

END TIMES

Key Verse: Revelatin 19:11-16 (Rev. 20)

Key Idea: I believe in heaven, hell and the return of Jesus to establish His kingdom

Key Question: What are the details regarding the end times and the afterlife?

What Will Happen When Christ Returns?

There have been many debates in the history of the church over questions regarding the future. Specifically, the debates have centered on the return of Christ, the millennium (or "thousand years"), the final judgment, the eternal punishment of unbelievers and eternal reward of believers, and life with God in the new heaven and new earth. Studies of these events are called studies of the "last things," or "eschatology" (from the Greek *eschatos*, meaning "last").

The Return of Christ

Jesus told his disciples that he would return to earth a second time: "I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:3). While it is clear from this and other passages (such as Acts 1:11; 1 Thess. 4:16; Heb. 9:28; 2 Peter 3:10; 1 John 3:2) that Jesus himself will return, these passages also make it clear that "no one knows" (Mark 13:32) the exact time of that return, for "The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matt. 24:44).

The Timing of the Return

While the verses cited above are clear that Christ's return will come at a time that no one knows, other passages in the Bible seem to suggest that certain signs will precede the time of Christ's return. These signs, as shown through the verses that support them, are as follows:

- "The gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations" (Mark 13:10; see also Matt. 24:14).
- "There will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord has not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days" (Mark 13:19-20).
- "False christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect" (Mark 13:22; see also Matt. 24:23-24).
- "After that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken" (Mark 13:24-25; see also Matt. 24:29-30 and Luke 21:25-27).
- "Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ...that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God" (2 Thess. 2:1, 3-4).
- "I want you to understand this mystery...all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:25-26).

Jesus did not say these signs were given so that people would think that since they haven't seen the signs, Christ couldn't return. Instead, they were given to intensify an expectation of Christ's return: "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28).

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But the mentioning of these signs raises two legitimate questions: Have any of these signs occurred? And, if they haven't all occurred, could Christ really return at any moment? The answers to these questions vary throughout the church.

Some believe these signs haven't occurred and therefore Christ won't return at any moment. But Jesus encouraged his disciples, "Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13:33). A view that tells Christians that Christ cannot return soon seems to nullify the force of Christ's encouragement.

Others believe that Christ could indeed come at any time, and they deal with the fulfillment of the signs in three distinct ways. (1) Some argue that there will be two separate comings of Christ: a secret return and a public return. (2) Others argue that all the signs were already fulfilled in the early history of the church and that therefore Christ could really return at any moment. But some of the signs (for example, the great tribulation, the salvation of Israel, the appearance of the "man of lawlessness," and the stars falling from heaven) do not seem to have been fulfilled in any clear or evident way at the time of the early church. (3) Still others argue that it is unlikely but possible that the signs have been fulfilled and that therefore Christ could return at any moment.

The Events at the Return

Much of the disagreement within the church regarding Jesus' return deals directly with the interpretation of one Bible passage: Revelation 20:1-6. Specifically, the disagreement has to do with the thousand years that John mentions in Revelation 20:4-5 when he writes that certain people came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended." Many Christians term this thousand-year stage "the millennium," and they usually take one of three views on the time and nature of this period.

View 1 – Amillennial: The millennium is now, and when it ends, Jesus will return

The simplest view of the millennium is that Revelation 20:1-6 describes not a future time but the present church age. Christians who hold to this view believe that many or all of the previously mentioned signs occurred early on in church history and that Christ could really return at any moment. According to this view, when John writes that "they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (Rev. 20:4), he means that Christians who have already died are today reigning with Christ in a spiritual sense. Since the events in Revelation 20 are currently being fulfilled in the church, the thousand-year period John mentions in Revelation 20:4-5 is a figure of speech for a long period of time - namely, the entire church age from Pentecost until Christ's return.

This view would say that Satan, who in Revelation 20:2-3 is said to be "bound" and sealed in a pit "so that he might not deceive the nations any longer," had his power significantly reduced during Christ's ministry on earth (Matt. 12:28-29; Luke 10:18). The fact that someone like Paul could teach all Gentile nations about "the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31) is a demonstration that Satan has been "bound" so that he does not "deceive the nations any longer."

This view is often called the amillennial view (a meaning no), because those who hold to it don't believe that Revelation 20:4-5 teaches a future thousand-year reign either before or after Jesus' return. Instead, they believe that when Christ returns, there will be one resurrection of both believers and unbelievers. Those who believe in Jesus will go to heaven; those who don't will face the final judgment and eternal condemnation. At that time, the new heavens and new earth will begin and remain for eternity. One argument in favor of this view is that it is all very simple and uncomplicated: Christ returns, there is judgment, and we live in the new heavens and new earth forever.

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View 2 – Postmillennial: The millennium will come gradually, and Jesus will return after the millennium

Other Christians believe Jesus will return after the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20:4-5. As the church grows and Christians continue to have greater and greater influence, society will begin to function more and more in line with God's standards. Gradually, a "millennial age" of great peace and righteousness (not necessarily a literal one thousand years) will come about on the earth. Christ will not physically reign on earth during this period; instead, Christians will have a tremendous influence in society, and Christ's reign will come about through this influence of Christians. People who support this view emphasize verses that show how the kingdom of God grows quietly but steadily from a tiny start to a huge end. For example, there is the parable of the mustard seed that became a great tree (Matt. 13:31-32) and Jesus' statement that "the kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened" (Matt. 13:33). Postmillennialists also emphasize Jesus' statement, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18), and they expect that as a result the kingdom of God will continue to advance with great power throughout the earth until there is a millennial kingdom on the earth.

According to this view, Jesus will return at the end of this millennial age. Then there will be one resurrection of both believers and unbelievers. Those who believe in him will go to heaven; those who don't will face the final judgment and eternal condemnation. At that time, the new heavens and new earth will begin and remain for eternity, and Christ will be present on earth to reign in bodily form. This view is called the *postmillennial* view because Christ's return and reign will occur *after* a future millennium.

View 3 – Premillennial: The millennium will come suddenly, and Jesus will return before the millennium

Finally, there are Christians who believe Jesus will return before the events of Revelation 20:1-10. This is called the premillennial view because it holds that Christ will return before the millennium. This view also holds that prior to Jesus' return there will be a time of great suffering on earth, sometimes called the great tribulation (see Matt. 24:21-31).

According to the premillennial view, Christ will return and physically reign on earth for the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20:4-5. When Christ returns to begin his millennial reign, all who have believed in him will be raised from the dead to reign with him. This is the meaning of Revelation 20:4, "they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years."

During that millennium, Satan and his demons will be completely removed from all influence on the earth, as described in Revelation 20:1-3:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

Because Jesus will reign in peace and righteousness over the earth, many people on earth will turn to him for their salvation., But there will still be unbelievers on the earth just as there were some who "doubted" after they had seen Jesus in his resurrected body (Matt. 28:17). Some will not believe because genuine faith is something that must come from an internally changed heart and cannot be compelled even by overwhelming outward evidence and arguments. Even with no influence from Satan

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or demons at all on the earth, there will still be people who do evil, showing that our sin is not really caused by Satan but is the responsibility of the human beings who do the sin.

In this premillennial view, after the thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth, the final judgment will occur, and those who believe in Jesus will continue to reign with him for eternity; those who rejected him will be condemned for eternity.

The Bible seems to support this position more than the others. It is an easy and natural reading of Revelation 20:1-6, and many have understood it in this way since the early church. In addition, Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 65:20 indicate a time in the future that is very different from this age yet when sin and death are not removed: "No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed." Other passages, such as Psalm 72:8-14; Isaiah 11:2-9; Zechariah 14:6-21; 1 Corinthians 15:24; and Revelation 2:27; 12:5; and 19:15, seem to indicate a period of time when Christ's reign over all things is seen in a greater way but sin and evil still exist on the earth. This fits a picture of Christ's future millennial reign.

One variation on the premillennial view has had many followers in the United States. Since it holds that Christ will come back before the great "tribulation" mentioned in Matthew 24:21-31, this view is called *pretribulational* premillennial view. Those who hold this view believe that Christ will actually return twice: once to suddenly take Christians out of the world and then seven years later in a second, public return when he will bring Christians back to earth to reign with him for the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20:4-5. During the seven years when Christ and the Christians are absent from the earth, there will be a time of great tribulation when the vast majority of Jewish people will trust in Christ as their Messiah and preach the gospel to those left on earth.

The Victorious King

It is perhaps not surprising that Christians have differences over their views of the future. This is due in part to the subject matter: the future is somewhat unclear to us since it has not yet happened! But regardless of the timing of Christ's return, all Christians believe that the final victory of Christ over Satan (described in Revelation 20:7-10) will occur in the future. They believe that Satan "will be released from his prison" (Rev. 20:7) to gather together for battle those he has deceived. At that final battle, Jesus will defeat Satan and his army once and for all. At the end of the battle, Satan will be "thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur" where he "will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev. 20:10). At the end of the final battle, Jesus, the victorious king, will execute his final judgment. And then, he will reign forever and ever.

The Final Judgment?

Jesus "is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42; see also 2 Tim. 4:1 and Matt. 25:31-33). His "authority to execute judgment" was given to him by God (John 5:27). This "time for the dead to be judged" will be a time for "rewarding" God's servants and a time for "destroying the destroyers of the earth" (Rev. 11:18). Therefore, at this time, both those who believe in Jesus and those who do not believe in him will be judged.

As for unbelievers, Paul says, "for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury" (Rom. 2:8). Already in the Old Testament there was an assurance that "God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Eccl. 12:14). Those who haven't looked to Jesus for their salvation will be judged according to what they have done (Rev. 20:12). God will be fair. The degree of punishment will vary according to what each person has done, for some "will receive the greater condemnation" (Luke 20:47). According to Jesus'

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teaching on the difference between the servant who knew his master's will and the one who did not (Luke 12:47-48), it seems that punishment will also vary according to how much knowledge people had of God's requirements.

We who believe in Jesus will also "stand before the judgment seat of God" to "give an account" of ourselves to God (Rom. 14:10-12). But the final judgment for believers will not be one of punishment, but one of reward. Jesus promises in John 5:24, "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." Paul confirms this when he writes in Romans 8:1, "There is ...no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Therefore, the final judgment should not be a source of fear for believers but instead an encouragement for them to make it their aim "to please" God (2 Cor. 5:9). Every sin we have committed has been eternally paid for by Christ and therefore eternally forgiven by God. At the judgment, we will receive rewards due us for what we have "done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10). The evil will pass away, and the good will be rewarded (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

Although there will be degrees of reward in heaven, everyone's joy will be complete. This is because our joy will not come from what we possess or our status but from our relationship with God. In heaven, our joy in fully delighting in God, our joy in being able to be in his presence and fall down before his throne you worship him, will be greater than the joy found in any reward (Rev. 4:10-11).

The Purpose of the Final Judgment

The final judgment will be entirely fair. Each person God will judge "impartially according to each one's deeds" (1 Peter 1:17), "for God shows no partiality" (Rom. 2:11). God will be so glorified in his final judgment that we will cry, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just" (Rev. 19:1-2).

What About Hell?

At the final judgment, those who have rejected the claims of Jesus will go to a place of eternal punishment. That place of eternal punishment, the Bible tells us, is hell.

The Bible's descriptions of hell are difficult to read, and they should be deeply disturbing to us. Jesus speaks of hell as "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels," and he says that those who have rejected him will also go there (Matt. 25:41). It is a place where the "worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). It is a "place of torment" (Luke 16:28). John tells us it is a place where those who rejected Jesus will, along with the devil and his angels, "drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger" and "be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the presence of the Lamb" (Rev. 14:10). The "smoke of their torment" will go on "forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night" (Rev. 14:11).

While we who have believed in Christ should have no fear of hell, we should still think of it only with great solemnity and sadness. Even God himself says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek. 33:11). Although it is hard to think about, the doctrine of hell is so clearly taught in Scripture that there does not seem to be any acceptable way to deny it and still be subject to God's Word. In addition, in a universe where there is deep and profound evil that calls forth the just wrath of a righteous, holy God, we should also realize that evil cannot simply go unpunished. All of God's judgments are just and right, because "the Lord is upright...there is no unrighteousness in him" (Ps. 92:15).

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Heaven

The Renewed Heaven and Earth

The Bible frequently refers to the place God currently dwells as "heaven." For example, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). Peter says Jesus "has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God" (1 Peter 3:22). Heaven is the place where God most fully makes known his presence to bless. Although God is everywhere, his presence to bless is most clearly seen in heaven, and his glory is most clearly seen in heaven. Heaven is the one place where everyone worships him.

The Undeniable Glory of God

In addition to being a place of unimaginable beauty, heaven will be a place where God's glory is so undeniably evident that all of creation will function in a way that is in full cooperation with his will. Therefore, the world will no longer be "broken"; it will work like it is supposed to. And all the people there will also no longer be "broken," for they will work and act and relate to one another like they are supposed to. There will no longer be any pain or sorrow, grief or tragedy, for God himself will dwell with his people. "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4)

Our greatest joy will be that we "will see his face" (Rev. 22:4). The sight of God's face will be the fulfillment of everything we know to be good, right, and desirable in the universe. In God's face, we will see and experience the fulfillment of all the longing we have ever had – the longing to know perfect love, peace, and joy, to know truth and justice, holiness and wisdom, goodness and power, glory and beauty. We will discover that in God's presence "there is fullness of joy" and at his right hand "pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11).

Material from Christian Beliefs, by Wayne Grudem

Personal Questions

1. What are some of the things about eschatology that all Christians should agree on? Which of those things gives you the greatest joy?
2. What are some issues relating to eschatology that Christians differ on? How should Christians deal with these differences?
3. Take a moment to read Revelation 22:12. In response to reading that, take a moment to pray John's prayer as found in Revelation 22:20.

Group Study

OPEN

VIDEO TEACHING NOTES

Key Question: What happens _____?

Key Idea: I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus will return to judge all people and to establish his _____ kingdom.

2 Kings 2:1: "When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to _____ in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal."

When our body exhales its final breath, our spirit exits the body and goes to one of two places - _____ or _____.

Key Verse: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a _____ for you?" (John 14:1-2)

(Key Application) Life with _____ every day, regardless of the circumstances around us. Life can get better here, but even if it doesn't, his home awaits us.

(Key Application) Love people with freedom and boldness, because our future is _____ in him.

(Key Application) Lead more people into a relationship with Christ, because we want to _____ this great hope with others.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Describe the moment you became aware of your mortality and pondered what would happen after your death.
2. What is it about heaven that brings you hope? What about it is uncertain? What about it brings you freedom?
3. What is it about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that led you to put your faith in him?
4. How does having a secured future in heaven affect the way you live your life in the present?
5. How does what the Bible writes about heaven compare with some of the popular notions of heaven today?
6. According to Paul, why is the resurrection essential to Christian theology?
7. In the Apostle Peter's passage about "the day of the Lord," what phrases encourage you? Challenge you? Frighten you?
8. How does the prospect of eternal life in heaven affect your perspective on what is going on in your life today?
9. What do you most look forward to in heaven?

Read Romans 1:18-32 together and choose 1-2 questions that will lead to the greatest discussion in your group.

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1. What does this passage tell you about God's character, human nature and yourself?
2. At what point did you realize that your heart was wicked and that you desperately needed a Savior? Who was the person or people that guided you toward a relationship with Jesus Christ? How did they do it?
3. Is there someone in your life (family, friend, or neighbor) whose future is not secured in the saving power of Jesus? If so, what is keeping you from talking to them about it?

KEY APPLICATION: Since heaven, hell and the return of Jesus are certain, we ought to live holy and godly lives (Jude 20-23).

Application:

Read Revelation 22:12. First respond to John's prayer then include it in your closing prayer.