

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 23 – The End of the Ages

### Key Questions:

- How will the world come to an end? What happens to the souls of people after their body dies?

### How will the world end?

There are many theories and ideas about how life on earth may come to an end, including global warming, an asteroid collision or nuclear war. The Bible, however, teaches that the end of the entire Universe is connected with the end of the earth and the end of human history. The Bible teaches that of all things God created, human beings are the most precious to Him, and that the planet earth is therefore the most important place in the Universe. It claims that the reason why God created such a large Universe was to show us how great and powerful He is. Just as God created the Universe and set it in motion, He will bring it to an end. Life on earth will not end by some natural disaster, but when God decides to end it through His final judgement. In fact, the date for the end of life on earth has already been set by God. The Bible does not give us all the details about the end of the world, but it does teach that the world will become more evil as time passes, and that many people will reject the message of good news about Jesus. One day, however, God will intervene when Jesus returns to earth to judge all human beings, living and dead.

### Jesus will return to earth to restore God's Kingdom

The Old Testament prophets, who looked forward to the coming Messiah, had visions of two kinds: the Suffering Servant and the Conquering King. When Jesus came to earth in 4 BC He lived the life of the Suffering Servant. Although He spoke much about the Kingdom of God, and taught that we can be part of God's Kingdom now, He refused to be made King in Israel, and in fact chose to die on the cross. His death fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about God's Servant who would die for the sins of the people. However, the other Old Testament prophecies about the Conquering King still remain to be fulfilled – **Jesus must return to finally restore God's Kingdom.** Jesus spoke about His future return:

- **John 14:1-4 – Jesus will prepare a place for His followers and will return for them**
  - Jesus told His disciples that He was going to leave them to prepare a place for His followers to live (verse 2)
  - He promised that He would come again one day to take His followers to be with Him (verse 3)
- **Matthew 24:26-31, 36-44 – the second coming of Jesus will be in power for all to see**
  - When Jesus returns He will appear in the sky in power and great glory and everyone will see Him (verse 30)
  - All Christians from all parts of the earth will be gathered to Him (verse 31)
  - No one knows the day when this will happen, so we should get ready now (verses 36-44)

The apostles also spoke about the return of Jesus. Paul wrote to several churches about the hope it gives to Christians:

- **I Thessalonians 4:13-5:3 – the return of Jesus will reunite all Christians**
  - Jesus will return with all the Christians who have died before He comes again (4:13-15)
  - Dead Christians will be raised to life first, then the Christians on earth will meet Jesus in the sky (4:16-17)
  - No one will know the date when Jesus will come again – it will be sudden (5:1-3)
- **I Corinthians 15:35-58 – the resurrection body for Christians**
  - The resurrection body will be similar to, but different from the present body as it cannot die or decay (verses 35-42)
  - The resurrection body will be full of power like the resurrection body of Jesus (verses 43-49)
  - All Christians will receive a new body, since our current bodies cannot live forever (verses 50-58)

So, one day in the future (the date is unknown to anyone except God), Jesus will come again to earth, but that this time He will be the Conquering King. He will destroy the enemies of God, but those Christians who have died will be raised again and will come with Him, and the Christians who are alive at the time will join them.

### What happens to people who die now?

Jesus taught that there is more to a human being than just a body (Matthew 10:28). We have both body (the physical part) and soul (the invisible part that is the centre of our thoughts, emotions and will). When the body dies, the soul continues to exist. The Bible teaches that human beings only live once on this earth, and then they must answer to God for how they have lived. As Hebrews 9:27 says, "*it is destined that each person dies only once and after that comes judgement*". We do not get a second chance at how we live our lives – we live one life and then God will judge us based on how we have lived. The souls of Christians who die return to God to be with Jesus (see II Corinthians 5:6-8, where Paul says that after he leaves his body he will be "*at home with the Lord*"). We do not know if these people are conscious or whether they are unaware, just as if they were asleep. Not much is said about the place where non-Christians go after their death, but we know that they await the future Day of Judgement that will come after Christ returns to earth. On that day all people will be judged by Him, both those who are alive at the time and those who have died (who will be raised to life again).

### Heaven and Hell

Jesus taught that there are only two possible permanent destinies for people after the final judgement: eternal punishment and eternal life (Matthew 25:46). These two alternatives are often called Hell and Heaven.

### HEAVEN (the New Earth) – Eternal Life

The word "heaven" in the Bible simply means the place where God lives (the plural form "heavens" means the sky and outer space), but people often use it to describe the place where Christians will live forever. Christians will live forever in a physical resurrected body. The whole human person is a body together with a soul, and we will not live forever as spirits or ghosts. The Bible teaches that Christians will live in these resurrection bodies on a New Earth in a new Universe. The prophet Isaiah foresaw this (Isaiah 65:17-25), and Simon Peter also told Christians that they should look forward to this new creation (II Peter 3:13). In the book of Revelation the new Universe is revealed (Revelation 21:1). The New Earth will be created from the same material that the current earth is made from. The earth will be melted down (II Peter 3:12) and reformed into a new planet. Life on the New Earth will be different from now because:

- *All animals will be vegetarian* – just as before the Flood (Isaiah 65:25 – compare with Genesis 9:3)
- *Everyone will be right with God* – there will be no more sin (II Peter 3:13)
- *There will be no more death, or sorrow, or crying or pain* – the Curse God put on the Universe because of Adam and Eve's sin will be reversed (Revelation 21:4 – compare this with Genesis 3:14-19)
- *People can eat again from the Tree of Life* (see Revelation 22:2), from which Adam and Eve were banned from eating after they sinned (Genesis 3:24). This means they will be able to live forever.

On the New Earth mankind will be perfect in their relationship with God, with one another and with the universe, just as God intended. Sin and all its effects will be gone. **God's Kingdom will be finally restored in fullness!**

### HELL (the Lake of Fire) – Eternal Punishment

Hell is the place where God and His love are not present. In the Bible Hell is often described as a place of great suffering: the main picture is of a lake of burning fire (Revelation 20:14). This suffering is both a result of the person's own rejection of God and also God's punishment on them for their sins. The Lake of Fire was actually prepared for the Devil as a place where he will be punished (Revelation 20:10), but people who have not responded to God in faith will also be cast into it after the final judgement. There is no hope of escape.

## The Final Judgement

Throughout the Bible it is clear that God must judge and punish sin. He cannot ignore it – there is no hope for a future perfect New Creation if sin is allowed to continue. Jesus spoke more about this judgement than anyone else in the Bible. After Jesus returns, He will judge all people by His standard of perfection. **Revelation 20:11-15** tells us how people will be judged on this final Day of Judgement:

- *Jesus Christ will sit on the throne in judgement* (verse 11a)
- *All people will stand before Him to be judged* – there will be nowhere to hide (verses 11b-12)
- *God knows everything we have done* – our actions are recorded in His books (verse 12b)
- *All the people whose names are not written in another book, the Book of Life, will be thrown into Hell* (verse 15)

So, the final judgement will be fair and just with all the evidence taken into account and no miscarriages of justice (see also Romans 2:5-11). The evidence against people will be the sins they have committed, but the reason they will be condemned to Hell will be because their names are not written in God's book of life. The people whose names are written in this book are people who have trusted in God to forgive them.

For Christians there will not be any punishment on this Day of Judgement, because they have had their sins forgiven by Christ – there is no longer any judgement or condemnation for them, rather the return of Christ will mean salvation for them (see Romans 8:1; I Thessalonians 5:9). Remember that the New Covenant promised that God would never keep a record of the sins of His people (Hebrews 8:12). Christians will, however, have to give account for the way they have lived their lives. This is called the Judgement Seat of Christ, and you can read about it in Romans 14:10-12, I Corinthians 3:11-15, and II Corinthians 5:10. The reality, according to Jesus, is that people are either free from the coming judgement if they have believed in Him or they will face that judgement. In fact, those who reject Him have already been judged because they have rejected the truth God has shown them (see John 3:18-21).

## How Christians should live in view of the future return of Christ

The promise that Jesus is coming again is full of hope and meaning for Christians. Many New Testament passages challenge Christians to change their behaviour and beliefs in light of this hope. The following are just two examples:

### The apostle John – I John 3:2-3

- Christians are children of God, and it is not clear yet exactly what we will be like in our resurrection bodies (verse 2a)
- We know that on the day when Jesus returns we will see Him as He is and become like Him (verse 2b)
- As a result of this hope, Christians should aim to live like Jesus now, keeping themselves pure (verse 3)

### The apostle Peter – II Peter 3:3-14

- Some people will mock the idea that Jesus will come again, just as they deny that God created the world (verses 3-7)
- God is not slow at keeping His promise but is patient, giving people an opportunity to repent (verses 8-9)
- When the "*day of the Lord*" does come it will come suddenly ("*like a thief in the night*") and will mean judgement for godless men and the melting down of the whole Universe and formation of a new Universe (verses 7, 10, 12-13)
- Christians should be holy and godly because we are looking forward to the day of God. The return of Christ will bring our final deliverance from the presence of sin, but there is a challenge for us to live lives focussed on God because everything in this world will pass away. Nothing matters more than our relationship with Him (verses 11 and 14).

### Key Lesson: After death people must answer to God for how they have lived

The death of our bodies is not the end of our existence. In the future Christ will return to the earth to set up God's perfect Kingdom, and when He returns He will judge all people. Those whose sins have been forgiven will be part of God's Kingdom on the new earth, but those who have not trusted God will be punished in the Lake of Fire.