unpurified) earth, whereas the eternal phase will begin only after the heavens and earth are renewed and purified from the presence, and all effects of sin. Although there will be sin and death in the millennium (owing to the presence of unredeemed descendants born to those who entered the kingdom from the tribulation in their natural bodies), there will be no sin or death in the eternal phase. In the eternal phase, Heaven—the “New Jerusalem”—will descend and rest upon the earth, and the new earth will become the eternal abode of God and his saints. Although the Old Testament does not distinguish between these two phases, they are clearly distinguished in the New Testament book of Revelation (Rev. 20:4-22:5). The prophet Micah also gives the following picture of the coming kingdom.

[Micah 4:1-5] In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken. All the nations may walk in the name of their gods; we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.

While we know a great deal about the character of the millennium, only a few of the actual events are revealed in Scripture. One of the first events of the millennium will be the resurrection of the righteous dead (Rev. 20:4-6). Since the church-age saints will be raised at the rapture, it remains for the Old Testament saints and anyone saved after the rapture (who subsequently dies) to be raised. This resurrection likely signals the beginning of the millennium. There are four distinct groups that will enter the millennium: 1) the glorified church-age saints having been raptured earlier, who will return with Christ at his second coming; 2) those saved after the rapture that survive physically until the second coming; 3) the Old Testament saints, who will be resurrected at the beginning of the millennium; and 4) those saved after the rapture that do not survive until the Lord's coming—who will be resurrected at the beginning of the millennium along with the Old Testament saints. Of these, only the second group (those saved after the rapture who survive until the Lord's second coming) will enter the millennium in natural (untransformed) bodies. Saints of the other three groups will enter the kingdom in glorified (resurrected, or transformed) eternal bodies.

Life in the millennium will be different from past ages. Christ will be personally present to rule over the earth. There will continue to be governments, but these will be accountable to Christ (Mic. 4:1-8; Zech. 14:17). The curse placed upon the earth at the fall of man will be lifted, at least partly (Isa. 65:17-25). This change in the natural order will affect both animal and plant life, and the earth will become highly productive (Amos 9:13). Nevertheless, the millennium will not be a perfect age. Although only the redeemed enter the millennium, those in their natural bodies will soon reproduce (Isa. 65:19-23), introducing unredeemed sons and daughters. As the period progresses, the population of both saved and lost will soar. As mentioned earlier, because of the presence and effects of sin and death, the millennium will not be a perfect age; rather, it will serve as a transition from the present (imperfect) state to the eternal (perfect) kingdom.

The millennium derives its name from the fact that its duration is approximately one thousand years (Rev. 20:2,7-10). Satan and his host of fallen angels will be confined to the Abyss at Christ's second coming. After he has been in confinement for a thousand years he will be released. At the close of the millennium, God will allow Satan to organize the final rebellion of human history, in order that all who do not love God and his Christ might be manifested and judged. John gives the following description of this conflict in Revelation 20:7-10,

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

This rebellion will have the effect of polarizing humanity into two camps—one belonging to God, and the other belonging to the Devil. Christ's enemies will perish by fire from heaven, and Satan along with the other fallen angels will be cast into the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:7-10). The final event of the millennium will be the dissolution of the present heavens and earth to prepare the way for the final judgment of the lost and the creation of a new heavens and earth, wherein will dwell only God, his holy angels, and those made perfect (righteousness) by the blood of Christ.

The interlude between the millennium and the new creation

At the conclusion of the millennium the present heavens and earth will be dissolved by fire (2 Pt. 3:10-11; Rev. 20:11), and all of the unrighteous dead will be resurrected to face judgment. The

book of Revelation refers to this as, “the second resurrection” (Rev. 20:11-15). At this judgment it will be demonstrated to each and every unredeemed person that they are guilty before God and that their name is not recorded in the Book of Life (of the redeemed), and they will be cast into the Lake of Fire (Hell)—which is, “the second death” (v.14). John records the following account of the second resurrection and the judgment of the unredeemed before the “great white throne.”

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

The kingdom: Phase two—eternity in the new heavens and earth

Having finally dealt with evil forever, God will create new heavens and a new earth (Rev. 21:1-5). In this eternal phase of the kingdom, the New Jerusalem, the Heavenly City, will descend out of heaven to rest upon the earth forever (Rev. 21:9-22:5). This city will be the eternal home of the saints. There will be no one who is unrighteous in this perfect phase of the kingdom. Sin, suffering, sorrow, and death will be no more, and God will dwell forever in the midst of His people. While eternity will certainly be full of new opportunities for the redeemed, the story of biblical prophecy ends here.

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