

## 8. Doctrine of Last Things

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### Our Triune God in Last Things<sup>1</sup>

We believe that our triune God is the sovereign Author of history and will orchestrate all things to fulfill his glorious intent in creation (Gen 1:28-30; Isa 46:10-11; Dan 2:21; Matt 6:10; Acts 1:7; 17:26; 1 Cor 15:21-28; Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:16-17; Rev 21-22).

1. God is currently working all things toward the promise of Christ's literal, physical, visible, and sudden return to reign on earth in power and glory (Ps 8:4-8; Mark 14:61-62; Luke 21:27; Acts 1:9-11; Phil 3:20-21; 1 Thess 5:2-3; Heb 2:6-9).
2. The Holy Spirit has been and is currently guiding God's people into truth that accords with scripture and preparing them for the return of the Lord (John 16:8, 13; 1 Cor 2:6-16; Eph 1:18; 1 Thess 5:23; Heb 12:14; 1 John 2:27-28; Rev 2-3; 22:17).
3. After his return, the Lord Jesus Christ will raise the dead, exercise his role as final Judge, bring an end to all evil, gather his elect, and establish his good rule and reign in the new heaven and new earth, the eternal dwelling place for God and his people (Matt 24:31; Luke 22:28-30; 1 Cor 15:22-24; 1 Thess 4:15-17; 2 Thess 1:5-2:12; 2 Tim 4:1; 1 John 4:17; Rev 11:15-18; 19:7-9).

### The Last Days Have Already Begun

1. God's good rule will one day encompass all of heaven and earth. This fully realized and consummated kingdom of God is intended to be "our blessed hope" that is both a reassuring promise for the future and a potent motivation for godly living in the present (Luke 21:34; 1 Thess 4:13, 18; Titus 2:13; 1 Pet 1:13; 2 Pet 3:11-14; 1 John 2:28; 3:2-3; Rev 1:3).
2. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the present ministry of the Holy Spirit, the kingdom of God has already broken into this present age. Thus, in a very real sense, the entire history of the church has taken place in the last days, between the inauguration of the kingdom and its future consummation (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:14-21; 1 Cor 10:11; Heb 1:1-2; 9:26; 1 John 2:18).
3. Through the Holy Spirit, the church experiences a foretaste of the life and blessings of the kingdom and makes them visible in this present life, in order that they may witness to the world concerning the present and future realities of the kingdom of God and call others to submit to his saving rule<sup>2</sup> (Matt 6:33; 13:1-51; 24:14; 25:31-46; 28:18-20; Luke

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as *eschatology*, from the Greek word *eschatos*, meaning "last" or "end."

<sup>2</sup> For more, see *Doctrine of the Church: The Church in the Biblical Story*, 4.

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19:11-27; Acts 1:1-8; 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 30-31; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Heb 6:4b-5; 2 Pet 3:11-13).

4. Therefore, the discussion of last things must give careful consideration to what aspects of God's promises have *already* been fulfilled and what aspects have *not yet* been fulfilled, so that the church may live and witness faithfully in the present by cultivating both a proper anticipation for the future and an appreciation for what has already been accomplished (Matt 24:14; 1 Cor 7:29-31; 1 Pet 1:5, 13; 4:7; 2 Pet 3:11-14; 1 John 2:15-17).

### Death, Resurrection, and Judgment

1. We believe that God created human beings as unified physical and spiritual beings. However, humanity's rebellion against God has brought the curse of death, which results in a separation between body and spirit.<sup>3</sup> At the death of the physical body of an individual, there is no loss of non-physical, spiritual consciousness (Rev 6:9-11).
  - a. At death, the spirits of those redeemed pass immediately into the presence of Christ (Luke 23:43; Phil 1:23; 2 Cor 5:8).
    - i. God's people will experience a separation of spirit and body (Matt 10:28; Phil 1:21-24), which will continue until the return of Christ (1 Thess 4:13-17).
    - ii. Upon Christ's return, the spirits of the redeemed will be united with resurrection bodies that will be physical, immortal and incorruptible, and God's people will be glorified forever with the Lord in new creation<sup>4</sup> (Isa 26:19; Ez 37:12-13; John 6:40, 44; Acts 24:15; Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:35-54).
    - iii. The spirits of the redeemed in Christ who have died remain in joyful fellowship with him in heaven, while awaiting the fulfillment of the hope of resurrection (2 Cor 5:8).
  - b. At death, the spirits of those unredeemed are held in Hades, a place of punishment, torment, and utter darkness, where they will remain until their resurrection to judgment (Luke 16:19-26; Acts 1:25; 1 Pet 3:19; Jude 6-7; Rev 20:13-15).
    - i. At the resurrection, their spirits will be united with resurrection bodies (Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29, Acts 24:15).

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<sup>3</sup> See *Doctrine of Humanity: Creation of Humans*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Different views exist regarding the connection and timing of the return of Christ, believers being caught up (or "raptured") to meet him in the air (1 Thess 4:17), and the resurrection of dead saints. We consider the rapture to be a tertiary doctrinal matter. We believe that the return of Christ, the rapture of living saints, and the resurrection of dead saints will likely occur in close succession. Those in Christ will meet him in the air as he returns to earth, in order to welcome and accompany him into his kingdom. For more, see "the Millennium" below. For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena: Our Theological System and Tradition*.

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- ii. They will then appear before the Lord for judgment (Rev 20:11-15), and will be cast into the lake of fire (Matt 25:41-46; Rev 20:11-15) and cut off from God forever (Dan 12:2; Matt 25:41-46; 2 Thess 1:6-9).
2. We believe that every human will experience a bodily resurrection to one of these two eternal realities—new creation or the lake of fire—and no other<sup>5</sup> (Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29; 6:39; Acts 24:15; Rom 8:10-11, 19-23; 2 Cor 4:14; Rev 20:12-15).
    - a. God has appointed a day in which every person will appear before Jesus Christ, who has been appointed by the Father to be the righteous judge of all people (John 5:22-29; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Tim 4:1).
    - b. This day of judgment, in which all shall give an account of their works, words, and thoughts, and receive what is due them, whether good or evil (Ecc 12:14; Matt 12:36-37; Rom 2:16; 14:10, 12; 2 Cor 5:10), will include not only humanity, but also the fallen angels (1 Cor 6:3; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6).<sup>6</sup>
    - c. Though the coming of this day is certain, the timing of when it will come is not. Therefore, God's people await with eagerness, steadfastness, diligence, and soberness (Acts 1:11; Phil 4:5; 1 Thess.1:10; 4:16; 5:2, 4, 6; Titus 2:11-14; Heb 9:28; James 5:8; 2 Pet 3:10-12; 1 John 3:2-3; Rev 22:12, 20).

## The Millennium

1. In Revelation 20, John is shown a vision of a period of one thousand years, during which Satan is bound, and those who had been killed for their faith in Jesus are raised to reign with him. This "millennial kingdom" precedes the final defeat of Satan, the resurrection

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<sup>5</sup> By "eternal realities" we mean that once a person is welcomed into new creation or cast into the lake of fire, this destination is final. There will be no change or reversal. Thus, we reject *universalism* (the view that unredeemed humans will be given additional opportunities after death to repent, resulting in the eventual salvation of all people) as unbiblical (cf., Matt 7:13-14; Heb 9:27). Regarding the lake of fire, Revelation 20:10-15 says that Satan and his cohorts "will be tormented day and night forever and ever," but it does not explicitly state the duration of this torment for unredeemed humans. Christians hold different convictions about how unredeemed humans will experience this reality. Some believe that the lake of fire will be a place of *eternal conscious torment*, while others believe that it will be a place of *annihilation*, where unbelievers may suffer for a long period of time but will ultimately be consumed by the flames and cease to exist. The debate stems from the fact that some passages speak of the *destruction* of the wicked (Ps 92:7; Philip 3:19; 2 Thess 1:9; 2 Pet 3:7), while others indicate an *eternal experience* of punishment (Dan 12:2; Matt 25:30, 41, 46; Mark 9:43; Luke 9:22-28). We recognize that some orthodox Christians hold the annihilationist view, but we hold as a secondary doctrinal matter that unredeemed humans will suffer eternal conscious torment in the lake of fire. We do not hold this position flippantly. Rather, the doctrine of eternal punishment humbles us, grieves us, and motivates us to bold and compassionate gospel proclamation, calling unbelievers to repent and find salvation and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

<sup>6</sup> This will be the fulfillment of the prophetic theme of the "day of the Lord," the climactic event of history in which "God will make visible his rule of righteousness by calling for an accounting by the nations as well as individuals, dispensing punishment for some and ushering in salvation for others" (Elmer A. Martens, "Day of the Lord, God, Christ, The," *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 1996, p. 146. See also: Amos 5:18-20; Joel 2:1-11, 28-32; 3:18-21; Zeph 1:14-2:3; 3:8-20; Isa 2:10-22; 13:6-11; 34-35; Mal 3:16-4:3). The writers of the New Testament refer to this event as both "the day of the Lord" and "the day of Jesus Christ," indicating that God's righteous judgment and deliverance will be executed by Jesus himself at his coming (Rom 2:16; 1 Cor 1:8; 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14; Philip 1:6-11; 2:16; 1 Thess 4:13-5:11; 2 Thess 1:5-2:12; 2 Pet 3:10-13).

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of the dead, the final judgment, and the consummation of God's kingdom. The relationship between the millennium and the return of Christ has been understood by Christians throughout history in three main ways:

- a. The *premillennial* view holds that the physical, visible return of Jesus Christ will occur before the millennial kingdom (Rev 19:11-21).
  - i. The phrase "one thousand years" may be interpreted literally or symbolically (referring to a long period of time).
  - ii. Upon his return, Jesus Christ will rule with his saints on earth over a global kingdom that will be characterized by harmony, justice, peace, righteousness, and long life (Isa 11:1-12; 65:17-25; Ezek 36:33-38).
  - iii. Many premillennialists also believe that the Jewish people (ethnic descendants of Israel), having been redeemed via mass conversion to Jesus (Rom 11:25-27), will play a central role during the millennial kingdom, bringing blessing to the nations, in fulfillment of prophecy (Isa 2:1-4; 65:17-25; Jer 23:5-6; Ezek 37; Amos 9:9-15; Zech 14; Luke 1:31-33; Acts 1:6-7; 3:19-21; Rev 20:1-6).
  - iv. At the end of the millennium, Satan will be released and will lead unredeemed humanity in a final, ill-fated rebellion against Jesus Christ. After this battle, the dead will be raised to face final judgment (Rev 20:7-15).
- b. The *amillennial*<sup>7</sup> view holds that the millennium does not refer to a *future* time period, but rather to the *present* age of the church.
  - i. The phrase "one thousand years" is interpreted symbolically, referring to a long period of time, which has already lasted for almost two millennia, having begun in Acts 2 at the inauguration of the church.
  - ii. Satan was bound by Jesus Christ through his ministry, death and resurrection (Matt 12:25-29; Mark 3:23-27; John 12:31), and Christ presently reigns with his people as they make disciples (Matt 28:18-20; Eph 1:20-23; Col 1:13-14).
  - iii. The first resurrection (Rev 20:4-6) is interpreted spiritually, referring to believers who have physically died but presently reign with Christ in heaven.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The literal meaning of *amillennial* is "no millennium." This does not mean that those who hold this view deny the millennium. Rather, it means that they do not believe in a *future* millennium, because they view the *present* church age as the millennium.

<sup>8</sup> See above: *Death, Resurrection, and Judgment*, 1a.

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- iv. After the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world (Matt 24:14), Christ will physically and visibly return to earth, bring about the bodily resurrection of all people, and render final judgment.
- C. The *postmillennial* view holds that the physical, visible return of Jesus Christ will occur *after* the millennium.
- i. The phrase “one thousand years” may be interpreted literally or symbolically (referring to a long period of time).
  - ii. As the church is faithful to her mission of preaching the gospel and making disciples of all nations (Matt 24:14; 28:19; Rom 1:5; Rev 7:9-10), the world will be gradually pervaded and transformed by an increasing number of Christians, who will exercise a sanctifying influence upon their societies (Matt 5:13-16; 13:31-33).
  - iii. When Jesus has accomplished his mission to save the world (John 3:17), this will result in a “millennial age” on earth of righteousness, justice and peace, after which Christ will return, ushering in the resurrection and final judgment.<sup>9</sup>
2. We hold to a *premillennial* understanding of the millennium, viewing it as a secondary doctrinal matter. We seek to hold this view in an attitude of humility and grace, maintaining a willingness to learn with and from those who hold other views. We ask that members who hold to a different millennial perspective do so with the same attitude.<sup>10</sup>

## Eternity and New Creation

1. After his return, the Lord Jesus Christ, having fulfilled his redemptive mission, will deliver up the kingdom to God the Father so that in all domains—heaven and earth—the triune God will reign forever and ever, and all things will finally fulfill his intended purpose, to the praise of his glorious grace (1 Cor 15:24-28; Col 1:19-20).

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<sup>9</sup> Some postmillennialists do not view this worldwide triumph of the gospel as the “millennium.” Rather, they identify the millennium with the present heavenly reign of Christ with his saints (similar to *The Millennium*: 1 b iii above).

<sup>10</sup> We recognize that each millennial view represents ways that godly men and women have sought to understand what God has revealed in Scripture about his ultimate plans for his people and his world. Each view has strengths and weaknesses, but we believe that the premillennial view provides the best explanation of the biblical material. Though we do not hold the postmillennial or amillennial views, we acknowledge them as biblical perspectives. More importantly, we believe that the primary purpose of all biblical prophecy is to motivate God’s people to live faithfully in the present, not to give a clear sequence of future events. Therefore, we believe that humble, gracious discussion of scripture and the different millennial views, when done for the purpose of encouraging one another to faithfulness, can serve to build up the church better than mere uniformity of opinion. In this way, we appreciate how our amillennial brothers and sisters remind us of the importance of the church’s history, not only our future. We also appreciate how our postmillennial brothers and sisters remind us of the power of the gospel to transform societies. For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena: Our Theological System and Tradition*.

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2. After the return of Christ, the one true people of God will be presented perfect in holiness before God because of the obedience, suffering, and triumph of Christ. All sin and evil will be eradicated, and its shameful effects will be banished forever from the new heavens and earth (Eph 5:5; 1 Thess 3:11-13; 1 Pet 1:6-7; Heb 12:22-23).
  - a. This one people of God will be comprised of all the redeemed throughout history who, by faith, submitted to God's rule, whether under the old or new covenants. This multitude "from every tribe, tongue, language, and nation" (Rev 5:9) will be the fulfillment of God's promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham, and of Jesus' commission to the church to "make disciples of all nations" (Gen 12:2-3; Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Isa 2:1-4; 49:1-7; Jer 3:17; 4:1-2; Eph 2:11-22; Heb 12:22-24; Rev 5:9-10; 7:9-17; 21:9-14).<sup>11</sup>
  - b. Therefore, at the completion of Christ's redemptive mission, redeemed humanity will resume and fulfill their original mission: to join the triune God in ruling over his world, as he intended in the beginning (Gen 1:26-28; Ps 8; Isa 2:1-4; 11:1-10; Heb 2:5-10; Rev 21:22-27; 22:3-5).
  - c. The result of this renewal will be eternal, ever-increasing delight in the hearts of God's people, which will be more glorious and satisfying than any experience in this life, as God displays his infinite and inexhaustible greatness and glory for the enjoyment of His people (Ps 16:11; 1 Cor 2:9; 13:12; 2 Cor 5:1-9; 12:2-3; Eph 2:6-7; 1 John 3:2; Rev 21:9-11, 22-23; 22:4-5).
3. We believe that the new heavens and earth will be the fulfillment of God's intention for creation from the beginning. God's dwelling place and humanity's dwelling place will once again be the same place, but a better place<sup>12</sup> (Isa 65:17-25; 66:22-23; Matt 6:10; 25:34; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1-3).
  - a. This residence will be the dwelling place of the saints—with new, eternal bodies—where they will enjoy eternal, unbroken fellowship with God and one another (John 17:3; 1 Cor 15:35; Rev 21-22).
  - b. New creation will be the place where heaven and earth once again overlap. The final home of the redeemed will not be a disembodied or ethereal existence in "heaven." It will be just as physical an existence as humanity presently experiences, yet made perfect (Acts 1:11; 7:55-56; 2 Pet 3:13; Rom 8:18-25).

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<sup>11</sup> See *Doctrine of the Church: The Church in the Biblical Story*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Christians hold different views about how the new heavens and earth are related to the present heavens and earth. Some hold that the present creation will be completely destroyed, and an entirely new creation will take its place. We hold as a tertiary doctrinal matter that the present creation will be purged and cleansed by fire on the day of the Lord, but then will be "set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom 8:21), purified and renewed. This cosmic renewal is similar to and connected with the redemption of our bodies through resurrection (Rom 8:18-24). It will also be similar to the way that God destroyed and renewed the world through the flood (2 Pet 3:5-13). Whichever view one holds, all Christians are united in their ultimate hope of a perfected heavens and earth in which we will dwell with God forever, so this is not an issue over which Christians should divide. For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena: Our Theological System and Tradition*.

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- c.** New creation will be far beyond and more wonderful than anything that humanity can ultimately conceive. It will be better by quantity because it will be eternal, and by quality because it will be the habitation in which only righteousness dwells (1 Cor 2:9-10; Eph 5:5; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 20:15; 21:1-27; 22:1-21).
- d.** Because this will be a realm dominated by the purity and brilliance of God's own presence, it will be free from all manifestations and effects of the fall—pain, sorrow, death, sin, temptation, etc. (Rev 21:3-4, 8, 22-27; 22:3).
- e.** In new creation, God will lavish his riches upon His people, rewarding them for faithful service that He accomplished through them, and entrusting them with new service in and for the kingdom (Isa 65:17; 66:20-22; Matt 15:14-30; Luke 19:11-27; 2 Cor 5:10; Eph 2:10; Col 3:23-25; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21-22).

## **Summary and Implications**

Therefore, in the words of the Lausanne Covenant,

We believe that Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly, in power and glory, to consummate his salvation and his judgment. This promise of his coming is a further spur to our evangelism, for we remember his words that the gospel must first be preached to all nations. We believe that the interim period between Christ's ascension and return is to be filled with the mission of the people of God, who have no liberty to stop before the end. We also remember his warning that false Christs and false prophets will arise as precursors of the final Antichrist. We therefore reject as a proud, self-confident dream the notion that people can ever build a utopia on earth. Our Christian confidence is that God will perfect his kingdom, and we look forward with eager anticipation to that day, and to the new heaven and earth in which righteousness will dwell and God will reign forever. Meanwhile, we rededicate ourselves to the service of Christ and of people in joyful submission to his authority over the whole of our lives (Mark 14:62; Hebrews 9:28; Mark 13:10; Acts 1:8-11; Matthew 28:20; Mark 13:21-23; 1 John 2:18; 4:1-3; Luke 12:32; Revelation 21:1-5; 2 Peter 3:13; Matthew 28:18).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The *Lausanne Covenant*, pt. 15. The Lausanne Covenant was drafted by an international committee at the First International Congress on World Evangelization, held in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974. The entire covenant is available online at: <https://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant#cov>.



## Resources for Further Study

### Beginner

- BibleProject video: “How to Read the Bible: Apocalyptic Literature.” <https://bibleproject.com/videos/apocalyptic-literature/>
- BibleProject videos: “Read Scripture: Revelation” (parts 1 & 2). <https://bibleproject.com/explore/revelation/>
- Sam Storms, *The Restoration of All Things*, The Gospel Coalition Booklets, 2011. <https://static.crossway.org/excerpt/the-restoration-of-all-things/the-restoration-of-all-thingsdownload.pdf>

### Intermediate

- BibleProject, “How to Read the Bible: Apocalyptic Literature” video notes, 2020. [https://d1bsmz3sdiplr.cloudfront.net/media/Study%20Notes/H2R19%20Apocalyptic%20\\_Video%20Notes\\_final.pdf](https://d1bsmz3sdiplr.cloudfront.net/media/Study%20Notes/H2R19%20Apocalyptic%20_Video%20Notes_final.pdf)
- Robert Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, 1977.
- J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word*, Chapter 17: New Testament—Revelation, 2001.
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Part 7: The Doctrine of the Future, 1994.
- George Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies on the Kingdom of God*, 1959.

### Advanced

- Benjamin L. Gladd and Matthew S. Harmon, *Making All Things New: Inaugurated Eschatology for the Life of the Church*, 2016.
- Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation*, 2011.