FIFTEEN

Eschatology: The Already and the Not Yet of the Christian Life

Daniel J. Baker – *Systematic Theology* – 2025

Introduction

We come now to the final topic, eschatology, which means "the study of last things," from the Greek word *eschaton* (ἔσχατον), "the last thing." Our reflex might be to turn to the book of Revelation and immediately begin to analyze its contents, since that book deals with "last things." Yet, even within the opening chapters of our Bibles the breezes of an age to come are already blowing. You can feel them in that tree in the Garden of Eden, "the tree of life" (Gen 2:9). And then even more dramatically there is the promise of an *eschaton* in Gen 3:15 the *protoevangelion*: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." Here, just three chapters into our Bible is the promise of a life we can experience and of a redemption—and a Redeemer!—that will undo the work of the devil. Here already is the promise that the enemy of our souls, "that ancient serpent, who is called the devil

and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (Rev 12:9), will be crushed and defeated beneath the heel of a victorious Redeemer. Eschatology is nothing but the expansion of all these themes.

Further, on almost every page there is a forward lean to the message of the Bible. In Genesis 49 as Jacob is speaking blessings and prophecies over his twelve sons, he says to Judah, "to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gen 49:10). Millennia later through Christ "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" this will be fulfilled (Rev 5:5), but it is back in Genesis that the expectation is birthed. When we get to the Psalms, we hear the refrain that Yahweh is coming to judge the whole earth "in righteousness" (Ps 96:13). Isaiah speaks of a coming "new heavens and a new earth" (Isa 65:17). Jesus speaks of a kingdom that is both here (Mark 1:15) but also yet to come (Matt 6:10; Mark 14:25). Always is the idea of a "not yet" we are waiting to experience. The Bible opens with the promise of an age to come, and it closes with the cry, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20). The Bible ends with God's people still waiting for the age to come. Yes, *the whole Bible* is eschatological.

The Already and the Not Yet

The idea that the whole Bible is eschatological prepares us for a second idea, one that has been called, "the already and the not yet." From beginning to end in the Scriptures we get a sense that "already" some things have been accomplished and are ours to enjoy but we have "not yet" entered into the fullness of God's blessings for his people. One example is the Covenant Formula, "I will be your God and you will be my people." The first mention of the Covenant Formula is in Genesis 17:7–8, and truly, Abraham has some experience of knowing God as his God, and he is the recipient of many of the blessings of being God's people. Thus, truly during his lifetime he had "already" experienced the reality of the covenant promises. And yet, he had "not yet" the fullness of any of the promises, which are ours only in "the new heaven and new earth" with our triune God (Rev 21:1–4). Further, while he had *some*

knowledge of God, the full-blown trinitarianism of the New Testament was far beyond his understanding and so the God he claimed as his God was far less understood than would be true in later generations of salvation history. Of course, his *experiential* knowledge of God was profound, and so we do not want to overstate how much greater our knowledge is with the completion of the New Testament. Still, the point remains that even the greatest heroes of our Bible—the patriarchs, Moses, David, Paul, Peter, John—could say right along with us that they had "already" experienced wonderful things but had "not yet" experienced the fullness of the things to come.

This tension between what faith possesses and what faith longs for is the great lesson of Hebrews 11, which dwells on the reality of "faith" as looking ahead to things not yet fulfilled. Abraham was "looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (Heb 11:10). He, like all the heroes in this chapter of faith, "died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" (Heb 11:13). Anthony Hoekema reflects on "the tension between the already and the not yet" in his book on eschatology and concludes by saying,

> Summing up what has been developed,...we conclude that our entire Christian life is to be lived in the light of the tension between what we already are in Christ and what we hope some day to be. We look back with gratitude to the finished work and decisive victory of Jesus Christ. And we look forward with eager anticipation to the Second Coming of Christ, when he shall usher in the final phase of his glorious kingdom, and shall bring to completion the good work he has begun in us.[1]

[1] Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 75.

The Resurrection of Jesus and the Age to Come

One the issues we will take up below is the biblical framework for understanding eschatology. Is there a future millennium or are we experiencing it right now? If it is future, is it before or after Christ returns? I will argue that we are in the millennium right now. The millennium is equivalent to the church age and will end when Christ returns. One reason to affirm this is the New Testament idea that there are basically two ages, "this age" and "the age to come." You can hear this throughout Jesus and Paul's teaching:

> And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matt 12:32)

> Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, [30] who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." (Mark 10:29–30)

> The God of our Lord Jesus Christ...raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (Eph 1:17, 20–21)

It is clear there is an "age to come," and in New Testament teaching it appears that this coming age will begin when he returns. We get the clearest picture of this new age in Revelation 21–22, and there we see that the age to come is marked by a new fullness of our experience of God and of his revelation to us.

Yet, the New Testament reveals another facet of this "age to come," a facet connected to the time when it the "age to come" begins. There is a sense in which the "age to come" begins with the coming of Christ and especially with the resurrection of Christ. These events inaugurate a new day in salvation history. You can see this with Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God. Where certain New Testament scholars defended the view that the kingdom was future and not present, and others wanted to say it is present and not future, scholars like Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos rightly said that it is *both*. That is why Jesus could speak of entering the kingdom now (Luke 16:16) but also a future day where we shall "recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 8:11). Ladd even titled his book on the topic, *The Presence of the Future*,[2] to capture this idea. The future has invaded the present with the redemptive work of Christ. In the Johannine vocabulary, "eternal life" speaks to this. "Eternal life" has a future dimension and is thus in contrast to perishing (John 3:16). But it also has a present side, since "this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). The "eschatology" of the Bible is thus an "inaugurated eschatology": *It has already begun!* What has happened to make it so that the kingdom and eternal life can be entered into today, so that the future can be experienced in the present? It is the coming of Christ and his resurrection. These change everything. Ridderbos summarizes these ideas by saying,

> We shall continue to hold fast to the terminology of the gospel which on the one hand speaks of the *fulfillment* of the time and the fulfillment of the Scriptures as a new dispensation of salvation that has started with the coming of Christ Jesus and with his work. On the other hand Jesus preaches the coming of the kingdom also as a future revelation, which the gospel denotes as the *consummation* of

[2] G.E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974).

> all things. We also use other terms derived from the language of the gospels, but these two: fulfillment and consummation have the advantage of qualifying the presence of Jesus' coming and his work as well as the beginning of the great era of salvation, and, besides, they hold out the prospect of the definitive, final significance of the kingdom as something of the future.[3]

Personal Eschatology: What happens to us individually when we die?

With the above general ideas, we are now ready to consider the question of *what happens to us individually when we die?* Eschatology has an individual and a corporate side. If we die before Christ returns, then our individual journey will include physical death and the temporary separation of our soul and body with our soul being temporarily with the Lord or beginning our eternal torment. Then follows our bodily resurrection, our final judgment, and then our eternity either in heaven or in hell. Corporate eschatology has to do with the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, final judgment of the living and the dead, the judgment of Satan and his demons, the new heaven and new earth, and the realities of hell. These events are "corporate" in that they impact all people everywhere. The "individual" series of events affect you and me personally. Of course, there is overlap between these two series of occurrences, but it is helpful to distinguish them to best convey the Bible's teaching.

Physical Death

The place to start with respect to individual eschatology is our physical (or, bodily) death: "It is appointed for man to die once" (Heb 9:27). Our death will not occur until the predetermined

[3] Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 56.

number of our days have been reached (Ps 139:16), but once our final day arrives, we will die. The reality of death hangs over humanity like a dark grey thunder cloud, silent and ominous and a reminder of a great unwelcome Guest on his way. Paul calls it "the last enemy to be destroyed" by the redemptive work of Christ (1 Cor 15:26). We can sometimes approach death as if it is a simple matter, a naturally occurring phenomenon also experienced by animals and plants and all living things. And yet, death only exists because of sin (Gen 2:17; Rom 5:12–14). One day death will be eradicated, because sin's effects will be finally destroyed: "Death shall be no more" (Rev 21:4). But another reason death is not so simple is because not all physical deaths by people are the same. The death of an enemy of God is connected to his or her individual sin. The person is receiving a first installment of his or her endless torment. But a Christian has been redeemed, is united to Christ, and at conversion enters into "eternal life" (John 17:3). Paul even says we have "died with Christ" when we are united with Christ (Rom 6:8). Our physical death is not this dying with Christ. It occurs before our physical death. Jesus tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, [26] and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25–26). In a real sense, a Christian does not die, so what we can we say about our physical deaths? The Heidelberg Catechism helps us here:

> Q. Since Christ has died for us, why do we still have to die?
> A. Our death is not a payment for our sins, but it puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life. (Question 42)

As Hoekema says, "death is for us who are in Christ not a satisfaction for sin" like it was for Christ. Rather, "death is a source of blessing," because it means an end to our experience of sin and temptation and "entering into eternal life" in an experiential and

new way.[4] This is not to say that *physical* death is not a reality for the Christian, only that *physical* death is for us a doorway to something far more precious and wonderful than anything we can imagine. It is not the end of pleasure but the end of pain. The reality of the intermediate state makes this very clear.

Intermediate State

When we die, we enter into what is sometimes called "the intermediate state." During this time our body is dead and in the ground, but our soul is not. There is a temporary separation of our soul from our body. This will last until the final resurrection (Daniel 12:2; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:14–15). In some ways, the answer to Jesus' riddle to Martha is that for our soul, there truly is no death (John 11:25–26). Our souls continue seamlessly from an embodied state now to a disembodied state at our physical death. At the final resurrection, our soul and body is reunited and then forever we will live on in an embodied state of sinless joy with the Lord. You can hear proof of this idea in the words of Jesus to the thief dying next to him on the cross: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). The man's body died—gruesomely and definitively. And yet, because of his faith in Christ, he would go immediately into "paradise" and be "with" Christ. Likewise, Paul spoke of death as a departure followed by being immediately in the presence of the Lord. Divided in his desires between a life of serving Christ and a death to go and be with Christ he said, "I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Phil 1:23). Elsewhere he says, "We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord," and "we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:6, 8).

The fact this is true for both God's enemies and his people is taught in Luke 16:19–31. We often refer to this passage as a

[4] Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 84, 85.

parable, implying it is a fictional story meant to convey certain truths. And yet, Jesus does not introduce it as such. He simply begins by saying, "There was a rich man who was clothed in purple" (Luke 16:19). Regardless of whether two actual individuals are intended, Jesus' intended meaning in the narrative is clear. There are two possible states we can experience upon death, each demonstrated by the two main figures in the narrative. There is a rich man whose life earns him judgment. He is "in Hades, being in torment" upon dying (16:23). The poor man Lazarus is a good man and so goes to "Abraham's bosom" (16:22) and receives God's reward for his life. Further, there is no hope for remedy at this point, for Abraham tells the rich man, "Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us" (16:26). Once again we have confirmation that the intermediate state is (1) one of either torment or paradise, dependent on whether one is saved or not; and (2) it is experienced immediately upon death and not after some period of time.

Resurrection of the Body

The intermediate state will not last forever. At some point the end will come as Christ returns. His return sets in motion a whole series of events, and one of these is the resurrection of the dead. We can see this timing in 1 Thessalonians 4:16: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first." When Christ returns his people will be with him, but for that to happen, the "dead in Christ" need to "rise" from the dead. Paul tells us they will actually precede the Christians who are still alive when Jesus returns: "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess 4:17).

The Bible tells us the resurrection of those "in Christ" is part of the resurrection of all the dead—the "good" and the "evil" (John 5:28–29), "the just and the unjust" (Acts 24:15):

> "Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice [29] and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." (John 5:28–29)
>
> 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. (Dan 12:2)
>
> "But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, [15] having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust." (Acts 24:14–15)

We need to see that our resurrection is not progressing into some ghost-like or spirit-being existence. It is a resurrection *of the body*. Our eternal state is an *embodied* state. We will be souls in bodies forever when we enjoy life in the new heaven and new earth. Our resurrected bodies will be very different from our current ones. Our current bodies are subject to decline, disease, and death, but our future bodies are part of the age to come where there will be neither "mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4). In the language of Romans 8:30, our future state is where we are "glorified." Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 elaborates on our resurrected bodies and says that while our "earthly bodies" do possess a certain kind of "glory," our "heavenly bodies" possess a much greater "glory" (1 Cor 15:40). We can list out what he says about this future "heavenly body" this way:

Our "Earthly" vs. "Heavenly" Bodies from 1 Corinthians 15	
Earthly	***Heavenly***
"Perishable" (v. 42)	"Imperishable" (v. 42)
"Sown in dishonor" (v. 43)	"Raised in glory" (v. 43)
"Sown in weakness" (v. 43)	"Raised in power" (v. 43)
"A natural body" (v. 44)	"A spiritual body" (v. 44)
From Adam the man of dust (vv. 45–48)	From Christ "the last Adam" the "life-giving Spirit" (vv. 45–48)
In "the image of the man of dust" (v. 49)	In "the image of the man of heaven" (v. 49)
"Mortal" (v. 53)	Possesses "immortality" (v. 53)
Subject to death (v. 54)	No longer subject to death (vv. 54–55)

Several ideas are presented here. First, a key idea in 1 Corinthians 15:42–55 is that while "earthly" bodies are subject to death ("perishable," "mortal"), "heavenly" bodies will never die ("imperishable," "immortality"). Second, while an earthly body has an essential "dishonor" to it, there is a "glory" to "heavenly bodies." On this "glory," Thomas Boston writes,

> They shall be glorious bodies; not only beautiful, comely, and well-proportioned, but full of splendor and brightness. The most beautiful face, and the best proportioned body, that now appears in the world, is not to be named in comparison with the body of the meanest saint at the resurrection; for 'then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun' (Matt 13:43).[5]

Third, there is a "weakness" to our current bodies but a "power" to our glorified ones (1 Cor 15:43). We will not be omnipotent in the

[5] Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2020), 388.

new heaven and new earth, and neither will we be super-humans. Yet, the kind of weakness inherent to this fallen world will be eradicated. No more atrophied muscles and aching backs. No more headaches and cancerous cells. No more broken bones and auto-immune diseases. No more brains and hearts that fail to work like they are supposed to work, and which often leave their owners profoundly debilitated. There is weakness that is part of being human, and that finitude will be ours. But there is weakness that is part of living in a fallen world, and that weakness will be gone. Fourth, where our bodies are now thoroughly "natural," our glorified ones will be definitively "spiritual" (1 Cor 15:44). Boston is helpful here as well:

> They shall be spiritual bodies. Not that they shall be changed into spirits, but they shall be spiritual as to their spirit-like qualities and endowments. The body shall be absolutely subservient to the soul, subject to it, and influenced by it, and therefore no more a clog to its activity, nor the animal appetites a snare to it. There will be no need to beat it down, nor to drag it to the service of God.[6]

We could say more about our resurrection bodies but let this be sufficient for now.

Final Judgment (of Works)

Following the resurrection, we will face God's judgment. Being a Christian does not mean we avoid this moment of judgment, only that we escape a negative verdict at this moment of judgment. The glory of the gospel is that on the day of judgment we will be justified and not condemned. Yet, the Bible is clear that "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" (2 Cor 5:10; cf. Matt 16:27; Rom 2:6–8; 14:10; Rev 20:12–13; Pro

[6] Boston, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, 390.

24:12). There are two aspects to this. The first is the presentation before "the judgment seat of Christ." Note that Christ is presented as the judge throughout the New Testament. Jesus himself said, "the Father...has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). We sometimes imagine that Christ will defend us before the Father in the final judgment, but it is Christ himself who is presented as the judge. This should be even more encouraging to Christians, for it means that *our Savior is our Judge!*

The second aspect of final judgment is that it will concern what we have "done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor 5:10). Our works will be the focus of God's judgment. Yet, we know that being justified by faith settles the issue of whether we will be declared "righteous" or "guilty" on the day of judgment:

> Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. [10] For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. (Rom 5:9–10)

From Paul we see justification is really a *future* reality brought into the present. Being justified now means that in the future we shall "be saved by him from the wrath of God" and "saved by his life" (Rom 5:9, 10). Christ's intervention to bear our punishment removes "the wrath of God," and his perfect "life" merits for us a perfect record of obedient righteousness. So, when we consider what works will be evaluated on the day of judgment, this has to include Christ's works being judged as ours. Justification has an eternal dimension and not just a temporary one.

Additionally, God's judgment will involve giving out rewards to his people. The New Testament speaks of "rewards" as being attached to deeds of righteousness in a manner implying there are different amounts of reward given to different people: "If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward" (1 Cor 3:14; cf. Matt 6:1–5; 10:42; 1 Cor 3:12–

15; 2 Cor 5:10). In the parable of the "minas" in Luke 19:12–27, Jesus also teaches about the connection between present faithfulness and future rewards in the kingdom of God. One faithful servant is given "ten cities" for his work, and another "five cities" (vv. 17, 19). There is no sadness evident in the one who received fewer cities, just a different allotment in the future kingdom of God.

These ideas of God's judgment are difficult to hold together, but it is vital that we do. Here are a few statements we can make about our final judgment. First, the judgment of works with Christ as judge is a real judgment and so will truly evaluate our works in order to distribute God's rewards accordingly. Second, All of those justified in Christ will be declared "righteous" on the day of judgment, and, similarly, none of them will be condemned. Those who are justified now need not fear our judgment to come. And third, there will be different amounts of reward given to different Christians, but there is no "mourning" or weeping in the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:4), and so the respective rewards given out will produce no tears or regret—only rejoicing.

The Rest of the Story

Following our resurrection of the body and final judgment, we enter into the glories of the new heaven and new earth. We will enjoy life forever in our glorified resurrection body, with our bodies and souls completely renewed by the sovereign work of God. We will reserve our descriptions of this future age for the next section on corporate eschatology.

Corporate Eschatology: What events does the Bible connect to the last days and the last day?

We have looked at the New Testament picture of being in "this age" and awaiting "the age to come." We have seen that we live in the

"already" and are awaiting a glorious "not yet." In the words of Peter's sermon in Pentecost, we are now living in "the last days" (Acts 2:17) but are awaiting the last day, "the day of the Lord..., the great and magnificent day" (Acts 2:20). But now we want to consider the cosmic events all will experience at the end of this age. These concern not just Christians or non-Christians but all people, all creatures, the whole visible creation, and even all angels, demons, and the devil himself. The timeline of history is no two-way street. It is unstoppably advancing to the great cataclysmic end of all things when the creation becomes the new creation, the heavens and the earth become "the new heaven and new earth" (Rev 21:1).

The Millennium

We start our discussion of corporate eschatology by looking at the millennium of Revelation 20:1–6. The name "millennium" is a reference to the "thousand years" mentioned in every verse of Revelation 20:2–7. Why place a discussion of the millennium here? Why not place it after the return of Christ? Because the best reading of this unique passage in the Bible is to see it as a description of "the last days" of Acts 2:17 or "this age" or "the church age." The thousand years do not *begin* with the return of Christ, but they *end* with his return. But given that the millennium for so many belongs in a discussion of eschatology, it seemed best to talk about it here as opposed to another chapter on a different topic.

There are basically three views on the millennium, with a lot of varieties with one of them (i.e., premillennialism). The views are named for how each view positions the return of Christ with respect to the millennium. The view that says Christ returns *before* (pre-) the millennium is called the premillennial position. The view that says he turns *after* (post-) a somewhat literal millennial age is called the postmillennial position. The third view has a name that is unideal but still one we will use. It is the "amillennial" position. The name indicates there is "no millennium," since the prefix *a-* here

means "no." This is *sort of* true. In this view there is no distinct millennial age separate from the church age. And yet it is also not true, for this view believes *we are currently in the millennium*. For this reason, some have used the labels "realized millennialism"[7] or "inaugurated millennialism."[8] Yet, changing labels is precarious and sometimes creates more problems than it solves. "Amillennialism" is a fine label if we remember that it refers to there being "no distinct millennial age *separate from* the current church age."

Premillennialism

There are different versions of premillennialism with strong defenders attached to each of them. What they have in common is that they affirm Christ will have a thousand-year reign on earth *before* the final resurrection and judgment. I will discuss four different versions of this position.

Dispensational Premillennialism: Church history is divided into "dispensations" that are each said to contain certain elements. The prophesies in the Old Testament addressed to Israel must all be "literally" fulfilled by the nation of Israel (and *not* the church). God's initial plan had to do with Israel, and so the church is really a kind of "parentheses" in that plan. The point of the millennium is for God to be able to fulfill his prophesies regarding Israel. Other ideas have become attached to this view. They hold to a "rapture" of Christians, typically before a final 7-year "Great Tribulation" (though there are defenders of a mid-tribulation rapture). Christians will be removed from this tribulation period. Some of the real problems with this view are not really about the details of the end times events and have much more to do with how they interpret and handle the Old Testament. For instance, there is a tendency to think in terms of two ways of salvation, one for Jews and one for Christians. There is also a tendency to take myriad

[7] Jay Adams, *The Time is at Hand* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1970), 7–11.
[8] G. K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 420.

moral laws and say they are not for today but are for the millennial age. Some even go so far as to say this of the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament. Adherents to this position include Lewis Sperry Chafer and John Nelson Darby, and the position is famously preserved in *The Scofield Bible* (1909).

Progressive Dispensationalism: While dispensationalism continued to revise in the middle of the 20th century through men like Charles Ryrie,[9] a more significant development came with "progressive dispensationalism."[10] As New Testament scholars have continued to exegete the Bible and much more work has been done in the area of biblical theology, older and harder-to-swallow elements of dispensational premillennialism have been abandoned. Critical for this position is a rejection of the idea that there are two plans of salvation, one for the nation of Israel and one for the church. The church is no longer seen as a parenthesis in the plan of God but is "a vital part" of God's one "plan of redemption."[11] This uniting of Israel and the church is a significant change in the soteriology of older dispensationalisms. And yet, there is still the expectation of a coming millennium, during which "the returned, resurrected Christ, along with a company of resurrected saints, rules the nations of the earth" and "mortality still conditions the lives of a segment of humanity, and many of the dead still await resurrection."[12] Advocates of this view anticipate a future "tribulation," but resist the attempts by many to precisely locate the tribulation using contemporary historical events. For them, the definitive evidence that "The Tribulation" is upon us is the return of Christ. Until Christ's return, there is no way to know for us if a season of tribulation is actually *the* tribulation.[13]

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[9] Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2007).
[10] Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).
[11] Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 47.
[12] Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 272–73.
[13] Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 274.

Historic Premillennialism: A third version of premillennialism is held by men like Wayne Grudem and G. E. Ladd.[14] Once again a key element of this view is a future millennial reign of Christ on earth prior to the new heavens and new earth. Where this differs from dispensational premillennialism is in not holding to a pretribulation rapture where Christians are taken up from the world and then return years later with Christ to begin the millennial reign. Instead, the tribulation will be at the end of the current church age. Christ's return will mark the beginning of the earthly millennial reign of Christ. After that age, during which time people live and die, the final resurrection will occur. Grudem notes that "Classical Premillennialists differ over whether the renewed earth will begin in the millennium or the eternal state."[15]

New Creation Millennialism: A fourth version of the premillennial approach has been called "new creation millennialism" by J. Webb Mealy.[16] The idea here is that the millennium is the first stage of the new heaven and new earth. A distinctive is that the nations in Revelation 19:19–21 are indeed destroyed and enter "the realm of the dead" where they are later joined by Satan during the millennial age. After the thousand years, Satan and these nations will be released from their "confinement," with the nations being resurrected. They will again rebel against Christ and again be judged by Christ.[17]

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[14] George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972); Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1369–1403.
[15] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1111.
[16] J. Webb Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgement in Revelation 20*, vol. 70 of *JSNTSup* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992). Another advocate of this view, though more tentatively at present, is Thomas Schreiner as reflected in his BECNT commentary on Revelation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023). For a thorough rebuttal of this position see Greg K. Beale, "Review Article: J. W. Mealy After the Thousand Years," *EvQ* 66.3 (1994): 229–50, https://doi.org/10.1163/27725472-06603004.
[17] Beale, "Review Article," 230.

Postmillennialism

A key difference with the premillennial positions above is that for the postmillennialist, the return of Christ will occur *after* (post-) the millennium. The millennium for the postmillennialist is a kind of "golden age" of the church before Christ returns. Loraine Boettner is an advocate of this position and has described the view in this way:

> We have defined Postmillennialism as that view of the last things which holds that the Kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the Gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world eventually is to be Christianized, and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the "Millennium." It should be added that on postmillennial principles the second coming of Christ will be followed immediately by the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the introduction of heaven and hell in their fullness. The Millennium to which the Postmillennialist looks forward is thus a golden age of spiritual prosperity during this present dispensation, that is, during the Church age, and is to be brought about through forces now active in the world. It is an indefinitely long period of time, perhaps much longer than a literal one thousand years. The changed character of individuals will be reflected in an uplifted social, economic, political and cultural life of mankind. The world at large will then enjoy a state of righteousness such as at the present time has been seen only in relatively small and isolated groups, as for example in some family circles, some local church groups and kindred organizations.[18]

[18] Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1957), 14.

Passages in the New Testament where Jesus talks about the gradual growth of the kingdom until it encompasses everything are essential to this position (Matt 13:31–33), as also a sense of the triumph of Christ as being experienced by the church in this world in this age (Matt 28:18). The view is not that the whole world necessarily becomes Christian, but yet for Boettner at least, postmillennialism means that "evil in all its many forms eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions, that Christian principles will be the rule, not the exception, and that Christ will return to a truly Christianized world."[19] Of course, this meshes with the great longings we all have for a world that is renewed and eager in its declaration that Christ is Lord. And yet, such sentiments are very difficult to square with the great many passages that speak of the ongoing tribulations, sins, temptations, and rebellions against Christ in our world. As just one passage among many, we can look at the following:

> But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. [2] And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. (2 Pet 2:1–2)

Further, it is also questionable whether Jesus' parables about the spread of the kingdom require such a dominant place for the church. One could easily argue that Jesus' parables have been fulfilled. The church has spread throughout the globe and the number of Christians is surely in the hundreds of millions presently. We certainly desire a greater increase of the true church, but the growth from the first century to the present is massive. And yet, one could never argue that "evil in all its many forms" has been "reduced to negligible proportions."

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[19] Boettner, *The Millennium*, 14.

Amillennialism

As I said above, Revelation 20:1–6 is a unique passage in our Bibles. By that, I mean *it is the only passage that speaks of a millennium*. Which is to say the only way to understand God's teaching about the millennium is to rightly interpret this paragraph within the context of John's Revelation. To do this fully would require a complete exegesis of Revelation, a highly symbolic and apocalyptic book that is also structured in a profoundly deliberate manner. I will offer only a brief overview of the book to help us grasp John's intention with Revelation 20:1–6. For a fuller treatment, see the very accessible commentary by William Hendriksen or the more technical commentaries by Greg Beale.[20] Hoekema's *The Bible and the Future* also deals well with this passage.[21]

For starters, Revelation is part of the Bible's "apocalyptic" literature, literature that includes Daniel 7–12, Ezekiel 1, and Zechariah. This is the label we give to prophetic parts of the Bible that communicate through symbols and word-pictures. As prophecy, these apocalyptic passages can be either "foretelling," telling the future *before* it occurs, or "forth-telling," speaking forth God's Word to his people. These authors write in a "show me, don't tell me" style, drawing elaborate pictures with their words, and these pictures have profound meaning. For instance, if we look at Revelation 5, we find a description of Jesus as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (v. 5). When John actually sees Jesus, though, he sees "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes" (v. 6). The number "seven" in Revelation is repeated often in clearly symbolic ways. The point is not that Jesus had "seven horns" instead of four or sixteen horns. The point is "seven," a number referring to perfection and completeness, just as

[20] William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015); G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013); Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*.
[21] Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 173–238.

the seven days of creation brought about perfection and completeness. Having seven "horns" means Jesus has "all power." Having seven "eyes" means Jesus is "all seeing" and thus "all knowing." The reason to emphasize a number like seven is that we find the same approach to the number "one thousand." The point is not a span or amount that is countable to "one thousand" (more than 999 but less than 1,001). The point with this number seems to be "a vast span or amount." The 144,000 in Revelation 7:4 and 14:1–3 is also referred to in 7:9 as "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." The number 144,000 is symbolic of 12x12x1000, which means that vast number of the elect include all the elect from Israel (*12* tribes) and all the elect of the church (those following the *12* apostles). This use of twelve comes back again in the new Jerusalem with its "twelve gates" that have the names of the "twelve tribes" of Israel (Rev 21:12) and "twelve foundations" which have "the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (v. 14). The book itself, then, leads us to assume that a number like "one thousand" is symbolic unless proven otherwise. "A thousand years" in Revelation 20:2–7 is such a number.

Another feature important feature of Revelation is repetition. Numbers and events are repeated throughout the book to provide its structure and to provide a guide to interpretation. As one example here, you can think of the repeating cycle of seven judgments: "seven seals" of judgment in 5:1–8:1; "seven trumpets" of judgment in 8:2–11:19; "seven bowls of wrath" in 16:1–21. When the book as a whole is seen, it is clear that John has many passages that refer to the same cataclysmic end of the age when God's final judgment comes. These pictures of final judgment get more detailed and more final as the book unfolds. In chapters 1–3 there is a reference to Jesus "coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him" (1:7), as well as references to the eschaton in the letters to the churches (2:7, 11, 17, 26–28; 3:5, 12, 21). In chapters 4:1–8:1, with the sixth seal there is a vivid depiction of final judgment with "a great earthquake," the sun going dark, stars falling

from the sky, and "the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals" and others cowering beneath "the great day" of "wrath" (6:12–17).

Revelation 8:2–11:19 includes the "seven trumpets" (8:2), the end of the age is described in 11:15–18. It is a seen where "loud voices in heaven" proclaim the fullness of the reign of "our Lord and of his Christ" and the fact his judgment has fallen on his enemies and his "servants" have received their reward.

Revelation 12–14 includes the end of the age in 14:1–20, which focuses on the judgment of "worshipers of the beast and its image" as the "the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever" (v. 11). There is also a seen of "one like a son of man" harvesting the earth in judgment and an angel swinging his sickle to judge the earth such that there is a bloodbath of judgment against God's enemies (vv. 14–20). This seen is good to note, because while the followers of "the beast and its image" are judged, the beast himself is not. John unfolds the picture of final judgment gradually. The beast will be judged emphatically, but his end is not described until 19:20. John tells his story like a movie that flashes forward and then flashes back, each time flashing a little more forward as the plot is revealed.

In Revelation 15–16, the "seven bowls of the wrath of God" (16:1) are revealed, and the view of the end is in 16:12–21. This scene is important for our purposes, because it describes a definitive "battle" involving the unholy trinity of "the dragon," "the beast," and "the false prophet" (vv. 13–14). Now we know the final battle will involve all three of this unholy triad. In verses 17–21 we again see "a great earthquake" and people cursing God as he casts "great hailstones" on them.

In Revelation 17–19, the key view of the end comes with the return of Christ in 19:11–16 and then the judgment of "the beast" and "the prophet" and all who follow them (19:17–21). "The beast" and "the prophet" are "thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur" (v. 20), the lake that appears again in 20:10 when the devil is cast into it. Those judged in this final battle include all

of God's enemies. In other words, there is a scene of final judgment here. There are no more enemies of God alive at this point. This is important to note, since in 20:8 "the nations" are said to be deceived by Satan after the thousand years. But the end of chapter 19 has seen the destruction of all these same nations. This is a strong clue that 20:1–10 does not follow chronologically after 19:11–21. Some other arrangement of material is being used than a chronological one. The end time picture in 20:7–10 is the final repetition of "the battle" (16:14; 19:19; 20:8). Since it is the end, as we would expect with each repetition taking us closer to the very end, it is now "Satan" who is "thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (20:10).

These pictures of final judgment in each of the main sections of Revelation point to something important for a right interpretation of the book. Each of these seven sections (1–3, 4–7, 8–11, 12–14, 15–16, 17–19, 20–22) is giving us the same basic span of time. Each of them takes us from the first advent to the second advent. Only in the final section, chapters 20–22, do we continue past the return of Christ and into the new heaven and new earth (though previous sections do have glimpses here and there of life in the eschaton).

All of this gives us a strong sense that 20:1–6 is telling us the story of the church age and not something that occurs *after* Christ's return. And since all the other sections describe more-or-less the whole church age, we would expect a new section to begin at the beginning of the church age. This is not required, but it is what we would expect. When we turn to Revelation 20:1–6, such a reading makes good sense. The passage opens with "an angel" descending and casting "the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan" into some form of imprisonment where he is "bound...for a thousand years" (vv. 1–2). In other words, he is bound for the duration of the church age. Such a binding is equivalent to Jesus speaking of binding "the strong man" in order to cleanse the house (Matt 12:28–29). The binding does not mean

Satan has *no* influence, only that he has a greatly reduced influence. This is demonstrated as you look at the growth of the gospel from the time of Christ to the present. The last two thousand years have seen a dramatic increase of the gospel and growth of the church. The devil is real and actively working, but at the same time the gospel is advancing in an undeniable manner.

When "the thousand years" are "ended," Satan will be "released for a little while" (v. 3). There is a final battle that awaits the devil at the end of the church age. In 20:4–6, we read of what happens to followers of Christ during the church age. With their deaths, they actually "came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (v. 4). Reigning with Christ is a part of our inheritance as God's people (2 Tim 2:12). It is true even now for us as God's people, for we are even now "seated...with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6). One day we shall even "judge the world" (1 Cor 6:2). After the church age "the rest of the dead" (i.e., unbelievers) will receive their fate. They are not reigning with Christ in his very presence now but are suffering for their rejection of Christ. In this way they "did not come to life" during the thousand-year reign of Christ. The life believers who die experience is actually called "the first resurrection" in Rev 20:5, to be followed by the bodily resurrection later.

What follows this thousand-year church age where Satan's influence is diminished is what we found in the other sections of Revelation, the final battle and final judgment of God's enemies. Satan is released from his confinement (Rev 20:7) and lashes out one final time against God. This final battle is the same one described in 19:17–21, so "the nations" involved in 20:8 are the same ones as fighting in 19:17–21. As before, God's victory is swift and absolute (20:9). This time the emphasis is on the final defeat of Satan, who is thrown into the lake of fire (20:10).

We can say a few more things to solidify this reading of 20:1–10. My assertion is that you should not read Revelation 19:11–20:10 in chronological fashion. They are retelling the same story twice, not giving you a single story in the order the events occur. R.

Fowler White wrote a helpful article examining several strong points of evidence for this reading. All view of the millennium other than amillennialism require reading Revelation 19:11–21 as if it happens *prior* to 20:1–10. Does this work, though? White says NO. His strongest arguments are the following. First is "the discrepancy between the events depicted in Rev 19:11–21 and Rev 20:1–3."[22] (321). Here he points out that if "the rest were slain" in 19:21, implying the destruction of all the nations, then it makes no sense to say that these same "nations" are the ones in 20:8, who are deceived by Satan and his followers.

Second, 20:7–10 recapitulates 19:11–21, it does not tell a different story. Evidence here includes the way both passages make use of Ezekiel 38–39. The invitation to a supper of the judged is in Revelation 19:17–18 and Ezekiel 39:17–20; Revelation 20:7–10 brings in Gog and Magog from Ezekiel 38–39; "Fire" is the weapon of judgment in Ezekiel 38:22; 39:6 but also Revelation 20:9. Further, John also uses Ezekiel 38:18–22 in 16:17–21 with its "combination of earthquake, hailstorm, and God's judgment of the nations." White points out that John using the same Ezekiel passage to describe similar scenes in Revelation provides warrant for seeing these scenes as connected to the same event, not different ones. Thus, Revelation 19:11–21 and 20:7–10 are the same event, not two different ones.[23]

Third, the use of the article when describing the definitive "battle" in Revelation points to recapitulation in 19:11–21 and 20:1–10.[24] "The battle" (*ton polemon,* τὸν πόλεμον) is used in 16:14; 19:19; and 20:8. Unfortunately, the ESV has left out the article in all three verses. White points out that the article is used in these three texts only, and in other occurrences there is no article (9:7, 9; 11:7; 12:7, 17; 13:7). But "an interesting pattern emerges," where John speaks of "warfare in general" when there is no article but a

[22] R. Fowler White, "Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1-10," *WTJ* 51.2 (1989): 321.
[23] White, "Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20," 327.
[24] White, "Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20," 328–329.

particular climactic battle when the article is present. Fourth, John describes these three battles in extremely similar ways, further reinforcing that they are speaking of the same battle. We can include 6:12–17; 16:17–21; 19:11–21; and 20:9–11 in this point. The similar elements of destruction and judgment, as we saw above looking through the various sections and views of the end, reveals that John is presenting these "cosmic" events as being the same event and not just similar ones.[25] Fifth and finally, White points out the confirming evidence of Hebrews 12:26–27:[26]

> At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." [27] This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. (Heb 12:26–27)

It is no small detail that the author of Hebrews tells us it will be "once more" when God will bring about a final shaking, not twice. Premillennialism requires two more "shakings," one when Christ returns to establish the millennium and another final judgment when the millennium ends and Satan is destroyed. Yet, the author of Hebrews reveals that such a cosmic and climactic shaking is to occur "once more," not twice.

Conclusion

In light of the above reading of Revelation, it makes the best sense to see John in 20:1–6 as describing the church age. A distinctive of the church age is that Satan's influence is lessened so that the gospel can advance and the church grow. Those who die in the Lord now will reign with Christ as they anticipate their bodily resurrection and entrance into the new heaven and new earth.

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[25] White, "Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20," 333–34.
[26] White, "Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20," 334–35.

Escalating Tribulation at the End of the Age

The dispensational premillennial position has a great emphasis on what they call "the Tribulation," which is a seven-year span at the end of the age just prior to the return of Christ. The seven-year framework comes from Daniel's seventy weeks (Daniel 9:24–27) and their interpretation of the seventieth week in Daniel 9:27. Within this seven-year timeframe is "the Great Tribulation," the second half of Daniel's seventieth week during which time an even more severe persecution will break out against the people of God. Defenders of this view see evidence for this "Great Tribulation" in the Olivet Discourse, where Jesus mentions a "great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (Matt 24:21).[27] Daniel 9:27 speaks of "half of the week" when "sacrifice and offering" are ended. The church is said not to experience this "Great Tribulation" because it will be raptured (raised up to be with Christ) at the beginning of the "tribulation"—or, at least at the beginning of this three-and-a-half-year span.[28] In the dispensationalist scheme, immediately after the Great Tribulation is the earthly return of Christ and the millennial age.

Yet, while tribulations are indeed a sign of the end of the age, the dispensational approach is not the best way to understand it. We can say this for several reasons. First, the New Testament presents the normal Christian life as one involving "tribulation."[29] It is not the exception but the norm of life in this world when you stand on the side of Christ. The word "affliction" (*thlipsis,* θλῖψις) in the New Testament is used forty-five times, which is no small number, and often the word is describing the many hardships of the Christian life.[30] Both Jesus and Paul made it emphatically clear that

[27] Richard Shalom Yates, "The Identity of the Tribulation Saints," *BSac* 163.649 (2006): 90.
[28] Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 172–73.
[29] On this point see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 434.
[30] Matt 13:21; 24:9, 21, 29; Mark 4:17; 13:19, 24; John 16:21, 33; Acts 7:10–11; 11:19; 14:22; 20:23; Rom 2:9; 5:3; 8:35; 12:12; 1 Cor 7:28; 2 Cor 1:4, 8; 2:4;

this life is one of tribulations (John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom 2:9; 5:3; 8:35; 12:12). Paul says it is only "through many tribulations" that "we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Within the book of Revelation, John refers to himself as "your brother and partner in the tribulation" (Rev 1:9); and Jesus says to the church in Smyrna, "I know your tribulation" (Rev 2:9). Thus, Christians are not presented as escaping tribulations but experiencing them painfully and routinely. The new heaven and new earth are where we escape tribulations (Rev 21:4), not any *pre*-tribulation rapture.

Second, the better interpretation of Daniel's seventieth week is to see it as encompassing the whole span of time from Christ's earthly ministry (the first half of the week) *through the entire church age* (the second half of the week). This reading begins by seeing Daniel 9:24–27 as a whole and seeing that it seems to be describing the coming of Christ and his redemptive work, perhaps even the final defeat of the devil. Then we do a little math and notice that seven times seventy weeks gives you 490 (7 days x 70 weeks = 490). This number comes very close to the exact number of years from Daniel to Christ, though if we consider "the going out of the word" (or decree) to be Artaxerxes' to send Ezra (457 BC in Ezra 7:8) or the decree to build the city walls under Nehemiah (444 BC in Neh 1–2), then we are in the ballpark of 490 years to get from one of these decrees to the ministry of Jesus. Yet, lining up these years exactly is not easy and does not point in the right direction. A better approach is to see that 490 is actually a significant number in the Old Testament. It is related to the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:1–12).[31] For the Year of Jubilee you counted off "seven times seven years" or 49 years, and then *the next year would be the year of Jubilee*. In Daniel 9, then, it is like you get the Uber-Jubilee,

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4:17; 6:4; 7:4; 8:2, 13; Eph 3:13; Phil 1:17; 4:14; Col 1:24; 1 Thess 1:6; 3:3, 7; 2 Thess 1:4, 6; Heb 10:33; Jas 1:27; Rev 1:9; 2:9–10, 22; 7:14.

[31] For a detailed defense of this view see Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*, 2nd ed. (Baker Books, 2013), 177–84; Meredith G. Kline, "The Covenant of the Seventieth Week," in *The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Oswald T. Allis* (Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1974), 452–69.

because it is *10 times that 49-year cycle*. This means that the next year would be a kind of Uber-Jubilee. In New Testament terms, this is not the cross of Christ but the end of the church age; after which the devil is fully destroyed, and the church enters into the new heaven and new earth. The 490 years, then, are not literal years but symbolic of the span of time from Daniel until the completion of the whole Messianic work of redemption.

Daniel 9:24 describes the entirety of the "seventy weeks," and within that span Christ's full redemption is described, his work "to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place." Then verse 25 speaks of the time from "the going out of the word" (it is not clear which decree or word is meant here) until "an anointed one" (i.e., Messiah) comes. The Messiah comes after sixty-nine weeks (following the passage in the more helpful NASB translation, "seven weeks and sixty weeks"). Daniel 9:26–27 then describe the seventieth week, during which we see the earthly work of Jesus when he is "cut off" at his crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple ("shall destroy the city and the sanctuary"). But the seventieth week also includes God who with his people will "make a strong covenant with many for one week" (9:27). This begins with the earthly ministry of Christ. By the end of the first half of this week, God will have "put an end to sacrifice and offering," once again referring to the destruction of the temple. In other words, the first half of the seventieth week is a symbolic description of Christ's earthly ministry either through the rending of the veil at the cross (when all meaningful sacrifice ends) or the physical destruction of the temple in AD 70 (when all physical sacrifices end for the Jews). The second half of the seventieth week is a span of time that ends with "the decreed end" when God triumphs over the devil completely and casts the unholy trinity into the lake of fire forever (Rev 20:10). In other words, the church age in Daniel 9:27 is a span of three-and-a-half days.

This interpretation of Daniel 9:24–27 means that the seventieth week does not refer to a time of tribulation, and that the second half of this week does not refer to the Great Tribulation. Something else entirely is being referred to here. The first half of the week concerns Christ's earthly ministry, and the second half of the week is the span of time from that ministry until the devil is destroyed. In other words, *the church age.* In Daniel time, the church age is three-and-a-half days. That number might feel arbitrary but in the book of Revelation, we keep seeing different versions of three-and-a-half. We find "forty-two months" when the holy city is trampled (11:2), but forty-two months is simply three-and-a-half years (thinking in terms of 30-day months). The two witnesses minister for 1,260 days (3.5 years of 30-day months) in Revelation 11:3. The woman is nourished in the wilderness by God for 1,260 days (12:6). The woman is also described as hiding for "time, times, and half a time" (12:14), another three-and-a-half-year reference. The beast utters blasphemies for forty-two months (13:5). The key for interpreting these spans is the woman hiding in the wilderness. She is clearly the people of God who give birth, as it were, to Christ. The church remains protected but in the wilderness while on earth before the return of Christ. We are so hidden and protected for the entire church age. The woman does not give birth to Christ during the Great Tribulation. The best reading is that these three-and-a-half patterns are references to the church age.

Third, even though the Great Tribulation of the dispensational position does not hold, we should expect a rise in persecution at the end of the age. Revelation 20:7–10 (and parallel passages in Revelation) points to such an uptick, as does 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 with the description of the "man of lawlessness." Revelation 20:7–10 brings out the full and violent opposition Christians will experience at the end of the age. Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 introduces the devil in personified terms as "the man of lawlessness." The sobering reality of this passage is that it speaks of a day of religious compromise in the church when the Antichrist will effectively lead the church. With such an idea it is

helpful to recall John's words about the antichrist: "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18).

The Return of Christ

When the disciples watched Jesus ascend, they were told something by "two men...in white robes" (Acts 1:10), something which informs our next topic: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? 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). The intent seems to be that Christ will come again visibly, physically, and down from "heaven." A difference, though, is that where this ascension occurred for an audience of a few, when he comes again "he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen" (Rev 1:7). When he returns again, there will be no deniers. He will have enemies, but no one any longer who will deny his very existence as is true today. In this section we will unpack the return of Christ.

First, Christ's return represents a cosmic event fulfilling many Old Testament word-pictures. Jesus' prophecy in the Olivet Discourse teaches this:

> "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. [30] Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. [31] And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." (Matt 24:29–31)

The sun darkening and the moon turning to blood appears in places like Joel 2:31and Isaiah 13:10. The Son of Man appearing in the clouds echoes Daniel 7:13.

Second, his return will be accompanied by a set of specific occurrences. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 teaches this:

> This we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. [16] For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. [17] Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. [18] Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thess 4:15–18)

Note the "cry of command" that will go up as "an archangel" and "the sound of trumpet" reverberate throughout the created universe. This will not be a silent moment of reflection but a vast, militaristic, and triumphant proclamation of the glory of Christ. And then unexpectedly we read that it is actually "the dead" will "rise first" and join Christ in the air, and only then will the living believers join him. We will be part of his military expedition to judge and destroy his enemies. This passage makes clear that the resurrection of the dead will happen more-or-less simultaneously with his return. But Paul saves the greatest part for last: "So we will always be with the Lord" (v. 17). There is no greater prize than Christ himself.

Third, Christ's return will be a surprise event: "You yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thess 5:2).

Fourth, Christ's full glory will be visible to his people and to his enemies. John gives us some reflection of what this glory will be like:

> Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. [12] His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. [13] He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. [14] And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. [15] From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. [16] On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. (Rev 19:11–16)

It is not really possible to know what here is a symbolic word-picture and not to be taken as a physical reality and what will actually meet our awestruck gaze. Yet, the passage does reveal the glorious Christ we will see and join in the air. Many of his glorious attributes are depicted here—his unmatched strength and power, his unrivalled purity and holiness and royalty, his total domination of any and all enemies.

Fifth, we saw in our reading of Revelation 19:11–20:10 above, that Christ's return (Rev 19:11–16) will happen prior to the final battle with Satan and his followers (Rev 20:7–10). The culmination of this battle is Satan's defeat and being thrown into the lake of fire (20:10). The "great white throne" judgment (Rev 20:11–13) will follow Satan's defeat. We looked at our final judgment above, but it is good to see where it follows in the end times calendar.

Sixth and last, his return is our greatest longing. There is a reason that the second to last verse in our Bible says, "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20). John speaks for all of us when he cries out, "Come, Lord Jesus!" It is indeed our great desire.

The Glorification of the Saints

Above we looked at the resurrection of the body and the great difference between our future resurrected bodies from what we experience now in our earthly and fallen ones (1 Cor 15:40–50). This new body will be ours "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (15:52) where we are immediately and forever "changed" (15:51). The resurrection is also our moment of glorification. Glorification affects us in our body and our soul. Our body is that resurrection body we have been speaking of. But our souls, too, are changed. Christ's redemptive work does not only forgive sins and sinners, but it also begins a transformation that will ultimately have its complete effect: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and 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). To be "like him" will not mean being deity, for God alone is God. Being "like him" means indwelling sin will dwell in us no longer. All temptations will be gone. In the famous dictum of Augustine, we will dwell in the final state of humanity, *non posse peccare*, "not possible to sin." No longer will our desires be at war within us (Gal 5:17), with the constant pull always there to disobey and dishonor God. Instead, our desires will be pure and undiluted and undivided, always striving to please our Lord and glorify him. Life in the new heaven and new earth means no more tears or death or sadness or pain (Rev 21:4), but this is only true because God's people are forever free of their sinful desires and actions.

Final Judgment

The great white throne judgment follows the return of Christ and the final battle with God's enemies:

> Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. [12] And I

> saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. [13] And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. (Rev 20:11–13)

Christ will be the judge at this final judgment, and he will judge each being "according to what they had done" (v. 13). Christ sitting as judge is clear from passages like Matthew 25:31–32; John 5:27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; and 2 Tim. 4:1. Yet, God's people will join him in that judgment. Paul speaks of us judging angels (1 Cor 6:2–3) and our future reigning with Christ will include such judgment (Rev 20:4; 22:5). Angels and demons (fallen angels) will be judged at this conclusive event as well (Matt 8:29; 1 Cor 6:3; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 1:6). Satan, too, will be judged (Rev 20:10). Abraham asked millennia ago, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen 18:25). The final judgment will show to all people and all angelic beings that yes, he shall!

Hell

In this final judgment, two outcomes are possible for each person and angelic being. One is to be vindicated and forever with the Lord in the new heaven and new earth. Yet, the second is to be condemned: "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev 20:15). We know that in this place of torment, "their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). Jesus says that is Gehenna (γέεννα) where this suffering occurs (Mark 9:47), but this is simply a Jewish euphemism for the place of endless torment.[32] Elsewhere

[32] γέεννα, BDAG, 191.

it is called the "hell of fire" (Matt 5:22). One of the most consistent attributes of this place is that it is a place of fire. People are not burned up in this place but continue to suffer, for Jesus says this is a place where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 25:30), and the punishment there is an "eternal punishment" (Matt 25:46). It is the reality of hell that makes the gospel such treasure for the people of God—and which makes it so important that Christians preach that gospel.

New Heaven and New Earth

For God's people, the final judgment will be vindication. Through the merit and work of Christ, we shall be judged as "righteous" (Rom 5:9–11) and even receive rewards for our good works done through him and in his name (Eph 2:10; Matt 6:1–5; 10:42; 1 Cor 3:12–15; 2 Cor 5:10). The result for this vindication is enjoying life in what God calls "the new heaven and new earth" (Rev 21:1). This idea is first mentioned in Isaiah 65:17. It is good to remember the connection between Isaiah 65:17 and Revelation 21:1 when you try and make sense of Isaiah 65:17–25. The connection makes it very clear that this Old Testament passage should be read typologically and not literally. He is speaking with the metaphors he understands at the time. Connecting them to Revelation 21:1 helps us see that he is really speaking of the life and harmony and renewal of "the new heaven and new earth."

The connections between this current world and the new one are not so easy to parse out. Paul speaks of the coming re-creation in Romans 8:19–22 as a creation currently "subjected to futility" (v. 20) and in "bondage" (v. 21) and then finally being "set free" (v. 21) and obtaining "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (v. 21). Somehow the creation itself will be renewed in the same way as God's people are. Such renewal and redemption language points in the direction of the new heaven and new earth being the same as this heaven and this earth only *redeemed*.

Yet, Peter captures just how drastic this change will be:

> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. [11] Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, [12] waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! [13] But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Pet 3:10–13)

Just like the way our new glorified self will still be us but in a completely sanctified manner, so the creation itself will experience some kind of similar transformation. The new heaven and new earth are *this* heaven and *this* earth but made new. We should expect the new earth to have land and water and trees and mountains and all those things inherent to our current earth. People will walk and talk as presently and not fly with wings like birds or eat with trunks like elephants. We should expect gravity will hold us down, and we will not float around to get places. The new creation is a kind of Eden revisited—yet without any possibility of sin ruining the created order or corrupting God's people and the "elect angels" (1 Tim 5:21).

We are not given extensive details about life in the new heaven and new earth, but we get some ideas from Revelation 21–22. First and foremost, this will be a real where "the dwelling place of God is with man" (Rev 21:3). He is the great glory of the new realm and the centerpiece of all the blessings we are to experience. None rivals or comes close to this blessing above all blessings. He is the "temple" of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:22) and the "light" that makes it unnecessary to have the sun or moon (Rev 21:23). As Hoekema said, "Where God dwells, there heaven is."[33] Second, the

[33] Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 285.

new realm has "nations" with "kings" of some kind (Rev 21:24–26). Perhaps Jesus has anticipated this in his parable of the talents, where those "faithful in a very little" are given "ten cities" to govern (Luke 19:17). Third, work is accomplished in this age, for these kings are presented as bringing "the glory and honor of the nations" to the Lord (Rev 21:26). We should not be surprised that work is done. The fall ruined our work but work itself was part of the original creation that was "very good" (Gen 1:31; 2:15–17). Fourth, worship is a part of that place, for "his servants will worship him" (Rev 22:3). Fifth, in some way we shall "reign forever and ever" with Christ (Rev 22:5; cf. Rev 2:26–27; 2 Tim 2:12). Sixth, this means we will have entered into a new fullness of our identity as "prophets, priests, and kings" ourselves (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 22:5).[34] We are prophets in our ability to know and speak God's Word and priests in the sense that we are forever dwelling in the presence of the Lord and worshiping him. As kings, we are not the "King of kings" (Rev 19:16), but we are nonetheless ruling with him. Seventh, we experience what Bavinck calls "the Eternal Sabbath,"[35] looking at Hebrews 4:1–11 and its discussion of "a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (v. 9) that is worth striving for. Given all that we have said, this is not the "rest" of doing nothing but the rest where we are in harmony with ourselves, our world, and especially our God. The war without and within is over. Peace will be ours forever. It will be uninterrupted and unopposed by any Garden Serpent.

Eighth and finally, we can say that all this is really describing the full and eternal and complete fulfillment of Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." The Christ will do it. He will emphatically triumph over the serpent and his offspring, and he will restore, redeem, and renew the woman and her offspring.

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[34] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:727.
[35] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:727–30.

Conclusion

With this topic we have completed our survey that took us from thinking about revelation itself and how we know what we know to some glimpse of the age to come. It is indeed a "survey," a brief overview of topics that are each worthy of a lifetime of study. And yet, hopefully it has been clear that God's Word that reveals such truths is perfect. There is both an endless depth and diversity to it while at the same time a beautiful coherence and symmetry. It is the work of a Master Painter. Each brush stroke is perfectly placed and each color perfectly attuned. And yet, when you step back and take in the whole of it, you are mesmerized by its beauty. But with this masterpiece, you come away aware that the Master Painter is infinite, majestic, brilliant beyond any comprehension, and worthy of endless worship. May this brief work only whet your appetite to pursue this God for the rest of eternity.