

CHAPTER 12.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN CHRIST RETURNS?

An elderly widow regularly watches the evening news and despairs at what is happening in the world. She has personally suffered through the horrors of World War II, and it grieves her deeply that nations keep on fighting. The United Nations was supposed to bring peaceful, diplomatic solutions to conflicts, but machine guns still fire, missiles still fly, and people still die. Newscasts are also full of stories about sexual abuse and rape. Where is justice found for women whose spirits have been wounded as much as their bodies have been mistreated? There are constant reports of other crimes as well: murder, theft, fraud, drug trafficking, human trafficking. The list goes on and on.

All of this would be depressing enough, but what adds to the spiritual stress is that this widow is a Christian, and she does not understand how God can continue to let all of this wickedness happen. Why doesn't he rise up and wipe the global slate clean? Why doesn't he right the wrongs and punish the offenders? These questions press home even more because so many unbelievers reject the Lord for this very reason. This problem is sometimes referred to as a question of *theodicy*. People then ask: how can a good, just, and all-powerful God continue to allow so much evil to prevail? Surely, if he wants to eradicate evil, and if he is able to do so, he should. Yet since he has not done so, millions turn their back on God and continue to walk in their old, stubborn, sinful paths. This leaves the elderly widow with a twofold grief: pain at the miser-

able state of affairs in this world and more pain at the thought how many reject God because of it.

Do you understand why this widow is troubled? Are there answers to these questions? Is there real hope for a better world? In a word, the answer is yes. The hope is found in biblical eschatology, more specifically *general eschatology*, which is a study of what will happen to all creation when our Saviour returns on the clouds of heaven. A quick glance at the last three chapters of the book of Revelation will illustrate the point. Will there ever be a genuinely better world to live in? Yes, not only will there be a new earth, but also a new heaven, and in this new creation there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain (Rev 21:4). The present order of things will be left behind in a most decisive and dramatic way (Rev 21:4).

Will there ever be a day on which all injustices will be addressed and redressed? Yes, for about this new earth, with the New Jerusalem as its focal point, we read that nothing impure or shameful will ever enter it (Rev 21:27), and that all the sexually immoral, the murderers, and everyone who loves and practises falsehood will be cast outside, where they will be punished eternally for their wickedness (Rev 22:15; 2 Thess 1:9).

And finally, will there ever be an occasion on which it will be abundantly clear to everyone that God is both infinitely good and infinitely powerful? Yes, when God presents us with the new creation, the question of theodicy will be answered adequately and eternally. Only a God who is both all-good and all-powerful could make such a new heavens and earth. Only a God who is both all-just and all-powerful can bring perfect justice to everyone in a single day, the Day of Judgment (Rev 20:11–15). In fact, in the world to come, the glory of God will shine so brightly and so extensively that the new creation will not need any other source of illumination, “for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev 21:23).

So the elderly widow need not despair. Instead, she should pray for patience. Patience is a difficult virtue to master, but those who wait for the LORD can also be strong and take heart (Ps 27:14).

In this final chapter we will focus on the return of Christ and a sound understanding of the events surrounding his second coming. This includes, of course, the Final Judgment and the eternal state for the people who love God and the people who reject God. However, first let us begin with a basic overview of what will happen when Christ returns.

A BRIEF SURVEY OF ESCHATOLOGICAL EVENTS

It was tempting to call this section a brief *chronology* of eschatological events, but that would have been presumptuous. To explain further, it would have presumed that we, finite and time-bound creatures that we presently are, understand how chronology works in eternity. But truth be told, that is something we do not comprehend. How can all the living and the dead, both great and small, be judged on Judgment *Day*? According to our present chronological calculations such a judicial process would take hundreds of years, if not more, but certainly not a day. Yet when we step over the ultimate threshold from time into eternity, our current watches and calendars become obsolete. We have the impression that in eternity things happen much more simultaneously than sequentially, but even that is nothing more than an educated guess. The bottom line is that we will have to wait and see how eternity actually works.

Bearing this in mind, note the list below as an attempt to pull together various passages and assemble them into a survey of the miraculous events that will mark the end of this age. The list follows an order that fits with what the Lord has revealed to us in his Word.

- The voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God will resound around the globe, heralding the return of the Great King, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess 4:16).
- Christ will return on the clouds of heaven (Matt 24:30; Acts 1:11).

- As he returns, Christ will also take with him the souls of all the departed saints who have been in heaven with him (1 Thess 4:14).
- The bodies of those previously deceased saints will arise from the grave, be transformed into glorious bodies, and be reunited with their souls (1 Thess 4:16). At the same time, the bodies of unbelievers will arise from the grave and be reunited with their souls. The former are destined for eternal glory, the latter for everlasting shame and contempt (Dan 12:2).
- Believers who are still alive at the time of Christ's return will have their bodies transformed into glorious bodies in the twinkling of an eye (Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:51–52).
- All believers, whether they are already with Christ in heaven or still alive at his return, will be caught up in the clouds to meet their Lord and Saviour “in the air” (1 Thess 4:17). The air will not be their final dwelling place but, rather, seems to be an initial rendezvous point. The reason for meeting in the air may well have to do with the next event.
- The Lord will begin to destroy this present earth by fire, including a meltdown of the very elements from which the earth is made (2 Pet 3:10). This may explain why the rendezvous point for Christ and his Bride is in the air rather than on the earth.
- Everyone, both believers and unbelievers, will appear before the great white throne of God to be judged (Rev 20:11–14). To be more specific, the Judge will be the Son of God, Jesus Christ (John 5:22; 2 Cor 5:10).
- Those whose names are not written in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire, which is another name for hell (Rev 20:15). There they will suffer eternally, in body and soul, for their sin of hating both God and their neighbours (Rom 1:30; 8:7).
- Those whose names are written in the book of life will be ushered into the new heavens and the new earth, where they will live together with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in eternal blessedness and glory (Rev 21–22).

Although many details have been left out of this survey, and some items had to be described tentatively because there is not enough divine revelation to be more definitive, it is helpful to see, in a quick glance, what the Lord has in store for this world, and particularly for his church. One thing is clear from the outset: all of God's attributes—his holiness, justice, love, grace, power, and wisdom, to mention only a few—shine forth in radiant splendour in these events. If at present we are already convinced that our God is great, we will be astounded at how awesome he is when these events begin to take place. Now let us look at these events in detail.

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

By speaking of the return of Christ we immediately indicate that he has been here before. Obviously someone cannot return to a place where he has never been previously. Indeed, there is a significant parallel between Christ's first coming, as a baby in the manger of Bethlehem, and his second coming, as a King on the clouds of heaven. This parallel includes some similarities but also differences. The first similarity is that he is still the same person. In Bethlehem he was both the Son of Man and the Son of God, that is to say, he had a divine nature as well as a human nature. As such that has not changed. After his resurrection and ascension he retained his human nature, albeit in a glorified state, and he will return as the very same, entirely unique Mediator and Deliverer, who is "true and righteous man, and yet more powerful than all creatures; that is, one who is at the same time true God" (LD 5, Q&A 15). This is the full significance of the words of the angels who at his ascension said to the disciples, "*This* Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

Another similarity between his first and second coming is that Jesus' motivation is still to save his people from their sins. That is the meaning of his name (Matt 1:21), and that meaning has not changed. In his first coming Christ delivered his people from the guilt and power of their sins by dying for them on the cross. That atonement is complete and need not be repeated. Yet as we all know far too well, we have not yet been deliv-

ered from the presence of sin. Temptation is a constant affliction, both from within and without. At his second coming, though, Jesus will completely deliver his people from every influence, aggravation, and consequence of sin. What a deliverance that will be!

At the same time, there are numerous differences between his two comings. At his first coming, he arrived in humility—no royal birth announcement and no cradle with satin sheets, just a manger with straw. By contrast his second coming will be “with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30). There will be the call of the archangel and the blast of a heavenly trumpet (1 Thess 4:16). In short, the ambiance of his second coming will be unmistakably different from his first.

In addition to this, the world will have no choice but to react differently to his second coming. At his first arrival, even though the world had been made through him, it neither recognized nor received him (John 1:10–11). The next time, though, every eye will see him (Rev 1:10), instead of only the eyes of Mary and Joseph. Every knee will bow down before him (Phil 2:10), instead of only a few shepherds and a few wise men.

Finally, his second coming will have an immeasurably greater impact on creation. True, when Christ first came, a special star shone in the night sky, and angels appeared on various occasions both before and at his birth. Creation did acknowledge the arrival of its co-creator. However, now the entire created order is groaning for his second coming (Rom 8:22). When he comes, all of creation will be reconciled to him, and everything, right down to the elements of hydrogen, iron, and gold, will be renewed by fire and refashioned into a completely new heaven and earth (Col 1:20; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 21:1). Suffice it to say, in more than one way his second coming will be more glorious by far than his first.

Glorious is also the right term to describe his return since it is the final step of Christ’s glorification. This becomes obvious if we look at the structure of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. According to our normal, chronological way of thinking, the return of Christ, the resurrection of

the dead, and eternal life belong together in a group. After all, they are all eschatological topics. Interestingly, both of the aforementioned creeds divide this group by presenting the topics in two distinct places. In the Apostles' Creed the return of Christ "to judge the living and the dead" is mentioned immediately after his ascension. Next we confess our faith in the Holy Spirit, in addition to such matters as the church and forgiveness of sins. And then, and only then, does the creed return to eschatological matters by speaking about the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. The same pattern is repeated, only in slightly different words, in the Nicene Creed. Why do both creeds have this seemingly unchronological order? The answer is that this highlights what eschatology is really all about. To be sure, it includes the resurrection of our bodies and our entrance into the life of the world to come, but before that, and above that, eschatology is about the last step of the glorification of our Saviour. Once again, we need to double-check whether our thoughts about the end times are sufficiently theocentric and Christocentric and not unduly egocentric.¹

CHRISTOCENTRIC ESCHATOLOGY

Christ arose in victory and glory. Yet nobody was there to witness it, and many doubted his resurrection, even from among his own disciples. Christ ascended in victory and glory. By then at least the faith of his disciples was restored, but the group of those acknowledging Christ as the Saviour was still shockingly small, only about one hundred and twenty (Acts 1:15). In other words, ever since the day he arose Christ has been clothed in radiant glory, but the populace of this world has been ignorantly slow and rebelliously averse to giving him the glory that he rightly deserves. So, even if for no other reason, Christ needs to return in order to rectify the great injustice that has been done to him. The Great King of all the universe ought to be honoured as such, and the sooner the better.

Glorifying Christ in anticipation of his return involves acknowledging what Scripture reveals about him in connection with his second coming.

1. See chapter 10.

One way to trace this is by looking at various titles that he holds and exploring how these titles are linked to his return in full and final glory.

The Son of Man

More than once Christ himself said that he would return as the Son of Man (Matt 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27). This particular title certainly confirms his humanity, but it does more than that. The phrase is also found in Daniel 7:13, where we read the following: “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man.” This son of man is then given “dominion and glory and a kingdom,” all the while receiving worship from “all peoples, nations, and languages” (Dan 7:14). Clearly, this type of universal recognition was not given to Christ during the time of his humiliation here on earth, but he will receive it when he returns.

The Lord of Lords and King of Kings

In the last parables that Jesus told before his arrest and crucifixion, characters such as a master (Matt 25:14–30) and a king appear (Matt 25:31–46). Both of these parables deal with the end times. Although different in content, the parables have this in common: servants are accountable to their master or lord. As we look forward to the return of Christ, let us not only reckon with the fact that there will be a settling of accounts (Matt 25:19), but let us also acknowledge that on the final day the Master of masters, the Lord of lords, and the King of kings—not we, mere servants and citizens—will be the centre of attention (Matt 25:31–32).

Judge

The first time Jesus Christ came to save, not to judge (John 12:47). That will not be the case the second time around. Then he will come to judge the living and the dead (1 Cor 4:5). The comforting and gracious truth in this, though, is that *he* will judge. Ever since the Old Testament psalms (Pss 96:13; 98:7–9) and prophets (Joel 3:12), God’s Word has been reminding us that the LORD is coming to judge all nations. How-

ever, in the New Testament we begin to hear that it is particularly the second person of our triune God, the Son, who will have the primary role on Judgment Day. The Father “has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22), and the judge’s seat is specifically called the “judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor 5:10). This does not mean that the other two persons of our triune God will not be involved in the judgment in any way. All the works of God are one. Still, the central role of the Son is clearly revealed in the passages mentioned above. This affords a great comfort to those who believe in Christ because, as the Heidelberg Catechism explains, then I can “lift up my head and eagerly await as judge from heaven the very same person who before has submitted himself to the judgment of God for my sake, and has removed all the curse from me” (LD 19, Q&A 52).

Saviour

Earlier we mentioned that, also at his return, Christ will come to save his people from their sins, only this time it will be from the very presence of sin. According to Romans 8:23, we can also add that we are looking forward to the “redemption of our bodies.” The fall into sin affected not only our souls, hearts, and minds, but also our physical bodies. From birth pains to sweat (Gen 3:16, 19) and from dental grinders that cease to ophthalmological windows that grow dim (Eccl 12:3), there is no shortage of physical limitations and afflictions that we experience. Praise be to the Saviour who will redeem our bodies from this present fallen state!

Bridegroom

The metaphor of a wedding day is perhaps one of the most powerful and moving descriptions concerning the return of Christ. Already now the Bridegroom is preparing his Bride, the church, for her grand day, so that she may be radiant, “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing . . . holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:27). This ultimate wedding day will turn out just the way that the Groom has planned it. In Revelation 19:8–9 and 21:2 we do read about a bride who is so perfectly adorned that words are not enough to capture her beauty. Yet if the Bride is radiant on their great

day, the Groom himself will be even more stunning in his appearance, for at the beginning of the book of Revelation we read that even his feet glow with glory (Rev 1:15) and his face will be like the sun shining in all its brilliance (Rev 1:16).

When all these descriptions of our returning Saviour are combined, it is nearly too much for the heart to contain. With the Spirit we, as the Bride of Christ, eagerly call out, “Come!” (Rev 22:17). Tomorrow is not nearly soon enough! The Groom, for his part, has assured us, more than once, that he is coming soon (Rev 22:7, 12, 20). According to our clocks and calendars, *soon* still seems to be taking a very long time. However, we must remember that God measures time in a different way than we do. For him one day is like a thousand years. His coming is not slow, as some count slowness, but he is being patient in order to give everyone ample opportunity to repent (2 Pet 3:8–9).

VARIOUS VIEWS CONCERNING THE MILLENNIUM

Included in the Revelation to John is a verse about a millennium, a period of one thousand years. It is found in Revelation 20:1–7. For example, Revelation 20:6 reads: “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.” After this millennium, so Scripture goes on to say, Satan will be released from his prison and go out into the world in a rage, trying to deceive and destroy as much as he can, although in the end he himself will be thrown into the lake of burning sulphur (Rev 20:7–10).

This section of Scripture has given rise to numerous questions and debates concerning the millennium. When will it be, and what will happen before, during, and after this millennium? In fact, entire eschatological viewpoints have been named after the millennium, including premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. Before we dig into some of the details concerning these various positions, we should remind ourselves from the start that the book of Revelation belongs to a special genre called apocalyptic literature, which is known for its rich symbolism.² Colours and animals, but also names and numbers, all

appear as symbols with a deeper meaning. Just as 144,000 people symbolize the complete number of God's chosen people in Revelation 7:4, so also this span of a thousand years in Revelation 20 indicates a complete period of time. It is not meant to be counted literally as a thousand calendar years.

Having said that, let us briefly consider the different views of the millennium and how they affect our understanding of Christ's return.

Premillennialism

There are different variations of this view, so it is challenging to summarize. However, all the variants have this in common: the return of Christ on the clouds of heaven will precede the millennium. For this reason it is called *premillennialism*. According to premillennialism, the events of the last days will generally occur in the following sequence. First, the sincere believers in Christ will be miraculously taken up into heaven without dying. This is usually called the rapture. The unbelievers will continue to live on this earth for a period of seven calendar years known as the Great Tribulation, during which there will be further opportunity for them to repent. Next, Christ will return to earth on the clouds of heaven and usher in a special period of a thousand calendar years. During this time the focus of the Lord's work will shift back to the Jews, his covenant people of old. Finally, after this millennium, Christ will come as the Judge and all people will appear before his white throne of justice (Rev 20:11–15). All of God's people will be brought into the new heavens and earth while all of God's enemies will be sent to eternal punishment.

Postmillennialism

This view presupposes that, due to gospel preaching and the positive influence of Christians, this world can be improved slowly but steadily. At a certain point in world history this positive influence will reach a critical mass, as it were, and will culminate in a special period of a thou-

2. See the section on "Eschatology and Hermeneutics" in chapter 10.

sand calendar years, which will be something like a golden age for the church. During this span of time many Jews will be converted to true faith in the Messiah. After this millennial golden era Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. Thus, the name for this view is *postmillennialism*.

Amillennialism

This perspective on Revelation 20 begins with the understanding that the millennium is a symbolic, not literal, span of time. Furthermore, it holds that the millennium symbolizes the entire period of time from the ascension of Christ until his return. Consequently, the millennium is not something that *will* happen but rather something that *is currently* happening. The church is already a royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9), so that she can already begin to reign with Christ, her eternal Husband, even though he is in heaven and she is still here on this earth (Rev 20:6).

Evaluation

A certain amount of freedom should be permitted in the church concerning eschatological views. As mentioned in previous chapters, it is challenging to interpret apocalyptic literature and, once we begin to think beyond time and into eternity, it is even more challenging to grasp how and in which order these events will occur. Thus we should not be so presumptuous as to think that we have all our eschatological details lined up in a nice, neat row.

At the same time, there are certain basic truths that we need to affirm. Premillennial views tend to separate Christ's return and Judgment Day into two chronologically distinct events, occurring as much as a thousand years apart. This is not the way that God reveals the future in his Word. The Lord Jesus Christ will come *precisely in order to judge*, as the apostle Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 4:5 when he says, "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart." The Lord Jesus himself also speaks of his return and Judgment Day as one event with two distinct aspects (John 5:24–30).

In addition, the return of Christ is co-ordinated with the resurrection of the dead (Phil 3:20–21). In sum, Scripture always portrays the return of Christ, the resurrection of the body, and the judgment of all people as occurring together in immediate succession rather than as events separated by various spans of time. For this reason premillennialism, as it is commonly taught, does not fully line up with what the Lord reveals to us concerning the future of this world.

As for postmillennialism, the key drawback of this view is that it portrays the time after Christ's ascension as a period in which things become steadily, if not inevitably, better. Such a positive outlook on world history may be desirable, but it certainly does not seem to agree with the news reports that everyone hears. More than that, the entire book of Revelation does not leave us with the impression that there is a gradual improvement in the state of world affairs, all culminating in a golden era of righteousness and piety. On the contrary, the book is filled with cycles of destruction and catastrophes, punctuated with chapters of encouragement so that God's people do not despair despite all the tragedies that they see around them and the persecutions that they endure. Thus, post-millennialism also does not seem to concur well with what Scripture teaches us.

How should the millennium be understood then? As already noted, it is in line with the rest of the apocalyptic literature to interpret the thousand years as a symbolic number for a complete period of time. Yet that only raises the question: *which* complete period of time? When does this period of time begin and when does it end? In answering that question it is noteworthy that the verses in which the millennium appear also refer to "the first resurrection" and "the second death" (Rev 20:5, 6). The second death is not our physical death but rather a spiritual death, for later it is described as "the lake of fire," which is hell (Rev 20:14). Our first death, then, is our physical death; the second death is the spiritual death of eternal punishment.

This already helps us to understand certain aspects of this passage, but the next step is to realize that Scripture often contains criss-cross patterns

called chiasms. If we think along the lines of a chiasm, then the *second* resurrection, just like the *first* death, is a physical event. It is the resurrection of our bodies at the return of Christ. Likewise, the *first* resurrection, just like the *second* death, is spiritual. It is the new life to which the Holy Spirit raises us with Christ (Eph 2:6).

Once it is clear that the first resurrection is a spiritual, not a physical, resurrection, then the rest of the passage in Revelation 20 starts to fall into place. The *first* resurrection does not refer to the time when Christ returns and the bodies are raised from the dead; that is the second resurrection. Instead, the first resurrection refers to the wonderful truth that ever since Pentecost Day the Holy Spirit has been busy raising people who were dead in their sins to a new life in Christ. This also means that Pentecost Day is the starting point of the symbolic thousand years. Ever since that day regenerated human beings have been reigning together with Christ as the “royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9). This will also continue, until the time is complete, or to phrase it more symbolically, until the thousand years are over. At that point the final battle between God’s army and Satan’s army will take place, and Satan will lose and forever be cast out (Rev 20:7–10).

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

The Word of God leaves no doubt that both believers and unbelievers will be raised from the dead. This is quite clear already in the prophecy of Daniel, where the servant of the Lord writes, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (12:2). It is plain from this passage that the resurrection will be general and global, not limited only to God’s chosen ones, those whose names are “written in the book” (Dan 12:1). This Old Testament revelation is confirmed in the New Testament where the sea, Death, and Hades have to give up all the dead that are in them in order for them to appear before the judgment seat of God (Rev 20:13).

The question that remains, though, is this: what will the resurrected body be like? At this point we must refrain from all speculation and restrict ourselves to what the Lord himself has taught us. In the first place, we know that our resurrected bodies will be “like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21). This already gives us a good indication, because we know that the resurrected Christ *could* eat and drink (Luke 24:42), although he did not need to eat and drink in order to survive. Likewise, we will be able to drink the wine new with Christ in the kingdom of his Father, just as he promised (Luke 22:18), but our glorified bodies will not *need* to eat and drink, for in the age to come God’s people will never be hungry and never be thirsty (Rev 7:16). In addition to this, we should be able to recognize each other, even as the women and the disciples could discern who the resurrected Christ was (John 20:16; 21:7). The Lord also tells us, and joyfully so, that the glorified body will experience no pain and no death, and therefore no sickness either (Rev 21:4).

These, then, are the main things that we know about the glorified body. Many other questions remain. Will those who die as children be raised with the bodies of children? Will those who died in old age arise with older, yet entirely healthy, bodies? Or will everyone have the body of a twenty-five-year-old? We do not know. Certainly by the time Christ returns and we learn the answer, the question will seem trivial at best.

JUDGMENT DAY

If everyone’s soul goes either to heaven or to hell after we die, why is there still a need for Judgment Day? Hasn’t the decision already been made? This is a question that is commonly, and understandably, asked. A good place to begin is not immediately after death but long before it. In one of his most famous teachings Christ said, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:16, 18). The wording of the last sentence is particularly noteworthy. Whoever believes *is* not condemned. Jesus does not say he *will* not be con-

demned (future tense), but that he *is* not condemned (present tense). In other words, matters of eternal life or death are already determined in this life. It is not as if suddenly, after we die, God has to initiate a new court case for each and every soul to determine, for the first time, the direction in which we will go: to heaven or to hell. That is the way an earthly judge may need to handle things, but the heavenly Judge reads the hearts of humans long before they die (Ps 44:21). Christ becomes even more emphatic about those who refuse to believe in him. They stand condemned *already* (John 3:18), even if they are still in the prime of life.

Indeed, this whole matter can be taken back one large step farther. The decision about who will enjoy eternal life is not taken by God in the moment that someone comes to faith. God himself took this decision long before that person came to faith, even before he was born, and even before this present world was created. As both Daniel 12:1 and Revelation 20:15 make clear, those who are acquitted on Judgment Day are those whose names are found written in the Lamb's book of life. That book of life was filled in before the creation of the world when God chose those who would be his own, out of his sovereign grace and to the praise of his glory (Eph 1:4–6; Rev 13:8; 17:8). Therefore God does not need to *discover* who will go to eternal life and who will go to eternal punishment on Judgment Day. He has *determined* all of this since before the creation of the world.

Yet what need is there for Judgment Day if everything has already been ordained beforehand in God's eternal decree? Once again, here is where a theocentric approach to eschatology is crucial. Judgment Day is not needed in the first place to decide where human beings will go for eternity, but rather to publicly vindicate the glory of God's great name. So many people throughout history have questioned the justice of God, either publicly with their mouths or secretly in their hearts. They have felt that God has been unjust to them personally or that he has not upheld due justice in this world more generally. However, on the great and final Day all the books of history will be opened (Rev 20:12). The motives of human hearts (1 Cor 4:5) and the careless words of their tongues (Matt

12:36) will be laid out, plain for all to see. Innumerable sins will be brought to light, and all people will see that God has not treated anyone unjustly, not at all. Quite the opposite, God's perfect justice will radiate in its splendour, and it will be evident just how unjustly people have treated God, despite all his goodness toward them and all his patience with them. In this way, true justice will be served.

This leads us to one final point concerning Judgment Day. More than once the Holy Spirit tells us that Christ will judge everyone *according to his deeds*. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:10 we read, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." This judgment is described in virtually identical words in Revelation 20:12. Inevitably this leads to the question: are we saved by grace or by works? In Ephesians 2:5 the apostle Paul emphasizes that we are saved by grace. But what we read in 2 Corinthians 5:10 seems to undermine this by saying that in the end we will be judged according to our works. How should this be understood? Is there an initial deliverance by grace but a final salvation by works? No, that is not the case. Also at the end of the age, salvation belongs to our God and to him alone (Rev 7:10).

The key to understanding this properly is to zero in more closely on the phrase *according to*. This phrase refers to a *corresponding point*, not to a *basis*. This difference between correspondence and basis is illustrated in Revelation 20. The books of history, including everything that everyone has done, are opened (v. 12). These books are used in the process of judging, and from their contents it is clear that no one deserves to be saved. At the same time it is crucial to note that the final decision about who will go into eternal life in the new creation is not based on those books. Rather, before the final declaration of the Judge is made, "another book" is opened, the book of life (v. 12). Those whose names are not written in the book of life will be cast into the lake of fire, but those whose names are written in the book of life will enter the New Jerusalem to be with Christ forever (Rev 3:5).

Thus the book of life is the *basis* upon which decisions of eternal blessedness or condemnation are made, and the other books of our deeds are used by God as a point of reference to ensure that the gracious rewards we receive in eternity *correspond* to our service of him in this life. For instance, he who has given up much for the Saviour in this life will receive a correspondingly great recompense in the age to come, even a hundredfold (Mark 10:29–31). Likewise, unbelievers will be punished in a way that corresponds to the manner in which they lived here in this life. For example, our Saviour said that the unbelievers in Bethsaida would be judged more heavily even than the wicked inhabitants of Sodom because they had seen miracles performed by Jesus but still refused to believe in him (Matt 11:20–24).

THE ETERNAL PUNISHMENT OF THE WICKED

Jesus Christ made it abundantly clear that those who trust in him will go into eternal life, but those who reject him will go away to eternal punishment (Matt 25:45). Jesus also calls eternal punishment “hell” (Matt 5:29–30), “eternal fire” (Matt 18:8; 25:41), and the place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). Elsewhere in Scripture it is also described as the “bottomless pit” (Rev 20:1), “the lake of fire and sulphur” (Rev 20:10), as well as the “second death” and “the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14). All in all, it is an unimaginably horrible place. In fact, it is so horrible that many have asked how a just God could ever punish anyone in such a terrible place for such a long time, yes, even for eternity. This question then frequently arises: although all sin is bad, is any sin worthy of that kind of infinite punishment?

Coming to a proper understanding of this requires us to begin with the atrocity of sin, not with the agony of hell. So long as we concentrate on the pain and misery that sin causes other human beings, a particular transgression usually appears to be limited in scope, or finite. A serial murderer may take dozens of lives, which is a crime of horrific proportions, but it remains true that he did not murder an *infinite* number of people over an *infinitely* long period of time. From that point of view, *eternal* punishment appears to be a penalty that does not fit the crime.

However, all sin, whether it be a multiple murder or a quick lustful look, is committed in the first place against God—to be more specific, against his infinitely high majesty. To say it in other words, the sin itself may not be infinite, but it is committed against an infinite God, whose holiness and majesty know no bounds. *That* is how serious sin is.

This is also why a sacrifice of infinite proportions was needed to atone for sin. God's *eternal* wrath could not be satisfied by the sacrifice of some finite creature (LD 5, Q&A 14). Therefore only the *infinite* value of the death of God's *eternal* Son could suffice (CoD 2.3). Consequently, if people reject Christ's infinitely great sacrifice for the infinitely great offence of their sins, then they will be left to suffer the full weight of God's eternal wrath. Viewed from the vantage point of Christ's inexpressibly great sacrifice for our sins, the punishment of hell does not seem so unjust anymore.

Still, any person of sound mind shudders at the thought of the eternal agony of hell that the unrighteous will endure. Many have tried to avoid this thought by suppressing it, by saying that Jesus never actually taught that there is a hell, or by suggesting that perhaps the wicked will simply cease to exist all together in eternity while the righteous will go on to life in glory with God. That latter option is called annihilationism or a belief in conditional immortality.

Proponents of annihilationism often point to Matthew 10:38 to support their position. There Jesus warns us, "Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Admittedly, this language of destroying the body and soul in hell does sound initially like a reference to the annihilation of the wicked. Yet, comparing Scripture to Scripture, we are compelled to reach a different conclusion. In Revelation 14:11 the Holy Spirit indicates that the torment of the wicked continues "forever and ever" (see also Rev 20:10). If the wicked are annihilated, their torment stops; however, since God teaches us that their torment continues forever, they must also continue to exist. Moreover, the destruction to which Jesus refers in Matthew 10:38 is not a complete annihilation, but rather a certain death, a second death to be precise, which the Holy Spirit also describes as hell

(Rev 20:14). So the horrible reality of eternal punishment remains for the wicked, but it also provides a stark background against which the full glory of eternal salvation shines forth even more splendidly.

THE ETERNAL BLESSEDNESS OF THE REDEEMED

In many ways this final topic is the most challenging, yet also most the exciting, to discuss. As the Heidelberg Catechism describes it, the eternal blessedness of the redeemed is so perfect that no eye has seen it, no ear has heard it, and the heart of man cannot even conceive of it (LD 22, Q&A 58). If that is the case, who would dare to write about it? It is true that when it comes to the blessedness that is in store for us, words ultimately and always fail us. Nonetheless, we can make a humble attempt by sticking as closely as possible to the words that the God of our salvation has given us.

Eternal blessedness begins with a perfectly blessed relationship between God and us. In final glory the church of Christ, his Bride, will be so entirely pure and blameless that her holiness will radiate with splendour (Eph 5:27). After so many long centuries of waiting, the Betrothed Couple will finally step forward to their wedding day. The feast will be phenomenal! Also, once this most holy marriage is solemnized, the love of the Groom and Bride will never fade. In some marriages, first love does not translate into forever love. Such a scenario cannot develop in this marriage, for the Lord's love is everlasting (Ps 103:17).

Since every marriage is a covenant relationship (Mal 2:14), it is not surprising that no sooner do we hear about the "bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:2) than we also hear some familiar covenant terminology: "They will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Rev 21:3). If the new covenant is already so much better than the old (Heb 8:13), then surely the covenant in eternity will be infinitely better than that. Due to sin, the old and new covenants brought many curses down upon the heads of covenant members. No such thing will happen in eternal life. Although there will be a covenant (Rev 21:3), there will no longer be any curse (Rev 22:3). Where there is no covenant curse, there can only be covenant blessings, one heaped upon the other.

Yet the relationship between Redeemer and redeemed in eternity is not only marital and covenantal; it is also familial. In the beginning we were created in the image of God, which also includes a father-children relationship (Gen 1:27 with Gen 5:1–3). This image of God, with its father-children relationship, is restored to an eternal high point when God himself declares, “The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son” (Rev 21:7). To be children of God is already an inestimable honour, but what will it be like to be glorified children of God? We can only say, “What we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Thus, in final glory, our relationship with God will transcend anything that we have experienced in this present age. No matter how intimate the prayer and no matter how invigorating the worship, the fact of our present reality is that we do not see God. Indeed, seeing God is forbidden (Exod 33:20). Yet, when blessedness becomes eternal that prohibition will be lifted and we shall see him as he is. What a sight that will be!

If eternal glory only contained a perfectly blessed relationship between God and us and with each other as children of God, then that already would be more than enough. Then the great commands to love God and our neighbour would be fulfilled for all eternity. Yet, as always, God’s grace gives more. In addition to the perfectly blessed relationship, God also gives us a perfectly blessed location in which to live forever. The new creation will contain both a new heaven and a new *earth*. For eternity we will live on this new earth, not up in the clouds of heaven, as many popular sketches of eternal life would have us believe. This new earth will be adorned with animals (Isa 11:6–9) and plants, including a new tree of life (Rev 22:2, 14) which corresponds to the one originally found in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:9). A clean, sparkling river will flow (Rev 22:1), and there will be plenty of fruit to eat (Rev 22:2).

It is not easy to know how all of these symbolic, apocalyptic images will be finally fulfilled. Yet one thing is clear: the new heavens and the new earth, including the Holy, Golden, Bejewelled City of Jerusalem (Rev

21:9–21), will be an unimaginably spectacular place to live. If anyone has ever longed to live in the Garden of Eden, all his desires, and even more, will be fulfilled in the City of the New Jerusalem.

With a perfectly blessed relationship to enjoy and a perfectly blessed location in which to dwell, life will be overflowing in abundance (John 10:10). Yet we must not end here. As the beginning commenced with God, so the end must conclude with God. He, not we, is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End (Rev 21:6). In making everything new, our triune God will also bring final, ultimate, and never-to-be-interrupted glory to himself.

On the new heavens and the new earth, the collective glory of all the nations will be brought in to exalt the God of all nations (Rev 21:26). Every creature in heaven and on earth will be busy with praising him who sits on the throne, along with the Lamb and the Spirit of the Bride (Rev 5:13). Indeed, God’s glory in eternity will be so bright that it will not just be comparable to the sun, or even supersede the sun, but instead it will render the sun, and the moon, obsolete (Rev 21:23). The glory of God—such as no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived—is what eternal life is really all about!

Suggested Readings: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; Revelation 20:11–15

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. From 1 Thessalonians 4:17 we learn that we “will be caught up together with them [predeceased believers] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” This is commonly called the rapture. What is the purpose, or purposes, of this rapture? Also, the air would seem to be a rather unstable and unsubstantial rendezvous point. So why do we meet our Saviour *in the air*?
2. In which specific ways will our glorified bodies be different from our present bodies? In order to answer this question, contemplate what was different about Jesus after he arose from the dead and received his glorified body. Will our glorified bodies be radically different or mostly new and improved?

3. Will there be degrees of punishment and reward in eternity, with some receiving more and some receiving less? Find Scripture passages that support your understanding on this point. If there are different levels of reward, how will we be able to remain jealousy-free for all eternity?
4. Some people today teach that hell is only a present state of mind and not an eternal location of torment. Are they correct? Defend your answer from Scripture.
5. Many people struggle with the following question: how can a good and all-powerful God allow so much evil to happen in this world? Given what you have learned about general eschatology, formulate the best answer that you can to this common stumbling stone.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. In the first creation, also before the fall into sin, human beings had to work (Gen 2:15). Will we have to work, albeit without any thorns and thistles (Gen 3:18), on the new earth as well? On the one hand, Luke 19:17 speaks of a servant who receives authority over ten cities. That sounds as if work is involved. On the other hand, Revelation 14:13 assures us that those who die in the Lord will rest from their labours. So which is it? In addition, what will we be busy with for all eternity?
2. We do not know who will all be condemned to eternal punishment, but we do know that their number will not be small (Matt 7:13). The everlasting torment of so many human beings is a particular burden that weighs heavily on the heart of any sincere Christian. Naturally, this motivates us to spread the gospel. Yet many reject it. How can God's people move forward each day again without letting the weight of this burden crush their hearts or compromise their faith?
3. Will married couples still be married couples, and will families still be families in the new creation? When eternal glory arrives, what will remain the same and what will be different about the close relationships we enjoy in this present age?