



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Chapter 15

The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)



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Lesson 15.1 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

The Perfect Life to Come

As believers in Jesus Christ, we already enjoy amazing blessings now in this age. Jesus' apostle John writes: **"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God"** (1 John 3:1). But we can look forward to even greater blessings. For John continues: **"Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is"** (1 John 3:2). Already now we have the perfect righteousness from God by faith in Jesus, just like the apostle Paul (Philippians 3:9), but there is still more to come, as Paul says: **"I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. ... I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"** (Philippians 3:12, 14).

In this present world we Christians already have perfection through the righteousness of Christ that is counted as ours when we trust in Jesus. **"Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"** (Romans 5:1). To the believer in Christ **"his faith is accounted for righteousness"** (Romans 4:5).

Yet every Christian knows that he is far from perfect in his Christian living because of the sinful flesh that remains with him until his death. It is written: **"The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish"** (Galatians 5:17). That is why even the apostle Paul had to say about himself: **"I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find"** (Romans 7:18).

Besides the continued presence of our own sinful flesh, we also continue to live in a world that is marred by the sin of others and the judgment that God has placed on all of creation because of human sin. **"The whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now"** (Romans 8:22). For this reason, what the apostle Paul told his converts in Galatia is true also of Christians of every time and place: **"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God"** (Acts 14:22).

As believers in Christ, we are looking forward to something better than our lives in this world, just like the patriarchs of old: **"But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them"** (Hebrews 11:16). On the night before His death Jesus promised His disciples that He would send them the Holy Spirit. He said, **"He will tell you things to come"** (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit has told us things to come in the writings of Jesus' apostles. For us believers in Christ these things to come are amazing, glorious, beyond comprehension, perfect in every way.

Jesus' apostle John was given the privilege of seeing a vision of this perfect world to come, **"a new heaven and a new earth, ... the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. ... He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain"** (Revelation 21:1-4). It will be indeed perfect, for **"there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie"** (Revelation 21:27).

When the Sadducees attempted to raise doubts about such a future life by telling Jesus the story of a woman who had seven husbands in this life and then slyly asked Him: **“In the resurrection, whose wife does she become?”**, how did Jesus respond? He said: **“The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection”** (Luke 20:33-36). The perfect life to come will be radically different from our present life on this earth. In the world to come nothing at all will mar our happiness.

Our present bodies are not even fit for living in that radically different and perfect life. God’s Word tells us what must happen to our bodies before we can live in that perfection. Paul informs us: **“Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet”** (1 Corinthians 15:50-52). Our bodies will be changed. The dead will be raised with incorruptible bodies, and the living will have their bodies changed instantly to make them fit for that perfect life. **“The Lord Jesus Christ ... will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself”** (Philippians 3:20-21). Even our minds will be glorified, as Paul indicates: **“Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known”** (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Eschatology, the doctrine of the last things, has to do with this perfect life to come and everything connected with it: the return of Christ, the last judgment, the resurrection of the dead, death itself, the state of the soul after death, eternal life, eternal death, and the signs preceding the end such as the destruction of Jerusalem and the appearance of the Antichrist. As we study what God has told us about these things, there will still be questions without an answer. We should not try to answer questions that God has not answered. For example, we should not make the mistake of trying to figure out when Jesus will return as judge. Jesus Himself said: **“Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only”** (Matthew 24:36). We are limited in our explanation of the future to what God Himself has told us.

What God has told us is sufficient to fill our hearts with hope for the future. The hope for the future is a sure hope because it is based on the promises of God, who does not lie. It is true that we cannot see what is to come. **“For we walk by faith, not by sight”** (2 Corinthians 5:7). The apostle Paul told the congregation at Thessalonica: **“I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope”** (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Non-Christians have no sure hope for the future, but we Christians have a sure hope that is based on God’s sure Word. Paul declares with absolute certainty: **“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words”** (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).

The apostle Paul himself was comforted with this hope as he faced death. He wrote to Timothy: **“The Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!”** (2 Timothy 4:18). Because we Christians have this hope for the future perfect life, we are strengthened to live the Christian life despite the difficulties and hardships in this world, we are fortified to persevere and endure to the end, and we are spurred on to bring the Gospel of Christ to others before it is too late. **“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal”** (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Questions

1. What blessings do we Christians enjoy already in this world?
2. What greater blessings are in store for us in the life to come?
3. What problems do we have in this life that we will not have in the life to come?
4. Who are the only ones who are promised these perfect blessings?
5. How are the new heavens and earth described in Revelation?
6. How did Jesus answer the question of the Sadducees?
7. Why do our bodies have to be changed to live in that perfect life?
8. Give an example of a question about the future that God does not answer.
9. What does it mean to walk by faith, and not by sight?
10. What is the difference between the outward man and the inward man?
11. What is meant by the term eschatology?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.2 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

What the Bible Teaches Us about Death

In the Bible the word “death” has several different meanings. Death is referred to already in Paradise before sin entered the world when God warned Adam: **“Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”** (Genesis 2:17). Adam passed on this warning to his wife, Eve. The two of them then knew that death was something bad, something that God did not want them to experience, something that did not fit at all with the wonderful life they were enjoying with God and each other and with all creation in the Garden of Eden. For in this home of theirs they were privileged to eat of the tree of life, not death (Genesis 2:9).

After Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command, their life and their world changed. They did indeed die. They died in a spiritual sense the moment they sinned. Their attitude toward God and toward each other changed immediately, as we can learn from their reaction to their sin and to God’s visit to them, as described in Genesis 3:7-21. Their spiritual death was accompanied by a change in their bodies that eventually led to their temporal death. The very first human temporal death was most likely the death of their son Abel at the hands of his brother Cain. We read in Genesis 4:8: **“Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.”** There was no longer any life in Abel’s body; he was dead. The same destiny awaited Adam and Eve and all their descendants. **“All the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years; and he died”** (Genesis 5:5). Adam and Eve had a son named Seth. **“All the days of Seth were nine hundred and twelve years; and he died”** (Genesis 5:8). The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **“Death reigned from Adam to Moses”** (Romans 5:14), and it has reigned ever since as well. The letter to the Hebrews describes human beings as **“those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”** (Hebrews 2:15).

This spiritual death and temporal death would have inevitably led to eternal death if God had not intervened at once by cursing Satan (the serpent), who had enticed Adam and Eve into disobedience by his lies. The cursing of Satan was at the same time the first promise of Gospel (Good News) to Adam and Eve. For God said to Satan: **“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel”** (Genesis 3:15). Since the woman’s Seed (Jesus, the Christ) would crush Satan’s head, He would also take the power of death away from Satan. The letter to the Hebrews explains: **“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He (Jesus) Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”** (Hebrews 2:14-15).

If Jesus had not come and released us, spiritual death and temporal death would have been followed by eternal death for us and all mankind. Now eternal death is the fate of the devil and his angels, together with all of Adam’s descendants who reject the one Savior God has sent, Jesus Christ, who has won eternal life rather than eternal death for all mankind by His death and resurrection.

Even in the early world before the great flood, God prevented temporal death from assaulting one man named Enoch. This was a sign to give hope to all believers that a victory over death was on its way through the woman’s Seed. The letter to the Hebrews explains: **“By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death”** (Hebrews 11:5). **“Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him”** (Genesis 5:24).

Questions

1. What warning did God give to Adam in the Garden of Eden?
2. How did Adam and Eve respond to God's command and His warning?
3. What changes came to Adam and Eve after they sinned?
4. What kind of death did they die immediately after they sinned?
5. What is meant by temporal death?
6. Who is the one exception to the statement that death reigned from Adam to Moses?
7. In what way was God's cursing of Satan a wonderful promise to Adam?
8. Who is the woman's Seed, and how did He crush Satan's head?
9. Why do we no longer have to be afraid of temporal or eternal death?
10. Explain the differences between spiritual death, temporal death, and eternal death.



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Temporal Death

In Genesis 5 the temporal death of Adam's descendants is referred to in plain terms. Over and over again we read: **"He died."** The great flood in Noah's day brought temporal death to all human beings and all land animals as well, except those with Noah on the ark. We read: **"And all flesh died that moved on the earth: birds and cattle and beasts and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every man. ... Only Noah and those who were with him in the ark remained alive"** (Genesis 7:21-23). There are those who claim that the flood in Noah's time was only a local flood. The Bible account, however, makes it clear that it was a universal flood that covered the entire planet.

The Bible also uses many figurative expressions to express the concept of temporal death. God told Abraham: **"You shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age"** (Genesis 15:15). Abraham's actual death is described like this: **"Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people"** (Genesis 25:8). As we read Genesis, we notice that after the flood the years of man's life on earth became less and less. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all lived well over 100 years. But Moses, several generations later, referred to seventy and eighty years as the ordinary span of human life (Psalm 90:10). It is not much different today.

When God first created Adam, He made His body first and then breathed into him the breath of life. Temporal death is the termination of the breath of life in the body. When Jacob's wife Rachel died, the Bible tells us that a separation took place. We read: **"And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name (the name of her son) Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died and was buried"** (Genesis 35:18-19). Temporal death therefore is the separation of the soul from the body. We read in Ecclesiastes 12:7: **"Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it."** The body is dust, and in temporal death it returns to dust. The spirit (or soul), on the other hand, goes to God.

When God told Moses that he would die, He said to him: **"You will rest with your fathers"** (Deuteronomy 31:16). The prophet Nathan used the same words when he spoke to King David about his temporal death. When David was about to die, he said to his son Solomon: **"I go the way of all the earth"** (1 Kings 2:2). In Psalm 13 David prayed: **"Enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death"** (Psalm 13:3). Solomon describes temporal death in a poetic style in the last chapter of Ecclesiastes, using many illustrations to picture what happens at the end, as **"man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets"** (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7).

There are many references to temporal death in the words of Jesus and His apostles. When Jesus was informed that Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter had died, He said to Jairus: **"Do not be afraid; only believe"** (Mark 5:36). When Jesus arrived at Jairus' home, He **"saw a tumult and those who wept and wailed loudly."** But Jesus said: **"The child is not dead, but sleeping"** (Mark 5:38-39). Jesus then gave the girl her life back by His word. Jesus also referred to the temporal death of His friend Lazarus as a sleep. He said to His disciples: **"Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up"** (John 11:11). With these words Jesus **"spoke of his death, but they (His disciples) thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep"** (John 11:13).

After Simeon saw the infant Jesus in Jerusalem, he prayed to the Lord: **“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace”** (Luke 2:29). The apostle Paul spoke of the two choices facing him: **“I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you”** (Philippians 1:23-24).

It seems that sleep is the favorite term used by the apostles when they refer to death. The Christians in Thessalonica were particularly concerned that temporal death would rob the believers of the bliss and glory of the world to come. Paul therefore wrote them these words of comfort: **“I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words”** (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Of his own death the apostle Paul said: **“The time of my departure is at hand”** (2 Timothy 4:6).

In temporal death the soul leaves the body. But this is only a temporary separation. Temporal death is not the end of the individual person, for the soul lives on, and even though the body disintegrates, God will raise every body from the dead on the Last Day.

There are some psalms that seem to speak of temporal death as the end of it all, and for this reason there are some Bible teachers who claim that the Old Testament believers did not believe in a life after death. But this is not true. Even Job, who lived in the days of the patriarchs, had no doubt that the separation of the soul from the body in temporal death was only temporary, for in his severe suffering he cried out: **“I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another”** (Job 19:25-27).

When the Sadducees came to Jesus with the story of the woman who had seven husbands in order to ridicule the idea of a continued existence after death, Jesus proved the resurrection from the Old Testament book of Exodus. Jesus told the surprised Sadducees: **“Even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live in Him”** (Luke 20:37-38). Temporal death does not mean total annihilation or a ceasing to exist.

Jesus Himself clearly taught that temporal death does not end the existence of a human being, for He told His disciples: **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul”** (Matthew 10:28). When Jesus experienced temporal death, He **“yielded up His spirit”** (Matthew 27:50); **“He breathed His last”** (Luke 23:46). But that was not the end of Him, for He told the thief crucified next to Him: **“Today you will be with Me in Paradise”** (Luke 23:43).

The apostle Paul pictured temporal death as the destruction of a tent, a temporary dwelling. But he said the person who dies is not then without any clothing; he is not naked. But rather God gives him new clothing. These are his words: **“We know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life”** (2 Corinthians 5:1-4).

God did not create mankind for death, but for life. Temporal death is not natural, but unnatural. It is contrary to God’s original purpose for His creatures. There is no reason to believe that God intended

animals to die either, for after God looked at His creation, He called it **“very good”**. There was no disease or death, for there was no sin. The cause of temporal death in every case is sin. Since it was the devil who introduced sin and death into the world, Jesus called the devil a murderer. **“He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it”** (John 8:44).

Adam and Eve could have resisted the devil’s temptation, but they did not. Paul says clearly: **“Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin”** (Romans 5:12). **“The wages of sin is death”** (Romans 6:23). Death entered the animal world through the sin of man, for it is written: **“The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God”** (Romans 8:20-21). It was man’s fault that sin and death corrupted all creation, including the animal world. Therefore, creation will in some way also share in the glory of the final deliverance from evil.

As we know from experience, temporal death can come slowly or suddenly; it can come through an accident, murder, disease, or sudden heart failure. The only ones who will escape temporal death are those who will be still alive on this earth when Jesus returns.

For the believer in Jesus Christ temporal death has lost its sting. Paul writes: **“The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Corinthians 15:56-57). Since Christ is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world, He has removed our sin as well, so that our death may be a stingless death. Since our sins have been paid for and God forgives them because of Christ, we can face death with confidence in a blessed hereafter. Nevertheless, because of our sinful flesh, we may still have anxieties about death and dying. These anxieties can be removed only by the Gospel of Christ’s redemption and the faith in that Word created by the Spirit. Jesus said: **“He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life”** (John 5:24). For this reason, the apostle Paul can say: **“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain”** (Philippians 1:21).

Questions

1. How many persons died in the great flood in the days of Noah?
2. What is the difference in span of life from before to after the flood?
3. How is Rachel's death described in Genesis?
4. Where does the soul (or spirit) go when a person dies?
5. What happens to the body when a person dies?
6. What did Jesus call temporal death in the cases of Jairus' daughter and His own friend Lazarus?
7. How did the apostle Paul comfort the Christians in Thessalonica?
8. How did Jesus answer the Sadducees when they ridiculed the idea of resurrection?
9. How did death enter the world that God made to be very good?
10. What happened to the animal world when man disobeyed God?
11. How has death lost its sting for those who trust in Christ?



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Lesson 15.2.2 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

Spiritual Death

A person can be dead and alive at the same time. That is, they may be alive physically but dead spiritually. The apostle Paul said that was the case with some of the widows he knew. He wrote to Timothy: **“She who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives”** (1 Timothy 5:6). In other words, such a person may be alive with temporal or physical life but is at the same time spiritually dead, without any spiritual life. The Lord Jesus Himself said the same thing to the congregation at Sardis in His letter to them: **“You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead”** (Revelation 3:1). Not only were they physically alive, but they gave the impression that they were spiritually alive also. But the Lord, who reads the heart, pronounced them dead, that is, spiritually dead, without any spiritual life. But even in Sardis there were exceptions. Jesus wrote: **“You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy”** (Revelation 3:4).

The Lord warned Adam and Eve that they would die if they ate the forbidden fruit. They did not immediately die physically; in fact, Adam lived for over 900 more years. But both Adam and Eve died spiritually that day, and they remained dead spiritually until God brought them the promise of a Savior and worked faith in their hearts to put their trust in that promise. Then they were spiritually alive again, although now they were subject to temporal death; their bodies had become mortal. Even though they were spiritually alive through faith in God’s promise, they also retained their sinful nature, called the old Adam or the old man. Thus, the believer in God’s promise of salvation has two natures: the old man (his sinful flesh), and the new man, created by the Holy Spirit through the Good News of Jesus.

From the moment we are conceived in our mother’s wombs, we are spiritually dead and remain spiritually dead until we are born again by the Holy Spirit. Jesus told Nicodemus: **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh. ... You must be born again”** (John 3:6-7). For this reason, the apostle Paul told the Christians in Ephesus: **“You He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13). Paul included himself and all his fellow-Jews in the number of those who came into the world spiritually dead, saying: **“We all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others”** (Ephesians 2:1-3). Jesus must have been speaking about spiritual death when He said: **“Let the dead bury their own dead”** (Matthew 8:22). The physically dead cannot bury any dead persons, but the spiritually dead can bury their dead.

How does a person who is spiritually dead become spiritually alive? The letter to the Hebrews assures us that Jesus destroyed him who had the power of death **“through death”** (Hebrews 2:14), that is, through His own death on the cross. In a similar way a spiritually dead person becomes spiritually alive through death, that is, through the killing and crucifying of their sinful nature. One is unable to crucify and kill one’s evil nature by one’s own power. A spiritually dead person cannot make themselves spiritually alive. It is God Himself who through baptism or the Gospel Word kills and crucifies the old sinful flesh. The apostle Paul explains this for us: **“Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life”** (Romans 6:3-4). In baptism **“our old man was crucified with**

Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin” (Romans 6:6).

Unless spiritual death is replaced by spiritual life, spiritual death inevitably leads to eternal death. Jesus told a story about a **“rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day”** (Luke 16:19), but he paid no attention to the beggar Lazarus who was laid at his gate. This rich man was spiritually dead during his physical life, and then **“he died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades”**, he wanted Lazarus to visit him and cool his tongue with water (Luke 16:22-23). But Abraham told him: **“Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us”** (Luke 16:26). This story shows us that spiritual death leads to eternal death, with no turning back. One who dies a temporal death while in a state of spiritual death can look forward to nothing but eternal death. It is written: **“It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment”** (Hebrews 9:27).

In this same parable Jesus explained how a person in his life on earth could become spiritually alive. Abraham told the rich man in hell, who expressed concern for his five brothers who were still alive: **“They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them”** (Luke 16:29). **“If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead”** (Luke 16:31). God in His grace has provided a way for a spiritually dead person to become spiritually alive and thus escape eternal death. That way is the means of grace: the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. The apostle Peter wrote: **“For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit”** (1 Peter 4:6). God wants the spiritually dead to hear the Gospel so that they may be given life, spiritual life, that will endure forever.

Our life on earth, from the time of our physical birth to our physical death, is our time of grace. That is, it is during this time that we are given opportunity to hear the Gospel and come to faith in the one Savior from sin and death God has provided for us: Jesus Christ. Remember the foolish man who built more barns and paid no attention to God’s Word and said to himself: **“Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry”** (Luke 12:19). **“But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’”** (Luke 12:20). And then Jesus said: **“So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God”** (Luke 12:21). This man misused his time of grace; his spiritual death and his temporal death was followed by eternal death.

“It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). When physical death ends a person’s time of grace, there are no later opportunities for any change of status. Since the next event of importance after death is judgment, death ends the time of grace for every person. Those who have not been brought to faith in Christ before their death will not be brought to faith in Christ after their death. All ideas of reincarnation are delusions.

Since we do not know when our time of death or the time death for others, we should not think that God will give us time to convert on deathbed, as He did to the repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus. Whenever we have an opportunity to hear the Gospel, God is calling out to us to believe in Jesus and be saved. The apostle Paul said: **“Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation”** (2 Corinthians 6:2). **“The Holy Spirit says: ‘Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts’”** (Hebrews 3:7-8).

Questions

1. How can a person be dead and alive at the same time?
2. When did Adam and Eve die after their sin? Explain your answer.
3. How many persons come into this world as spiritually dead?
4. How do spiritually dead people become spiritually alive?
5. What is the main point of Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus?
6. What is meant by the time of grace?
7. When does the time of grace come to an end?
8. What is the main point of Jesus' story of man who built more barns?
9. Why must the teaching of reincarnation be condemned?
10. Why are "now" and "today" the proper times for conversion?



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.2.3 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

The Time between Temporal Death and the Final Resurrection

God has not revealed very much to us on the state of departed souls between the moment of temporal (i.e. physical) death and the final day of resurrection, when the bodies of the dead will be raised from the dead and transformed into new bodies and rejoined with their souls. We can be sure these souls (or spirits) are not dead, for Jesus said to His followers: **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul”** (Matthew 10:28). Temporal death does not bring about the death of the soul. Jesus told the Sadducees: **“God is not the God of the dead, but of the living”** (Matthew 22:32). Therefore, since God is **“the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”** (Matthew 22:32), therefore Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must be among the living even though they died physically and their bodies were buried.

But the emphasis in Scripture is always on the eternal life we will enjoy with God in heaven after the general resurrection of all the dead on the Last Day. The Bible says very little about what is happening in the interval between temporal death and that day of resurrection. We must be on guard against applying everything that the Scripture says concerning the final state of the person after the resurrection of the body to the state of the soul that is separated from the body before the resurrection of the body.

The continued life of the soul with God after physical death is not our final goal. We are looking forward to Christ's return when our dead bodies will be raised from the dead, and we shall live, with body and soul reunited, together with the Lord in eternal bliss and glory. Consider the following promises of our God, which direct us to that everlasting glory. The apostle Paul tells the believers in Corinth that they are **“eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Corinthians 1:7-8).

In this same way Paul encouraged the Philippians: **“Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body”** (Philippians 3:20-21). He does not tell them to eagerly wait for the day when their souls can be with the Lord without their bodies but to wait for the resurrection when their bodies will be raised from the dead and transformed to be like Jesus' glorious resurrection body.

The same emphasis is found in other letters of Paul. To the Colossians he wrote: **“When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory”** (Colossians 3:4). To the Thessalonians he wrote: **“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven. ... And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air And thus we shall always be with the Lord”** (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). To Titus he wrote: **“We should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ”** (Titus 2:12-13).

What, then, can we say about the state of the dead after their temporal death and before their resurrection? According to the testimony of Christ and His apostles, we can say that they are with the Lord in heaven. For that is what Jesus said to the repentant thief crucified next to Him: **“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise”** (Luke 23:43). The body is buried in one way or another. As far as the body is concerned, its situation is like a sleep until the Lord awakens the body

on the day of resurrection. But the soul (or spirit) is with God in heaven. Jesus assured His believers, His sheep: **“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ... No one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand”** (John 10:27-29).

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“We are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord”** (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). It is not a demotion to be with the Lord and apart from the body. Paul wrote to the Philippians that he had **“a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better”** than continued existence on this earth (Philippians 1:23).

What we have been saying about the state of the soul after death is true only of those who trust in the Lord Jesus for salvation, that is, His sheep who listen to His voice and follow Him. As for those who reject Jesus, we have Jesus’ parable about the rich man in torments (Luke 16:19-31) and Peter’s words about **“the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient”** to whom Christ proclaimed His victory when He descended into hell (1 Peter 3:19-20). The soul of Judas Iscariot did not go to be with the Lord after he died; Peter said he went **“to his own place”** (Acts 1:25). That place was not heaven, for Jesus said: **“Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born”** (Matthew 26:24).

Through the years many strange teachings have been introduced among Christians concerning the state of the soul after death that have no basis at all in the holy Scriptures. The voice from heaven said to the apostle John: **“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on”** (Revelation 14:13). Those who die in the Lord, that is, as believers in Jesus and His work of salvation for them, need not fear any kind of torture or punishment after their death, but rather they will experience only blessing from the moment of their death.

But the Roman Catholic Church has developed various theories concerning the hereafter that they have taught as actual fact. Instead of only two possible destinies for human beings, i.e. heaven and hell, the Roman Catholic Church teaches the existence of five places: hell, purgatory, the limbo for unbaptized babies, the limbo for the Old Testament believers (now emptied), and heaven. The teaching of purgatory, in particular, has led believers astray and robbed many of the comfort they should have found in Christ. For according to Roman Catholic doctrine, purgatory is a place where almost all believers in Christ spend some time after death. It is a place of punishment, so that they can make satisfaction for all their sins for which they were unable to make satisfaction during their years on earth. The teaching of purgatory has been coupled with the notion that living relatives of the dead can pay money or do other things to shorten the time in purgatory for their relatives or friends who have died. For example, a relative can go to a priest and ask him to say a mass for his departed relative and pay the priest a certain amount of money for his efforts. The practice of buying indulgences for the departed in purgatory has also been introduced. But there is no basis for any of this teaching in Scripture. The Roman Catholic Church has used a passage in an apocryphal book, 2 Maccabees 12:43-45, to justify its practice.

From time to time Jesus Himself or His prophets and apostles have raised people from the dead. Jesus brought back to life the young man of Nain, the daughter of Jairus, and His friend Lazarus. The prophets Elijah and Elisha were given authority to bring persons back to life, as well as Jesus’ apostles Paul and Peter. But in every case these persons were brought back to life only to die again later. But the Bible does tell us of two persons who were given the special privilege of escaping death altogether. These two are Enoch in the days before the flood, and the prophet Elijah in the days of the kings. No doubt God permitted these two men to escape death in order to give testimony that He has power over death.

The case of Moses is also unusual. We are told that **“Moses the servant of the LORD died”** and that God Himself **“buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor; but no one knows his grave to this day”** (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). In the New Testament book of Jude we read: **“Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’”** (Jude 9). Then we have the appearance of both Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:3).

What shall we say about the supposed appearance of the prophet Samuel after his death, when King Saul asked the witch of Endor to bring him back from the dead? Was this really Samuel, or was it just an apparition? The Bible doesn’t give a clear answer. In any case, what this Samuel said was the word of the Lord (1 Samuel 28:11-20).

There may be some questions concerning this topic that God has chosen not to answer at this time. If God has chosen to be silent on certain matters relating to death and dying, we should not present our human speculations as the Word of God. We are limited in our teaching to what God Himself has revealed to us in Scripture.

Questions

1. How can we be sure that the soul continues to live after the body dies?
2. What should we emphasize when we speak of our future hope?
3. What will happen to our bodies and souls on the Last Day?
4. What did Jesus say to the penitent thief on the cross? What is the meaning of this statement?
5. Why can we be sure that believers will not be tormented after they die?
6. What happens to the souls of believers when they die?
7. What happens to the souls of unbelievers when they die?
8. What places has the Roman Catholic Church invented for the dead?
9. How do Christians lose their comfort by believing in purgatory?
10. What is special about Enoch, Elijah, and Moses?
11. Are there any prominent beliefs about the hereafter in your locale that are not taught in the Holy Scriptures? What are they?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.3 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

The Visible Return of Christ

Ever since Jesus ascended to heaven and two angels appeared, saying: **“This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven”** (Acts 1:11), believers in Jesus have been awaiting the visible return of Jesus to this earth. Jesus Himself referred to His second coming many times in His ministry. In His parable of the tares and the wheat Jesus said: **“Let both (tares and wheat – unbelievers and believers) grow together until the harvest”** (Matthew 13:30), and then He explained: **“The harvest is the end of the age. ... The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father”** (Matthew 13:39-43).

Jesus’ second coming will not be like His first coming. The first time He came in humility, but the second time He will come in glory. Jesus said: **“The Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works”** (Matthew 16:27). In the last week of His earthly life Jesus said to His disciples: **“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him”** (Matthew 25:31-32). It will be a day of reckoning for all human beings. Jesus said: **“Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels”** (Mark 8:38).

Jesus’ apostles also clearly taught that their Lord and Savior would return visibly to this earth on the Last Day. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: **“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God”** (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Paul wrote to Timothy: **“The Lord Jesus Christ ... will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom”** (2 Timothy 4:1). The letter to the Hebrews points out that Jesus’ second coming will mean final salvation for those who trust in Him: **“To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation”** (Hebrews 9:28).

According to Scripture many things will take place when Jesus returns visibly. The present world will come to an end. The dead will be raised. All persons will be judged, and a separation will be made between those who will be saved and those who will not be saved. Surely it will be a momentous day. Peter explains: **“The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. ... The heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat”** (2 Peter 3:10-12).

Since it has been almost two thousand years since the words of Jesus and His apostles have been spoken and Jesus has not yet returned as He said He would, there are many today, even professed Christians, who do not believe that Jesus will come again, as He said He would. The apostle Peter foretold that this would happen. For he wrote: **“Scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation’”** (2 Peter 3:3-4). There does not seem to be any evidence that the world will come to an end and Jesus will return. But Peter compares the

end of the world with the great flood of Noah's time. The people dwelling on earth at that time were not expecting the flood either, even though it had been foretold. But it came. **"The world that then existed perished, being flooded with water"** (2 Peter 3:6). And so it will happen on the Last Day. **"The heavens and the earth which now exist are kept in store by the same word, reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men"** (2 Peter 3:7).

We can be sure that what Jesus and His apostles said would happen will happen. **"Beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"** (2 Peter 3:8-9). The Lord has delayed His return in order to give more people an extension of their time of grace.

Because it has been so many years since Jesus said He would come again, it may be difficult for us to believe that Jesus could come in our lifetime. But we should remember how many of God's prophecies have already been fulfilled. Just think of the many prophecies that were fulfilled when Jesus came the first time. Paul wrote to Titus: **"God ... cannot lie"** (Titus 1:2). Everything will happen, just as God has promised. We can be sure of it.

But we do not know and we cannot know when it will happen. Jesus told His disciples: **"Heaven and earth will pass away"** (Matthew 24:35), and then He added: **"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only"** (Matthew 24:36). In His state of humiliation Jesus Himself did not know, for we read in the Gospel of Mark: **"Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"** (Mark 13:32). If we cannot know when Jesus will return, then we should be ready for His return at any time. **"Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is"** (Mark 13:33). **"Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect"** (Matthew 24:44).

At that same time Jesus warned: **"Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth"** (Luke 21:34-35). Jesus told His disciples the story of the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom to come. But five of them were foolish and did not have enough oil for their lamps, and so they were not ready when the bridegroom came, and they were not permitted to participate in the wedding celebration. Jesus concluded this story by saying: **"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming"** (Matthew 25:13).

Despite the clear words of Jesus, false teachers have arisen from time to time who claim to know exactly when Jesus will return. All such predictions have been wrong, and they will continue to be wrong. Such groups as the Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many others have set dates and years for the time of Christ's coming, and their prophecies have failed. Yet others continue to try, ignoring Jesus' clear warning that no one can know the time. The apostle Paul told the Thessalonians: **"You yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape"** (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3).

Besides Jesus' prophecies of His return at the end of time, Jesus and His apostles made other prophecies of future events that have already come to pass. For example, Jesus told His apostles that Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed. In saying this He was only repeating what God had revealed to the prophet Daniel many years earlier, that **"the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary"** (Daniel 9:26). Just a few days before Jesus' death, His disciples pointed out to Him the magnificent temple that King Herod the Great had built in Jerusalem. Jesus then said to them: **"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down"** (Mark 13:2).

The disciples then asked Jesus for a sign when this would happen, and Jesus gave them a sign. He said to them: **“When you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not, ... then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains ... For in those days there will be tribulation”** (Mark 13:14, 19). What was this sign? It is explained more fully in the Gospel of Luke. **“When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. ... For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people”** (Luke 21:20-23).

These words were fulfilled when the Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem about forty years later. The Christians living in Jerusalem and the surrounding country remembered Jesus’ warning and fled from the city to a place called Pella and they escaped the terrible judgment that fell on Jerusalem in 70 AD. This was what Jesus was talking about when He told the weeping women of Jerusalem as He was led to His death on Calvary: **“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children”** (Luke 23:28). Everything Jesus foretold happened, just as He said. The Jewish historian Josephus was present when Jerusalem was destroyed, and he described the gruesome events of those days.

The destruction of Jerusalem took place, as Jesus said it would. Therefore, we can be sure that the end of the world will also take place, as Jesus has said. But then there will be no sign of His coming that will allow Christians to make special preparations; He will come as a thief in the night. Nevertheless, Jesus and His apostles did make many predictions of things that will happen in the world before Jesus returns. We could call these signs preceding His coming, even though they are not signs of His coming in the sense that they will help us determine when He will come.

It seems that all these signs have already been fulfilled to some extent, although greater manifestations of fulfillment may yet take place in the future. Already back in the days of Noah, after the great flood, God made this promise: **“While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease”** (Genesis 8:22). God has kept this promise up until now, and we can be sure He will continue to keep it until Jesus returns. We do not have to be afraid of any climate change that will alter God’s promise.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: **“In the last days perilous times will come. For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God”** (2 Timothy 3:1-4). Paul told Timothy: **“The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers, and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables”** (2 Timothy 4:3-4). These things have happened and are happening today.

Paul wrote to Timothy: **“The Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving”** (1 Timothy 4:1-3). In history there have been many such groups making rules about marriage and food that go beyond anything God has said.

What Paul told the elders of Ephesus came true in Ephesus, and it has come to pass in many other places as well. He said: **“After my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves”** (Acts 20:29-30).

Besides the prevalence of false teachers in the world, we can also expect unrest in the world and calamities in nature: **“wars and rumors of wars. ... Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom**

against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places” (Matthew 24:6-7). **“You will be hated by all for My name’s sake”** (Luke 21:17). These things happened already in the days of the apostles, and they continue to happen in our day.

But the Lord Jesus also foretold great blessings that would come to the world after His departure. Shortly before He ascended to heaven, He said: **“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses of Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”** (Acts 1:8). The Gospel of Christ has gone out into the far corners of the world and continues to go out even today. Jesus said: **“This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations”** (Matthew 24:14).

Through all these years Christians have endured; Christ’s Church of believers remains. Although things may get even worse, much worse, before our Lord Jesus returns, we must keep on living the Christian life without becoming overly upset about events in the world. What Paul wrote to Titus applies to us now in this present time. **“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works”** (Titus 2:11-14).

Questions

1. Why should we believe that Jesus will return to this earth visibly?
2. What are some of the differences between Jesus’ first coming and His second coming?
3. What events will take place when Jesus returns?
4. Why is it that there are so many who do not think Jesus will return?
5. Why is it wrong to try to determine when Jesus will return?
6. What promise of Jesus was fulfilled in 70 AD?
7. Why did the Christians in Jerusalem succeed in escaping the danger?
8. Name some of the things that Jesus and His apostles said would happen.
9. Why do we not have to be afraid of climate change?
10. Are any of the predicted things happening in your locale currently? If so, mention some of them.
11. Why can Christians remain calm when evil things happen?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.4 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

Millennialism

A millennium is a period of one thousand years. The only place in Scripture where a millennium is mentioned is the twentieth chapter of Revelation. There we read that **“an angel ... laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years”** (Revelation 20:1-2). We are also told that **“the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus ... lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years”** (Revelation 20:4).

From this brief mention an entire type of theology has arisen called millennialism, which is then subdivided into premillennialism and postmillennialism. Premillennialism also has its divisions: dispensational premillennialism and historic premillennialism, and also pretribulational premillennialism, midtribulational premillennialism, and posttribulational premillennialism. The very fact that millennialists have such disagreements and divisions among themselves indicates that Scripture does not clearly teach what the millennialists think it teaches.

In the first place the numbers in the book of Revelation need to be understood not as literal numbers, but as symbolic numbers. For example, Revelation 7:4 gives the total number of Christians in the world as 144,000. Where does this number come from? The answer is easy. There were 12 tribes in Israel in the Old Testament. There are 12 apostles of Christ in the New Testament. 12 times 12 gives us 144. Then we have 10 times 10, which is the number of completeness, and that gives us a total of 144,000, the total of all Christians, both Old Testament and New Testament believers.

Rather than referring to a literal 1000 years, the millennium in Revelation 20 refers to the total number of years between Jesus' first coming in Bethlehem and His second coming in judgment at the end of the world. We are living in this millennium right now, and we are told that **“when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations”** (Revelation 20:7-8). This indicates that as Judgment Day draws closer, Satan will be given a longer leash and be permitted to use more deceptions among the nations of the world. This agrees with what Paul wrote to Timothy: **“Evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived”** (2 Timothy 3:13), and the many passages we read in the previous lesson.

Since Revelation is a book of visions and symbols, we cannot make it the starting point of our study of the last things. We need to interpret Revelation in the light of the many clear passages in the Bible elsewhere that describe the last things. If we study the clear passages of the Bible first, we will not become millennialists as the term is usually understood, but *amillennialists*, meaning those who do not find some special teaching of the millennium in Revelation and then interpret the rest of the Bible to fit in with this (false) millennial teaching.

Millennialists claim that there will be at least two resurrections from the dead: one before the millennium and one after the millennium. At this first resurrection they say the dead believers will be raised, and only after the millennium will the rest of the dead be raised. But Jesus taught clearly there would only be one physical resurrection: **“The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation”** (John 5:28-29). All the dead will rise at the same hour, and then the separation will take place between those rising to eternal life and those rising

to eternal condemnation. Moreover, Jesus taught: **“This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day”** (John 6:40). Note that Jesus’ believers will be raised on the last day, not one thousand years before the last day.

Jesus will return only once, not many times, and His return will be visible. His first appearance is described in this way in the letter to the Hebrews: **“Once at the end of the ages He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself”** (Hebrews 9:26). His second coming is described like this: **“To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation”** (Hebrews 9:28).

The beginning of the millennium in Revelation 20 is not sometime in the future, but it has already taken place. The binding of Satan took place when Jesus died and rose again. It was in connection with Jesus’ death, descent into hell, and resurrection that the apostle Paul wrote: **“Having disarmed principalities and powers, He (God) made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in Him (Christ)”** (Colossians 2:15). During the last week of His life, as Jesus looked ahead to His death and resurrection, He said: **“Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out”** (John 12:31). In that same week, the night before He died, Jesus said to His disciples: **“The ruler of this world is judged”** (John 16:11).

One of the most common false views of the millennialists is that Jesus will return *invisibly*, and suddenly all the living believers will be raptured, that is, taken into heaven; at this same time the resurrection of the dead believers will take place and they will be taken to heaven as well. Apart from this, the world will continue to function as before, only without any Christians in it. Seven years later Jesus and the Christians will return to set up His earthly kingdom at Jerusalem, all the Jewish people will turn to Christ, and possibly even the temple will be rebuilt with the ritual of animal sacrifices being reinstituted. In other words, they believe that Jesus will rule as an earthly king in Jerusalem for a thousand years, even though Jesus clearly said: **“My kingdom is not of this world”** (John 18:36). Dispensationalists teach (falsely) that the Old Testament prophecies about Christ’s Messianic kingdom foretell an earthly kingdom in which the people of Israel will rule over other nations. They teach that since the Jews at Jesus’ time rejected the kingdom, Jesus worked out an alternate plan that was not His real intention. This alternate plan was to gather a Christian Church made up of Jews and Gentiles, but this Church would be only temporary until Jesus came back to set up His earthly kingdom in Jerusalem and fulfill all the Old Testament Messianic prophecies through this earthly kingdom.

These millennialistic views have confused and disturbed many Christians and have led them away from a true faith in Jesus as their Savior from sin. It has led them from the hope of eternal life to a fantasy of a future that involves earthly glory and riches.

In a general way millennialism opposes the Bible’s clear teaching that Christ’s kingdom is spiritual, that there is only one future resurrection of the dead, and that Christ’s Church on earth should not look forward to earthly glory but rather cross of persecution and suffering for Christ’s sake. The apostle Paul told his converts: **“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God”** (Acts 14:22). Paul wrote to Timothy: **“All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”** (2 Timothy 3:12).

Most millennialists and some non-millennialists as well have taught that before Jesus returns at the end, there will be a general conversion of all the Jews. This is often based on a faulty understanding of Paul’s words in Romans 11:25-26: **“For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written.”**

In chapters 9-11 of his letter to the Romans Paul is discussing the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles in the Christian Church. The Jews had the special privilege of receiving God’s Word in Old

Testament times and hearing the promise of the Messiah who would come from the Jewish people. But when He came, most of the Jews rejected Him. There were those Jews, like the twelve apostles, who received Him gladly. God always had in mind the gathering of a people for Himself from all the nations of the world. Paul and the other apostles always first preached to the scattered Jews. But what usually happened is that Christ's Gospel found a greater hearing among the Gentiles than among the Jews.

Nevertheless, from that time until now there have been Jews who have become Christians, whom we can call Messianic Jews, or Jewish Christians. Together with the believing Gentiles, these believing Jews make up the new Israel, the spiritual Israel, the believing Israel. Paul calls this Church of Jews and Gentiles **"the Israel of God"** (Galatians 6:16). Paul makes a distinction between being from Israel and being Israel, saying: **"They are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham"** (Romans 9:6-7). True Israelites are those who believe in the Savior promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel; these believers in Christ are **"the Israel of God"**. And this is the way **"all Israel will be saved"** (Romans 11:26). Paul says of himself and other believers in Jesus: **"We are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh"** (Philippians 3:3).

Because of differences in teaching on this topic among Lutherans in America, confessional Lutherans have drawn up the *Brief Statement* of 1932, which includes the following paragraphs concerning the millennium:

"With the Augsburg Confession (Art. XVII) we reject every type of Millennialism, or Chiliasm, the opinions that Christ will return visibly to this earth a thousand years before the end of the world and establish a dominion of the Church over the world; or that before the end of the world the Church is to enjoy a season of special prosperity; or that before the general resurrection on Judgment Day a number of departed Christians or martyrs are to be raised again to reign in glory in this world; or that before the end of the world a universal conversion of the Jewish nation (of Israel according to the flesh) will take place.

"Over against this, Scripture clearly teaches, and we teach accordingly, that the kingdom of Christ on earth will remain under the cross until the end of the world, Acts 14:22; John 16:33; 18:36; Luke 9:23; 14:27; 17:20-37; 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 12:28; Luke 18:8; that the second visible coming of the Lord will be His final advent, His coming to judge the quick and the dead, Matthew 24:29, 30; 25:31; 2 Timothy 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 2:8; Hebrews 9:26-28; that there will be but one resurrection of the dead, John 5:28; 6:39, 40; that the time of the Last Day is, and will remain, unknown, Matthew 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:32, 37; Acts 1:7, which would not be the case of the Last Day were to come a thousand years after the beginning of a millennium; and that there will be no general conversion, a conversion en masse, of the Jewish nation, Romans 11:7; 2 Corinthians 3:14; Romans 11:25; 1 Thessalonians 2:16.

"According to these clear passages of Scripture we reject the whole of Millennialism, since it not only contradicts Scripture, but also engenders a false conception of the kingdom of Christ, turns the hope of Christians upon earthly goals, 1 Corinthians 15:19; Colossians 3:2, and leads them to look upon the Bible as an obscure book" (Brief Statement, paragraph 42).

Questions

1. What does millennium mean? Where in the Bible is this expression found?
2. How are the numbers in Revelation to be understood?
3. Why can we be sure there will be only one resurrection from the dead?
4. When was Satan cast out and bound?
5. Why can we be sure Jesus will not reign over an earthly kingdom?
6. In what way will all Israel be saved?
7. Why must we reject millennialism?
8. What can Christians expect in this world until Christ returns?
9. If there are any Christian groups in your locale that teach millennialism, which are they?



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.5 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

The Resurrection of the Dead

There are two kinds of resurrection from the dead. The first kind of resurrection takes place when the Holy Spirit, through the means of grace, brings a person out of spiritual deadness in sins into a new life of faith in Christ and produces the works of love that proceed from faith in Christ. This kind of spiritual resurrection is the same thing as conversion or quickening. We have already discussed this kind of resurrection in chapter 7.

The other kind of resurrection is a literal resurrection of dead bodies from their earthly graves to a new physical life. This is the kind of resurrection that we will now study in greater detail. Both kinds of resurrection were mentioned by Jesus in a lengthy discussion He had with His opponents after He healed a paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda on a Sabbath day. Jesus said: **“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation”** (John 5:24-29).

The first two underlined phrases in the above paragraph have to do with spiritual resurrection (conversion). The last phrase speaks of the bodily resurrection of all the dead on the last day. Like His Father, Jesus has life in Himself, and thus He can do both kinds of resurrection. He can raise people from spiritual death to spiritual life through His Word; He can also raise people from physical (temporal) death and bring them back to life through His Word.

For this very reason Jesus said to Lazarus’ sister Martha: **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die”** (John 11:25-26). Jesus is the resurrection because He will most certainly raise all believers from the dead on the last day. Jesus is the life because those who believe in Him have passed from spiritual death to spiritual life and will not die at all in a spiritual sense. Jesus said: **“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand”** (John 10:28).

The apostle Paul also spoke of these two kinds of resurrections. He wrote to the Colossians: **“You were raised with Him (Christ) through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him”** (Colossians 2:12-13). This is the spiritual resurrection (conversion). Again Paul says in Colossians 3:1: **“You were raised with Christ.”** Christ calls out to the spiritually dead: **“Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light”** (Ephesians 5:14). But Paul also wrote an entire chapter in his first letter to the Corinthians concerning the physical resurrection of the dead on the last day (1 Corinthians 15).

Those who consider themselves wise in this world have always maintained that a literal resurrection of dead people from their graves is unbelievable, incredible, and impossible. The sophisticated

Sadducees in Jesus' time are spoken of as those **"who say there is no resurrection"** (Matthew 22:23), and their story about the woman with the seven husbands was an attempt to ridicule the very idea of a resurrection. But Jesus gave them this answer: **"You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God"** (Matthew 22:29). He then proceeded to prove the resurrection from the book of Exodus, one of the portions of Scripture that the Sadducees supposedly accepted as authentic. The Sadducees as a group were not converted, however, for in the days of the apostle Paul the Sadducees are still described as those who **"say that there is no resurrection"** (Acts 23:8).

The inquisitive Athenians wanted to know what the apostle Paul meant by his talk about **"Jesus and the resurrection"** (Acts 17:18). They invited him to explain himself, and they listened to what he had to say until he said: God **"has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead"** (Acts 17:31). **"When they heard of the resurrection, some mocked"** (Acts 17:32), and the others had heard enough; they did not permit Paul to continue speaking.

When Paul defended himself before King Agrippa and other important people, he at one point cried out: **"Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?"** (Acts 26:8). From the believer's point of view, it is not incredible at all, for think of what God did in the beginning. He created all things out of nothing. Since He was able to create all things out of nothing, surely He is able to bring back to life something that once had life. But instead of believing that God created all things and that He will raise the dead, people are more ready to believe truly incredible ideas, for example, that everything evolved by itself without a creator or designer over billions of years of time, or that when people die, their soul goes into another human being or into an animal for another reincarnation, and that this happens innumerable times. There is no rational proof for such theories, and yet millions of people believe them. Paul says that such people **"suppress the truth. ... For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse"** (Romans 1:18-20). As it is reasonable to believe that a powerful supreme being created the universe in the beginning, so it is reasonable to believe that such a powerful Creator can restore to life those whom He has allowed to die.

The Christians in Corinth believed that Christ had risen from the dead, but some of them were saying **"that there is no resurrection of the dead"** on the last day (1 Corinthians 15:12). Paul pointed out that Christ's resurrection from the dead and our final resurrection from the dead are either both true or both false. And if they are false, Christianity is nothing but lies and nonsense, and Christians are the biggest fools on earth. **"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable"** (1 Corinthians 15:19). To those who wonder how God can actually do such a thing as raise the dead, Paul points out how God continually gives life to seeds that are buried in the ground. Who can explain this or duplicate it? But it happens all the time, because God has chosen to bring new life into the world in this way. **"So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption"** (1 Corinthians 15:42).

The bodily resurrection of the dead is taught in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus pointed out to the Sadducees that the Lord's statement to Moses in Exodus 3:6 that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob implies a resurrection of the dead, for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, and yet God is their God. God is not a God of the dead, but of the living (Mark 12:26-27).

Job certainly believed in a bodily resurrection when in his misery he affirmed: **"I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another"** (Job 19:25-27). The prophet Isaiah said: **"Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise"** (Isaiah 26:19). As the spokesman for God, the prophet Hosea said: **"I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction"** (Hosea 13:14).

It is clear that most of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus, including the Pharisees (Acts 23:6), believed in a bodily resurrection. For when her brother Lazarus died, Martha told Jesus: **"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"** (John 11:24). On this point Jesus and His apostles were not teaching anything new. Jesus did point out that life after resurrection would be different from life now. He said: **"The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, But those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection"** (Luke 20:34-36).

In his preaching the apostle Paul emphasized the resurrection of the dead, even as he proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus and our resurrection are joined together. The one is proof of the other. **"He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus"** (2 Corinthians 4:14). When he was brought before the Jewish council, Paul declared: **"I am a Pharisee ...; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"** (Acts 23:6). He made the same claim when he was brought before Governor Felix: **"I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust"** (Acts 24:15).

Somehow the believers in Thessalonica had the notion that if a person did not stay alive until the visible return of Christ, they would miss out on the glories of that day. The apostle Paul corrected that false idea with these comforting words: **"I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words"** (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

In these words the apostle Paul spoke about the bodily resurrection of those who sleep in Jesus, that is, those who die as believers in Jesus. When Jesus returns, those who sleep in Jesus will rise from the dead to be with Jesus. They will not miss out on anything but even precede the believers who are still alive on that day. For the dead in Christ will rise first, and then the living believers will be taken up to be with them and their Lord forever.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul reviewed at length the teaching of the resurrection of the dead, because there were some among them who dismissed or at least doubted the bodily resurrection of the dead. The entire fifteenth chapter is devoted to the doctrine of the resurrection. The emphasis is on the resurrection of believers in Jesus. Christ's resurrection is called **"the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep"** (1 Corinthians 15:20). **"Each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming"** (1 Corinthians 15:23). Notice that the resurrection will take place when Jesus returns visibly, not before then. The resurrection will take place at the end of the world, not before then. **"The last enemy that will be destroyed is death"** (1 Corinthians 15:26).

The Corinthians were interested in what kind of body the believers would have in the resurrection. It is the same person who died that rises from the dead. There is an identity of person. Job believed that he himself would see God. But the resurrected body will be greatly different from the body that is buried. When one plants a kernel of corn, it is not the kernel of corn that springs out of the ground, but a plant that eventually brings forth many kernels. Paul says: **"God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body"** (1 Corinthians 15:38). **"So also is the resurrection of the dead"** (1 Corinthians 15:42).

Notice the changes between the buried body and the risen body. **“The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body”** (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). **“As we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man”** (1 Corinthians 15:49). In a similar way Paul wrote to the Philippians: **“We ... eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself”** (Philippians 3:20-21). Surely this will not be too difficult for our omnipotent Lord. We can get some idea of what our resurrection bodies will be like by considering what Jesus’ body was like after His resurrection.

Paul maintains that a change from a natural body to a spiritual body is absolutely necessary, for **“flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does corruption inherit incorruption”** (1 Corinthians 15:50). Our earthly bodies, corrupt, dishonorable, weak, are not fit for eternal life. That is why the resurrection body must be different from the bodies we have now. The same thing is true of the believers who are living on the last day. Their bodies will have to be changed also. So Paul says: **“We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed”** (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

Since Paul was writing his letters to believers in Christ, it is natural that he would emphasize the resurrection of believers to eternal life. But in the presence of Governor Felix, an unbeliever, he said: **“There will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust”** (Acts 24:15). Jesus said: **“The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation”** (John 5:28-29). Besides the resurrection to life, there is also a resurrection to condemnation.

We need to be clear about Jesus’ words concerning those who have done good and those who have done evil, lest we conclude that people earn their resurrection to life by their good deeds, and that eternal salvation is a reward for our good works. Jesus Himself clearly taught about final salvation and condemnation in these plain words to His disciples: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”** (Mark 16:15-16). This plain statement about believers and unbelievers is repeated many times by Jesus, as well as by His prophets and apostles. Therefore, we have to understand Jesus’ words about those who have done good and those who have done evil in the light of His many other words about faith and unbelief. We must understand that the only ones who can do good in the eyes of God are those who believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin – those put their trust in the Good News about who He is and what He has done. As it is written: **“Without faith it is impossible to please God”** (Hebrews 11:6). The sheep on Jesus’ right hand in the judgment are His believers who hear His voice and follow Him. They will rise to eternal life. All the others will rise also, but only to be condemned. We shall study the final separation in more detail in the following lesson on the Day of Judgment.

Paul pointed out the importance of the doctrine of the resurrection to the Corinthians. **“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up – if in fact the dead do not rise”** (1 Corinthians 15:13-15).

Questions

1. What two kinds of resurrection was Jesus talking about in John 5?
2. Why did Jesus call Himself the resurrection and the life?
3. How did Jesus respond to the question of the Sadducees?
4. How did the Athenians react when Paul mentioned the resurrection?
5. Why should those believe in creation have no problem in believing in the resurrection?
6. In what way will our resurrection bodies be different?
7. How did Paul comfort those who thought dead believers would miss out on the coming glory?
8. How does the sowing of seeds help us understand the resurrection?
9. What will happen to living believers in Christ when Christ returns?
10. How many persons will rise from the dead on the last day?
11. In what two groups will those who rise from the dead be found?
12. Which persons will rise from the dead for condemnation?
13. Who are the persons who do good in the sight of God?
14. Why is it so important to believe in the resurrection of the dead?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.6 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

The Day of Judgment

Jesus and His apostles clearly taught that the last day would be a day of final judgment. **“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, ... all the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. ... And these (the goats) will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous (the sheep) into eternal life”** (Matthew 25:31-33, 46).

Sometimes God has chosen to bring about preliminary physical judgments on certain individuals or nations. The great flood in Noah’s time was such a judgment. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was such a judgment. Many of the defeats in war suffered by the children of Israel during the times of the judges and the kings were acts of judgment on the part of God against His rebellious, disobedient people. God also carried out judgments on such ungodly heathen cities as Tyre and Sidon, Nineveh, and Babylon. But such judgments were only preliminary. The main event is still to come: **“the day of judgment”**.

Jesus warned the cities who rejected His teaching: **“Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!”** (Matthew 10:15). Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida were cities where Jesus had done many of His mighty miracles. Jesus said to them: **“I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you”** (Matthew 11:22).

“The day of judgment” and **“the last day”** are the very same day. Jesus taught: **“He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him – the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day”** (John 12:48). Jesus also called the day of judgment **“the last day”** in John 6:39-40. The apostle Paul told the Athenians: **“He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained”** (Acts 17:31). Paul called that day **“the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God”** (Romans 2:5). On that day God will **“judge the world”** (Romans 3:6). When **“the Lord comes”**, He **“will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts”** (1 Corinthians 4:5). No one will be missing on that day, for **“we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ”** (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Sometimes the day of judgment is simply called **“that day”** as when Jesus said: **“Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”** (Matthew 7:22-23). Jesus said: **“Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only”** (Matthew 24:36). So also the apostle Paul referred to Judgment Day as **“that day”** (2 Thessalonians 1:10, 2 Timothy 1:12; 4:8).

Paul called Judgment Day **“the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Corinthians 1:8), **“the day of the Lord Jesus”** (1 Corinthians 5:5), and **“the day of the Lord”** (1 Thessalonians 5:2). The apostle Peter called that day **“the day of judgment”** (2 Peter 2:9) and **“the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men”** (2 Peter 3:7) as well as **“the day of the Lord”** (2 Peter 3:10) and **“the day of God”** (2 Peter 3:12). Jude, the brother of James and Jesus, spoke of **“the judgment of the great day”** (Jude 6).

Who will be the judge on the day of judgment? Abraham knew the answer to this question, for he called the LORD God **“the Judge of all the earth”** (Genesis 18:25). David had the same answer, for he said: **“The LORD shall endure forever; He has prepared His throne for judgment. He shall judge the world in righteousness”** (Psalm 9:7-8).

Jesus explained in greater detail how this judgment would proceed. He said: **“As the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man”** (John 5:26-27). The LORD God will judge the world in the person of the Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus Christ. Jesus taught His disciples: **“The Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works”** (Matthew 16:27). Again He said: **“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another”** (Matthew 25:31-32).

For this reason, the apostle Peter told Cornelius and his household: **“He (Jesus) commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead”** (Acts 10:42). Likewise, the apostle Paul told the Athenians: **“He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead”** (Acts 17:31). Paul taught the Romans: **“God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ”** (Romans 2:16). **“We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ”** (Romans 14:10). **“We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ”** (2 Corinthians 5:10). **“The Lord Jesus Christ ... will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom”** (2 Timothy 4:1; also 1 Peter 4:5). **“So then each of us shall give account of himself to God”** (Romans 14:12).

Amazingly Jesus will be joined as Judge on that last day by His apostles and by all who believe in Him. In answer to a question from Peter, Jesus said: **“Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel”** (Matthew 19:28). On the very night of His arrest Jesus assured His apostles: **“You are those who have continued with Me in My trials. And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel”** (Luke 22:28-30). Jesus said this, even though He knew that that very night they would all forsake Him and run away when He was arrested.

In fact, all of Jesus’ believers will join Him as Judge on that day. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Do you not know that the saints (the believers in Christ) will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?”** (1 Corinthians 6:2-3). Paul said this to them because they were taking internal arguments to heathen courts instead of handling these disputes among themselves. Their judging of angels refers to their sitting with Jesus as Judge over Satan and all his hosts.

How is it possible for the apostles and believers in Jesus to serve as judges with Christ when they themselves are subject to God’s judgment? The answer is given in Isaiah 53, where we read: **“Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him (the suffering Servant of God, Jesus Christ); He has put Him to grief”** (Isaiah 53:10). In a sense God carried out the judgment of the world on Good Friday, for it was then and there that He pronounced judgment on His Son, who was at that moment bearing the sin of the world as the Lamb of God responsible and guilty of all human sin. God judged man’s sin when He judged Jesus guilty of all sin and punished Him for it. **“The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all”** (Isaiah 53:6).

For that very reason Jesus will judge the world on the Last Day based on acceptance or non-acceptance of Him and His sacrifice on the cross. All human sin was punished in full when God punished Jesus on

the cross, when God made Him to be sin for us and therefore cursed and condemned Him and forsook Him. Therefore, those willing to confess their sins and cling to Jesus' sacrifice on their behalf will escape condemnation. Jesus and His apostles made this point as clear as it could possibly be made over and over again. Shortly before His ascension to heaven Jesus told His disciples: **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned"** (Mark 16:15-16). Notice that Jesus is not saying that anyone who has any kind of faith at all will be saved. He is saying that those who believe the Gospel will be saved. The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus is God's Son who was sent into the world to live, suffer, die, and rise again for our salvation.

Jesus very clearly taught this Good News to the Pharisee Nicodemus when he said to him: **"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God"** (John 3:14-18). Notice here again that Jesus is not talking about just any kind of faith or believing, but about believing in Him. He is the only Savior.

This was also the testimony of John the Baptist (baptizer), whom God sent into the world to prepare for the Christ: **"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"** (John 3:36). We do not come into this world with this kind of faith. Even though Jesus died and rose again many years ago and was judged and condemned for human sin at that time, the wrath and anger of God still hangs over the heads of earth's residents until they are brought to trust in Jesus and what He has done. Listen to Jesus' explanation of how this works: **"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life"** (John 5:24). This passing from death to life takes place when the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to bring a person out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of faith (trust and reliance) on Jesus Christ as Savior. Such a person will not be condemned on the final day of judgment.

Jesus said: **"I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness. And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him – the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day"** (John 12:46-48). Notice that believing in Jesus includes believing in His words, trusting in His teaching.

All of Jesus' apostles taught the Gospel that He told them to teach, especially the apostle Paul, whom Jesus chose especially to be His apostle to the Gentiles, the non-Jews. Over and over again in his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul emphasized faith in Jesus and His redemption as the only way sinners can receive the redemption and justification Jesus won for the whole world. The righteousness of God is received **"through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe"** (Romans 3:22). All are **"justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith"** (Romans 3:24-25). All have been declared righteous because of what Christ did, but the way for the individual sinner to receive this justification is **"through faith"**. **"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law"** (Romans 3:28). The idea of working to earn our salvation is ruled out completely, for Paul writes: **"To him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness"** (Romans 4:5). The sinner's faith is not his work by which he earns salvation. His faith is trust in Another, that is, in Jesus and the Gospel that God forgives sins and gives eternal life because of what Jesus did.

What wonderful comfort there is in these words! **"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"** (Romans 5:1Error! Bookmark not defined.). **"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus"** (Romans 8:1). **"It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"** (Romans 8:33-35).

It is true that God's law condemns us all, both believers and unbelievers. We need God's law to remind us at all times that we are sinners who deserve punishment and that there is no way that we can earn or merit eternal life. Listen, for example, to how these words of Jesus condemn us all: **"I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned"** (Matthew 12:36-37). If we are inclined to think that a misuse of the tongue is a harmless little blunder, these words will wake us up and remind us that we do indeed sin every day in thought, word, and deed, and that we need to cling to Jesus for forgiveness. Those who are lifelong Christians who have centered their lives on hearing God's Word in church and reading the Bible at home need Paul's reminder: **"Not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified"** (Romans 2:13). Does not God's law curse apply to us all? **"Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them"** (Galatians 3:10).

Thus, the warnings of God's law are directed to all of us, even to Christians on account of our sinful flesh. But **"Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes"** (Romans 10:4). **"If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, 'Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame'"** (Romans 10:9-11). Those who reject Christ and His Gospel have no hope of salvation.

In a sense, then, God has a double set of record books: one, Law, and the other, Gospel. The book of Revelation describes the judgment scene in this way: **"Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life"** (Revelation 20:11-12). The books are the books of law in which God knows everything about every single person who has ever lived. But, on the other hand, the Book of Life is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The final judgment will proceed as follows: **"And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of life. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire"** (Revelation 20:12-15). The city of new Jerusalem is described in Revelation 21. There we read: **"There shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life"** (Revelation 21:27). Notice that the Book of Life is called the Lamb's Book of Life, indicating that those whose names are written in that book are believers in the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who has taken away the sin of the world. The Book of Life is referred to also in Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8, as well as in Philipians 4:3.

But according to the books (the law) no one passes the test. For the works of all are imperfect and do not measure up to God's standard. This is what the apostle Paul taught consistently. **"By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin"** (Romans 3:20). **"By the works of the law no flesh will be justified"** (Galatians 2:16). The only hope for sinful mankind is that other Book, the Book of Life, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those whose names are in the Book of

Life are spared, that is, those who trust in the one Savior God has provided for sinful human beings. But **“anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”** This agrees perfectly with Jesus’ teaching: **“He who believes (the Gospel) ... will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”** (Mark 16:16).

The prophet Daniel had already spoken of the judgment as a day on which the books would be opened. Daniel said: **“I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated. ... A fiery stream issued and came forth before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened”** (Daniel 7:9-10). Daniel also referred to the other book, the Book of Life, in these words: **“At that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book”** (Daniel 12:1).

Everything depends on our spiritual connection with the Lord Jesus Christ. For this reason Jesus said to the seventy helpers He sent out as His messengers with the authority to proclaim His teaching and heal the sick: **“Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven”** (Luke 10:20). Those who believe in Jesus Christ do indeed have their names written in heaven; their names are in the Book of Life.

This, then, is how we must understand Jesus’ description of Judgment Day in Matthew 25:31-46. Those on Jesus’ right hand are His sheep. We know how Jesus described His sheep: **“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand”** (John 10:27-28). On the other hand, Jesus said to those who opposed Him: **“You do not believe, because you are not of My sheep”** (John 10:26). The great final separation is made based on whether persons are believers in Jesus or not, whether they are Jesus’ sheep or not, whether they are in the Book of Life or not.

Then, after the separation has been made, Jesus points out that His sheep have done all kinds of good things to Him, because they had done good things for the least of His brethren. Their faith in Jesus was not a fruitless faith, but a faith that showed itself in love for Jesus and His spiritual brothers. To those sheep on His right hand Jesus says: **“Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”** (Matthew 25:34).

On the other hand, Jesus will say to those on His left: **“Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”** (Matthew 25:41). Notice that the fire was prepared not for them, but for the devil and his angels. The Lord does not want anyone to perish in everlasting fire. He desires all to be saved, and that is why He sent Jesus into the world to suffer and die for all, and that is why the Holy Spirit is at work through the Gospel to save all. The Gospel is a Gospel for all sinners, for Jesus is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world. Hell was not made for people, and yet those who reject the Savior Jesus and the Holy Spirit’s invitation will have to share the destiny of the devil and his angels.

Whatever good works these unbelievers may have done in this world from a human viewpoint, they are not regarded as good by God because they have not been done out of love for Him. God does not recognize anything they have done as good, for without faith it is impossible to please God. And so Jesus concludes His account of the final judgment by saying: **“These will go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into eternal life”** (Matthew 25:46).

God’s sentence of eternal condemnation will also be imposed on Satan and all his army. It is written: **“God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment”** (2 Peter 2:4). **“The angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day”** (Jude 6). At that time **“the Lord”** will also deal with the Antichrist, whom He will **“destroy with the brightness of His coming”** (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

The final judgment will make all things right. Those who deserve to be punished will be punished, while those who have trusted in God's mercy during their earthly sufferings and persecutions will be delivered. The psalmist Asaph was perturbed because it seemed that God was treating evildoers much better than believers. But finally Asaph understood, as he says: **"When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me – until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction"** (Psalm 73:16-18). Unbelievers should not think they will escape punishment for their sins because they are prospering in this world. They will get their rightful reward on the Last Day. The apostle Paul addresses them with these words: **"In accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each one according to his deeds"** (Romans 2:5-6).

The Christians in Thessalonica were undergoing many tribulations and persecutions because of their confession of faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul gave them this assurance: **"We ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed"** (2 Thessalonians 1:4-10).

Notice that the final judgment will reverse the situation on earth. Those who were troubled will be relieved; those who troubled them will be troubled. There will be righteousness and mercy for the oppressed; there will be righteous justice for the persecutors. But notice the dividing line is between the believers who obey (trust in) the Gospel and those who do not.

Jesus shows us in Matthew 25:31-46 that the good works of His believing sheep will be publicized on that day. What about the sins of the believers? Will they be publicized also? It does not seem so. The new covenant announced by Jeremiah includes the statement: **"And their sin I will remember no more"** (Jeremiah 31:34). This verse is also quoted in Hebrews 10:17. King Hezekiah prayed to God: **"You have cast all my sins behind Your back"** (Isaiah 38:17). God says to Isaiah: **"I will not remember your sins"** (Isaiah 43:25). The prophet Micah spoke likewise to God: **"You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea"** (Micah 7:19). Notice also that in Matthew 25 there is mention of the sins of the goats on the left hand but no mention of the sins of Jesus' believers on the right hand.

Questions

1. What are some things that will happen on the day of judgment?
2. What separation will take place on the day of judgment?
3. Who has been appointed to be the Judge on the day of judgment?
4. Who will appear before the Judge on the day of judgment?
5. Who will serve as judges alongside the chief Judge?
6. In what sense have all the sins of the world been already judged?
7. On what basis will the separation take place on the day of judgment?
8. Prove that your answer to Question 7 is correct.
9. What is the difference between the books and the Book of Life?
10. Why will Jesus refer to the good works of believers on Judgment Day?
11. How will God's justice be displayed on the day of judgment?
12. What does God say about the sins of believers?
13. How can one prepare for the day of judgment?
14. Why is it important to be prepared at all times for the day of judgment?



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.7 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

The End of The World

What God created in the beginning was **“very good”** (Genesis 1:31). But when sin entered the world through the transgression of Adam and Eve, the entire created world was affected in a negative way. God said to Adam: **“Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return”** (Genesis 3:17-19). Everything that is not right with the created world today is a result of man’s sin.

The apostle Paul explained this to the Christians in Rome in these words: **“The earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now”** (Romans 8:19-22).

Notice that the creation did not go bad because it wanted to go bad. God subjected it to futility when man fell into sin. Paul calls the present situation of the created world **“the bondage of corruption”**. He says that at present **“the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs”**. The world that we live in now is not the very good world that God created in the beginning.

But notice that God has something good in mind for His creation. The created world is eagerly waiting for something, just as a woman in labor is eagerly waiting for the birth of her child. The created world has hope for the future. The created world is looking for deliverance from its present futility and corruption. This deliverance will include a share or a participation in **“the glorious liberty of the children of God”** in some way.

This deliverance will take place when this world, as we know it now, will come to an end. The psalmist describes the end of the world like this: **“Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will have no end”** (Psalm 102:25-27; quoted also in Hebrews 1:10-12). The eternal God who does not change will change His creation. The created world as we know it now will perish; it will die, so to speak, of old age.

The prophet Isaiah pictures the end of the world in these words: **“All the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll; all their host shall fall down as the leaf falls from a vine, and as fruit falling from a fig tree”** (Isaiah 34:4). **“The heavens will vanish away like smoke, the earth will grow old like a garment, and those who dwell in it will die in like manner; but My salvation will be forever, and My righteousness will not be abolished”** (Isaiah 51:6).

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus said that **“heaven and earth”** will **“pass away”** (Matthew 5:18). He said the same thing to His disciples during Holy Week: **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away”** (Matthew 24:35). The apostle Paul said: **“The form of this world is passing away”** (1 Corinthians 7:31). The apostle John stated: **“The world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever”** (1 John 2:17).

Jesus spoke about the end of the world and the changes that will come then as **“regeneration”** (Matthew 19:28). The apostle Peter called it **“the times of restoration of all things”** (Acts 3:21). The apostle Paul called it a deliverance from the bondage of corruption **“into the glorious liberty of the children of God”** (Romans 8:21).

Since the world has continued for so many centuries without coming to an end, there are many who do not think that there will ever be an end to this world. Or they believe that man himself will bring an end to this world through a nuclear explosion or through pollution of the atmosphere or that there will collision with an asteroid, or some such event. But the apostle Peter already foretold that there would be such skeptics in future times. **“Scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.’ For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which now exist are kept in store by the same word, reserved for fire unto the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men”** (2 Peter 3:3-7). As God destroyed the world once by water, so He will destroy our present world by fire.

This is the way it will happen: **“The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?”** (2 Peter 3:10-12).

The world as we know it will be destroyed. What will take its place? The prophet Isaiah tells us what God has in mind. **“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, and her people a joy”** (Isaiah 65:17-18; see also Isaiah 66:22).

The apostles Peter and John encourage us to look forward to this new world that will emerge when our present world is no more. Peter says: **“We, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”** (2 Peter 3:13) No more bondage, no more corruption, no more futility!

The apostle John has revealed to us what the Lord God showed to him. **“Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away”** (Revelation 21:1-4).

Questions

1. Why is our present world not the same as when God created it?
2. What pictures did Isaiah use to describe the end of the world?
3. What will remain the same even when the world comes to an end?
4. What is the opinion of many people concerning the end of the world?
5. Why do they hold this opinion?
6. In what way will God bring this world to an end?
7. What will take the place of our present world?
8. In what way will this be different from the world we live in now?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.8 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

Eternal Damnation

Before His ascension to heaven, Jesus told His disciples: **“Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”** (Mark 16:15-16). In this lesson we will study how the Bible describes what it means to be condemned.

Most of what we learn about this condemnation comes from the mouth of Jesus Himself from the four Gospels. In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus called it **“hell fire”** (Matthew 5:22) and **“hell”** (Matthew 5:29-30) and **“the furnace of fire”** (Matthew 13:42). He said, for example: **“If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell”** (Matthew 5:30). In Matthew 18:8 it is called **“the everlasting fire”**.

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus added that hell is **“the fire that shall never be quenched”** and quoted the words of the prophet Isaiah: **“Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched”** (Mark 9:43-48). John the Baptist had said that the Messiah **“will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire”** (Matthew 3:12). In His explanation of the parable of the dragnet, Jesus said at **“the end of the age”** **“the angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire”** (Matthew 13:49-50).

Jesus declared that His enemies, the scribes and Pharisees, together with their proselytes, were sons of **“hell”** (Matthew 23:15). In the same lengthy diatribe against them, He said: **“Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?”** (Matthew 23:33). Obviously, hell is not a desirable place.

In Jesus’ parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus, the rich man after his death is said to be **“in torments in Hades”** (Luke 16:23). In Hades the rich man cried out: **“I am tormented in this flame”** (Luke 16:24). He called Hades **“this place of torment”** (Luke 16:28). And there was no relief and no way out. The beggar Lazarus could not help him. In the parable Abraham explained: **“Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us”** (Luke 16:26).

Jesus said: **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”** (Matthew 10:28). Notice that hell is not only a place of punishment for the body but for the soul as well, in other words, for the whole person, body and soul.

Several times in His teaching Jesus spoke of hell as **“outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”** (Matthew 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). Being in outer darkness means missing the celebration inside, where the lights are on, and everyone is having a good time. The weeping means hell is a place of sorrow and sadness; the gnashing of teeth indicates that it will be a place of anger and pain.

In His description of the day of judgment Jesus spoke of **“the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”**. The human beings who are sent there are indeed **“cursed”** (Matthew 25:41). **“These will go away into everlasting punishment”** (Matthew 25:46).

Jesus' apostles agreed with their Master in their depictions of hell. The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: **"It is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you. ... These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power"** (2 Thessalonians 1:6, 9). The apostle Peter calls these enemies of the Lord **"accursed children"** (2 Peter 2:14) and says that there is reserved for them **"the blackness of darkness forever"** (2 Peter 2:17).

The letter to the Hebrews speaks of **"eternal judgment"** (Hebrews 6:2). In the book of Revelation, the apostle John calls it **"the second death"** (Revelation 2:11; 20:6), which is the same as **"the lake which burns with fire and brimstone"** (Revelation 21:8).

In view of all these words from Jesus and His apostles we must conclude that hell is not a joke but a terrible reality. It is a sober fact that those who do not trust in Christ as their Savior from sin will suffer eternal damnation in hell. Eternal damnation is as real as eternal life. It is because of man's consciousness of God (his conscience) that everyone, deep down in their heart, recognizes that they will have to face their Maker, and that is why the letter to the Hebrews says that human beings are **"through fear of death ... all their lifetime subject to bondage"** (Hebrews 2:15). They are afraid of death because of the possibility of punishment awaiting them after their death.

In an effort to persuade themselves that there is no such place as hell and that there is no such thing as punishment after death, many have argued that a God who loves the world (John 3:16) could not possibly inflict something so terrible as eternal punishment on anyone. Universalists teach that God will eventually take everyone to heaven, and no one will suffer eternally. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists deny the existence of an eternal hell. In fact, it seems that today most people in America, whether they call themselves Christians or not, do not consider hell as anything to be concerned about. The few people who believe that there is a hell do not believe they will be going there. If there is a hell, they think it will be only for the really evil people, certainly not for themselves. Others who calling themselves Christians have argued that when unbelievers die, they simply cease to exist; they do not have to endure any kind of punishment. Their only punishment is that they will not enjoy heaven.

The Roman Catholic Church and many others teach that there are other ways to escape hell besides trusting in Jesus as their Savior. They teach that if people live a fairly good life according to the knowledge they have, they will escape punishment and will be rewarded with eternal life. Even the Swiss theologian Ulrich Zwingli, a contemporary of Martin Luther, taught that heathen heroes such as Socrates, Cato, and Scipio would be in heaven based on their good lives. But Martin Luther strongly disagreed with him, saying: **"What need is there of baptism, the sacrament, Christ, the Gospel, or the prophets and holy Scripture if such godless heathen ... are saved ..., even though they knew nothing about God, Scripture, the Gospel, Christ, baptism, the sacrament, or the Christian faith?"** (*Luther's Works*, Volume 38, p. 290). Clearly Zwingli was wrong, for Jesus said: **"He who does not believe will be condemned"** (Mark 16:16).

God's love for sinners is not in doubt. God sent Jesus to die for all sins. The Holy Spirit wants the Good News of Jesus to go everywhere in the world. But it is possible for man to reject God's love, and in that case, there is punishment. The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote: **"Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. And again, 'The LORD will judge His people.' It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"** (Hebrews 10:28-31). **"There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked"** (Isaiah 48:22; 57:21).

God addresses those on His left hand with words such as these: **“You are those who forsake the LORD. ... When I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not hear, but did evil before My eyes, and chose that in which I do not delight.”** Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: **‘Behold, My servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry; behold, My servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty; behold, My servants shall rejoice, but you shall be ashamed; behold, My servants shall sing for joy of heart, but you shall cry for sorrow of heart, and wail for grief of spirit’**” (Isaiah 65:11-14).

Damnation is essentially being separated from all of God’s blessings and everything that is good. Jesus will say to those who are not His sheep: **“Depart from Me”** (Matthew 7:23). He will say: **“Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”** (Matthew 25:41). **“Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out”** (Luke 13:27-28). All will rise from the dead on the Last Day, but the resurrection of the unbelievers will be **“the resurrection of condemnation”** (John 5:29). This condemnation will include **“indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish”** (Romans 2:8-9), as well as **“destruction and perdition”** (1 Timothy 6:9). Those who reject Christ experience **“a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries”** (Hebrews 10:27).

Jesus’ words on several occasions indicate that for some it will be worse in hell than for others. When Jesus sent out His twelve apostles on their preaching tour, He said concerning those cities that rejected their teaching: **“It will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!”** (Matthew 10:15). Jesus said to the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida: **“It will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you”** (Matthew 11:22). To Capernaum, His home town during His ministry, He said: **“It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you”** (Matthew 11:24).

Jesus will make a distinction of some kind between those who sinned against their knowledge and those who did not have that knowledge. He explained it like this: **“That servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more”** (Luke 12:47-48).

Perhaps the most frightening thing about eternal death is that it is eternal. Eternity is a concept that we cannot fully comprehend. But the Scriptures clearly describe hell in such a way as to make the point that there is no hope for a change of any kind. The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophet Isaiah: **“It is the day of the LORD’s vengeance Its streams shall be turned into pitch, and its dust into brimstone; its land shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night or day; its smoke shall ascend forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one shall pass through it forever and ever”** (Isaiah 34:8-10).

In His parables and illustrations Jesus indicated the hopelessness of God’s punishment in words such as these: **“You will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny”** (Matthew 5:26). **“You shall not depart from there till you have paid the very last mite”** (Luke 12:59). **“It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire”** (Matthew 18:8). **“It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched – where ‘their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’”** (Mark 9:45-46). Jesus spoke of the **“great gulf”** between heaven and hell, **“so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us”** (Luke 16:26). Those on Jesus’ left hand on that last day of judgment will hear these words from the Judge: **“Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”** (Matthew 25:41). **“And these will go away into everlasting punishment”** (Matthew 25:46).

Jesus' apostles did not tone down Jesus' threats in any way. The apostle Paul taught: **"These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day"** (2 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Peter spoke of **"the spirits in prison"** (1 Peter 3:19). Jude, the Lord's brother, referred to Sodom and Gomorrah as being **"set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire"** (Jude 7).

The book of Revelation describes eternal death in a vivid manner. **"The smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night"** (Revelation 14:11). **"Her smoke rises up forever and ever"** (Revelation 19:3). **"They will be tormented day and night forever and ever"** (Revelation 20:10).

As Jesus said, hell was not prepared for human beings at all, but **"for the devil and his angels"** (Matthew 25:41). Why, then, will there be human beings in hell? It is not because God did not love them. **"God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son"** (John 3:16). It is not because Jesus did not atone for their sins. **"The Man Christ Jesus ... gave Himself a ransom for all"** (1 Timothy 2:6). There is no lack of desire on the part of the Holy Spirit to bring all persons to believe in Jesus. **"God ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"** (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Nor is there any deficiency in the means of grace God has chosen to use to bring sinners to faith in Christ. **"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead"** (Luke 16:31). James said: **"The implanted word ... is able to save your souls"** (James 1:21). Certainly there is no eternal decree on the part of God to condemn a certain portion of the human race, as was taught by John Calvin in the days of Martin Luther, and as is still taught by those who follow Calvin's "reasonable" logic. Such a blasphemous teaching is simply not to be found anywhere in Holy Scripture.

The only reason for the presence of human beings in hell is the rejection on the part of individual human beings of God's Gospel truth. Since the unbeliever rejects the only Savior God has provided and sent, he or she is damned both on account of his or her sins and on account of his or her unbelief. There are many Scripture passages that pin the blame for eternal punishment on only one human being: the individual who is thus condemned. The prophet Isaiah declared: **"Woe to their soul! For they have brought evil upon themselves"** (Isaiah 3:9). The prophet Jeremiah spoke likewise: **"Have you not brought this on yourself in that you have forsaken the LORD your God when He led you in the way?"** (Jeremiah 2:17).

Jesus told Nicodemus: **"God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil"** (John 3:17-19). John the Baptist taught the very same thing: **"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"** (John 3:36).

The Pharisees heard this explanation from Jesus' lips: **"If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains"** (John 9:41). The problem of the Pharisees was that they did not want to admit their own helplessness to save themselves; they saw no need for a Savior. Consequently, they rejected the one Savior God sent to save them. Human pride and self-righteousness work together in the unbeliever to close his mind and heart to his only hope for salvation: Jesus Christ.

By rejecting Christ's forgiveness, the unbeliever faces God with his own record of sins of thought, word, and deed. Jesus said: **"If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins"** (John 8:24). And so it will be. The apostle Paul said: **"Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things (namely, your sins of thought, word, and deed as spelled out in the context of this letter) the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience"** (Ephesians 5:6).

No matter what kind of excuses unbelievers bring to explain and defend their unbelief and to blame God for their failure to believe, there are no excuses that are acceptable to God. It is written: **“Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify God, nor were thankful”** (Romans 1:20-21). God’s creation and preservation are available to all, **“so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him”** (Acts 17:27).

It is certainly an act of love on our part as Christians to teach the truth about sin and unbelief and hell. The doctrine of eternal death is revealed by a loving God to us as a warning, so that we might escape the consequences of sin and unbelief through Jesus Christ. It is not we who teach the truth about hell who are lacking in love and mercy, but it is those theologians and Bible teachers who fail to teach what God’s Word says about hell that are the ones lacking in love and mercy. It is Jesus Himself, who in love gave Himself on the cross to rescue us from hell, who has warned about hell more than any other. Most of what we know about hell has come directly from Jesus’ own loving lips.

We need to remember the words of the prophet Ezekiel: **“If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman’s hand. ... When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die!’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul”** (Ezekiel 33:6-9).

Where is hell located? We think of heaven as being above and hell as being beneath. But it is not to be expected that anyone from earth will ever be able to find either heaven or hell by space exploration or by digging down deep in the earth. All that is necessary for us to know is that heaven and hell are realities, and that after this world comes to an end, we shall be residing, body and soul, in either heaven or hell. Jesus distinguished between heaven and hell by speaking of those on the inside, sitting down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and those on the outside, **“cast out into outer darkness”** (Matthew 8:11-12). In Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man says that he is in **“this place of torment”** (Luke 16:28).

When Jesus’ disciples were waiting for the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the apostle Peter said of Judas Iscariot that he went **“to his own place”** (Acts 1:25). That place was hell. The apostle Paul spoke **“of those under the earth”** (Philippians 2:10), no doubt referring to the devil and his army of evil angels (demons). The apostle Peter said of those who died in the flood that they were **“spirits in prison”** (1 Peter 3:19). Lastly, Jesus revealed to John in the book of Revelation that impenitent unbelievers will forever be on the outside, rather than being on the inside with God and His saints, who have the right to the tree of life in the New Jerusalem. Jesus said: **“Outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie”** (Revelation 22:14-15). By “dogs” Jesus no doubt means false teachers, as in Philippians 3:2.

The Old Testament Hebrew word that is sometimes translated as “hell” in English translations is the word *Sheol* (שְׁאוֹל). Some translations use various English words to translate this word. Some prefer to simply retain the Hebrew expression and leave the term *Sheol* untranslated. A word study of *Sheol* shows that the word is sometimes used to refer to punishment, to death, or simply to the grave. The context in which the word is used usually makes the meaning clear.

The New Testament Greek word that corresponds to *Sheol* is the word *Hades* (ᾍδης). This word also may mean death or the grave, as well as hell. Another word that is used for hell in the New Testament is the word *Gehenna* (γέεννα). In Acts 2:27 the Greek word *Hades* is used as a translation of the Hebrew word *Sheol* in Psalm 16. In Psalm 16:10 we read: **“You will not leave My soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.”** In Acts 2:27 we read: **“You will not leave My soul in Hades,**

nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.” David wrote this psalm as a prophecy of His Son, the Messiah, the Son of David. In this context *Sheol* and *Hades* refer to the grave, and the term “soul” does not refer to the soul of Jesus as distinct from His body, but simply refers to the person of Jesus. Jesus died and was buried. He went to His grave, His tomb. But He was not left there to rot, as would happen to others. In fact, God did not permit David’s Son, His own Son, even to begin to see any corruption, and on the third day He rose again from the dead, as is indicated by the next verse: **“You have made known to Me the way of life; You will make Me full of joy in Your presence”** (Acts 2:28).

Through Christ’s death and resurrection and through the work of the Holy Spirit in causing us to trust in Christ, we have the only way that is possible to escape the awful fate of eternal death. Now is the time of grace for all sinners to listen to Moses and the prophets, as well as Jesus and His apostles, and hang on to their words of life before the day of judgment comes and our time of grace will have come to an end. There are two ways in which our time of grace comes to an end: the day of our physical death or the day when Christ returns, whichever day comes first for us. Obviously, we need to be ready for that day.

Questions

1. What are the two possible eternal destinies for human beings?
2. What are some of the ways in which hell is described in the Bible?
3. What is meant by the second death?
4. List several false teachings with respect to hell and the groups that teach them.
5. Whose fault is it that some people go to hell?
6. Why can we say that hell was not prepared for any human beings?
7. Why is it an act of love on our part to warn people about the reality of hell?
8. Who has revealed to us the most details about hell?
9. Name some Hebrew and Greek words that are sometimes translated as “hell”.
10. How did Jesus win for us an escape from the hell we deserve?
11. What is the Holy Spirit’s desire for all human beings?
12. How does the Holy Spirit carry out this desire?



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.9 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

Eternal Life

In our presentation of the doctrine of eschatology or the last things we have saved the best for the last. It is our privilege to present what the Bible teaches about eternal life. This is the great and final goal of every believer in Christ.

Eternal happiness in the presence of God in heaven is beyond our full comprehension. Jesus Himself used the simple word **“life”** when He spoke of it. He said: **“Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it”** (Matthew 7:14). **“It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire”** (Matthew 18:8; also Matthew 18:9). At the close of His description of the final judgment Jesus said: **“These will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”** (Matthew 25:46).

Jesus’ apostle John recorded many of Jesus’ references to eternal life, as when He said to Nicodemus: **“God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”** (John 3:16). Jesus said: **“He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment”** (John 5:24). On the Last Day these believers will **“come forth”** from their graves and participate in **“the resurrection of life”** (John 5:29). This is our goal, as Jesus said: **“Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you”** (John 6:27). **“This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life”** (John 6:40). **“Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life”** (John 6:54). With these words Jesus meant that everyone who eats His flesh by trusting in His flesh and everyone who drinks His blood by trusting in His blood will enjoy eternal life. In its context this passage is not speaking about the Lord’s Supper, which Jesus instituted at a later time. Jesus Himself made that clear by saying on the same occasion: **“He who believes in Me has everlasting life”** (John 6:47). In His prayer on the night of His arrest Jesus said to His Father: **“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent”** (John 17:3).

The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles also used the terms **“life”** and **“eternal life”** and **“everlasting life”** when they spoke about the future destiny of God’s family of believers. See Isaiah 26:19; Ezekiel 33:11; Daniel 12:1-3; Amos 5:4-6; Acts 13:48; Romans 1:17; Romans 6:8, 23; 1 Timothy 6:12; 1 John 4:9.

Jesus also pictured eternal life as a happy place and a truly happy home with truly happy experiences. Jesus said we have reason to be glad already now because we can look forward to a happy heaven: **“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven”** (Matthew 5:12). Jesus promised that following Him would result in having **“treasure in heaven”** (Mark 10:21). Jesus called heaven **“an everlasting home”** (Luke 16:9) and **“Abraham’s bosom”** (Luke 16:22). Jesus told the repentant thief crucified next to Him: **“Today you will be with Me in Paradise”** (Luke 23:43). Jesus assured His apostles on the night of His arrest: **“In My Father’s house are many mansions”** (dwellings) (John 14:2).

Jesus often used the expression **“kingdom of heaven”** (Matthew 5:20; Matthew 7:21; Matthew 8:11) or **“kingdom of God”** (Matthew 21:31; Luke 13:29) or **“kingdom”** (Matthew 25:34; Luke 12:32) to picture the riches of our eternal home. This means eating and drinking at Jesus’ table (Luke 22:30) with

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Luke 13:29), as at a wedding banquet (Matthew 25:10). Jesus concluded His parable of the tares and the wheat with this amazing promise: **“Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father”** (Matthew 13:43). The apostle John was told: **“Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb”** (Revelation 19:9).

Being in heaven means being **“glorified together”** with Jesus (Romans 8:17). **“The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us”** (Romans 8:18). **“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory”** (2 Corinthians 4:17). Heaven is our **“inheritance”** (Galatians 3:18) **“in the kingdom of Christ and of God”** (Ephesians 5:5). The apostle Peter described heaven as **“an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you”** (1 Peter 1:4).

Very often this final destiny for believers is called **“salvation”** (1 Thessalonians 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 1:14; Hebrews 9:28), **“the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory”** (2 Timothy 2:10), **“the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time”** (1 Peter 1:5), or **“the end of your faith – the salvation of your souls”** (1 Peter 1:9).

In the letter to the Hebrews we find expressions such as these: **“a better, that is, a heavenly country”** (Hebrews 11:16), **“My rest”** (Hebrews 3:11), **“His rest”** (Hebrews 4:1), and **“a rest for the people of God”** (Hebrews 4:9). The contrast between what we have now and what we will have then is expressed by these words: **“Here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come”** (Hebrews 13:14), which will indeed continue forever.

No doubt the greatest blessing of eternal life is that we shall be with God. The promise is recorded in various places in the Old and New Testaments that God will be our God, and we shall be His people. In the new heaven and the new earth this promise will be totally fulfilled in every way. **“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with them, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God”** (Revelation 21:3). This was Job’s faith: **“This I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”** (Job 19:26-27). This was also David’s faith: **“You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore”** (Psalm 16:11). This was true first of all of David’s Son, Jesus Christ, of whom David was prophesying. But it is true also for us because of Christ.

Jesus said in His sixth beatitude: **“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”** (Matthew 5:8). In this life we have our allotted share of pain and grief and misery, as well as ignorance and imperfections of all kinds. **“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known”** (1 Corinthians 13:12). **“We know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is”** (1 John 3:2). **“There shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads”** (Revelation 22:3-4).

Most of the descriptions we are given concerning eternal life do not tell us exactly what it will be like, but rather tell us the things that will be lacking in heaven, such things as evil, sin, temptation, and all the consequences of sin, such as pain and grief and sickness and death. The prophet Isaiah declared by the Spirit of the Lord: **“He will destroy on this mountain the surface of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken”** (Isaiah 25:7-8). **“They shall neither hunger nor thirst, neither heat nor sun shall strike them; for He who has mercy on them will lead them; even by the springs of water He will guide them”** (Isaiah 49:10). **“The former troubles are forgotten. ... For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. ... I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in My people; the voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying. ... They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain”** (Isaiah 65:16-25).

Eternal life will be without the many troubles and distresses of the present time. Creation itself will be delivered from its present corruption. The apostle Paul has told us: **"The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. ... The creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God"** (Romans 8:18-21). **"Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory"** (2 Corinthians 4:17).

At the present time we must still **"wrestle ... against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places"** (Ephesians 6:12). But in our eternal future all the corrupt human authorities will have no power. The devil himself and all his hosts will have no power. Death itself will have no power. For it is written: **"Then comes the end, when He (Christ) delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death"** (1 Corinthians 15:24-26). **"Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory.' The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"** (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

Jesus' last revelation to John summarizes all the evil things that will be lacking in the glorious life to come. Suffering, imprisonment, tribulation will be no more, but rather **"the crown of life"** (Revelation 2:10). Those who have **"washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb ... shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"** (Revelation 7:14-17). **"God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away"** (Revelation 21:3-4). **"There shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie"** (Revelation 21:27). **"There shall be no more curse"** (Revelation 22:3). **"There shall be no night there"** (Revelation 22:5). **"Outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie"** (Revelation 22:15).

Enjoying eternal life involves being able to see God. Job confidently affirmed: **"I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another"** (Job 19:26-27). The presence of God is what makes heaven heaven. Asaph cried out: **"Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You"** (Psalm 73:25). **"My people shall be satisfied with My goodness, says the LORD"** (Jeremiah 31:14).

Peter, James, and John saw the glory of Jesus, the Son of God, when He was transfigured before their eyes on the high mountain. **"His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light"** (Matthew 17:2). Jesus has promised this to of His believers, saying: **"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"** (Matthew 5:8). Jesus said that the **"angels"** of the little ones **"always see the face of My Father who is in heaven"** (Matthew 18:10), and that is what is promised to us also. We shall **"enter into the joy"** of our Lord, as in Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25:21, 23).

The apostle Peter tells us that **"when His glory is revealed"**, we shall be **"glad with exceeding joy"** (1 Peter 4:13). We shall be presented **"faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy"** (Jude 24). In his vision of the life to come the apostle John saw **"a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb"** (Revelation 7:9), praising, thanking, honoring, and worshiping God. It is written: **"When He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is"** (1 John 3:2).

The question has often been raised whether the saints will know one another in heaven and whether we shall be able to converse with one another and with the angels and with God Himself, or any of the Persons of God. John says that the goal of his testimony about Jesus was so that we who believe in Him **"may have fellowship"** with the apostles, and **"with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ"** (1

John 1:3). This would seem to mean at least this much: that we would have the same kind of intimate fellowship that Jesus had with His apostles on earth, and no doubt much more.

Jesus said that **“many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven”** (Matthew 8:11; also Luke 13:38-39). When we sit down with others at a banquet, we usually enjoy conversation with them. Peter, James, and John recognized that it was Moses and Elijah who were talking with Jesus on the high mountain, and those two prophets no doubt heard Peter’s desire to set up three tents so that this wonderful moment could be prolonged. Staying in the glorious presence of Jesus was not possible at that time, but will it not be possible in eternity? Believers in Jesus on the Last Day will **“meet the Lord in the air”** and from that moment on **“shall always be with the Lord”** (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

The joys of heaven will be perfect, sinless, uninterrupted, and endless. **“We, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”** (2 Peter 3:13). We shall **“be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust”** (2 Peter 1:4). Our inheritance is **“incorruptible and undefiled and ... does not fade away”** (1 Peter 1:4). Our inheritance is **“eternal”** (Hebrews 9:15). Our salvation is **“eternal”** (Hebrews 5:9). **“We have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”** (2 Corinthians 5:1). Jesus promised His disciples: **“Your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you”** (John 16:22). Jesus called our future residence **“an everlasting home”** (Luke 16:9). **“For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before Me,” says the LORD, ‘so shall your descendants and your name remain”** (Isaiah 66:22).

We always need to remember that all of these heavenly blessings are gifts from our God, won for us by the obedience of our Savior Jesus Christ and His suffering and death in our stead and behalf. Eternal life is not given to us as a reward of merit. Even our faith in Christ is God’s gift to us, created by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. God’s law curses us all, for we have not kept it. **“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us”** (Galatians 3:13). **“By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Since **“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”** (Romans 10:17), we who are still living in this world of sin have been given the privilege of being God’s instruments to bring others to faith in Jesus Christ through our use of the Word of God. The apostle Paul longed to bring the Gospel of Christ to as many as possible, so that he **“might have some fruit”** among them (Romans 1:13). What is more wonderful than to be a participant in Gospel work that results in the conversion of unbelievers to Christ and an increase in the population of the new heavens and the new earth! Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **“I know that when I come to you, I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ”** (Romans 15:29). We also can go to others with the blessing of the Gospel of Christ, preaching the Gospel to every creature as authorized by our Lord and Savior (Mark 16:15).

What God said to His prophet Ezekiel He says to us all: **“Receive into your heart all My words that I speak to you, and hear with your ears. And go, ... speak to them and tell them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD”** (Ezekiel 3:10-11). When someone is in danger of losing his faith by continuing in some sin, we can bring the Word of God to that person. Jesus says: **“If he hears you, you have gained your brother”** (Matthew 18:15). We want to help our fellow-believers in Christ to continue as believers, and we want those who are on the outside to come in and enjoy the blessings of Christ and His Gospel with us.

What greater accomplishment can there be in life than to be a participant in the grand mission announced by Jesus after His resurrection from the dead: **“Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem”** (Luke 24:47). There are many ways to participate: preaching, teaching, supporting the preaching by assistance, prayer, and financial support, talking to neighbors, giving the example of a Christian life, watching for opportunities to share the Gospel **“in season and out of season”** (2 Timothy 4:2).

Consider how people are given an inheritance in heaven. The apostle Paul was sent to the unbelieving Gentile world **“to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me”** (Acts 26:18). What tool was Paul given for this work? The means of grace, the Gospel of Christ in Word and Sacrament. Paul wrote to Timothy: **“Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you”** (1 Timothy 4:16). There is an urgency in doing these things, for everyone’s time of grace comes to an end when he dies. **“It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment”** (Hebrews 9:27). Since faith in Christ must be acquired in this life, since there is no opportunity for conversion after death, we are all urged to participate in the grand project of preaching the Gospel of Christ to the world while we still have the opportunity to do so.

Our Lord has given us certain promises to encourage us to let the light of the Gospel shine wherever we are. The Lord said to His prophet Daniel: **“Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever”** (Daniel 12:3). In Jesus’ parable of the talents the man who gained five more talents was told: **“Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord”** (Matthew 25:21). The same thing was said to the man who gained ten talents with his ten talents; in addition, a talent was taken away from the man who wasted his one talent. The master said: **“Take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents”** (Matthew 25:28). Jesus said a similar thing in the parable of the ten minas (Luke 19:11-27). The one who gained ten minas with his mina was told: **“Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities”** (Luke 19:17). The one whose mina gained nothing was told: **“Take the mina from him, and give it to him who has ten minas”** (Luke 19:24). Jesus concluded: **“To every one who has will be given; and from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him”** (Luke 19:26). We are to use what God has given us in the service of the Gospel.

The Christian worker needs to use good materials in his spiritual building. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire”** (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). The reward for good workmanship will be the presence of believers in heaven because of our working with good materials, such as the means of grace, which Jesus instructed us to use. The apostle Paul used the best materials possible. Therefore, he looked forward to seeing his converts on the last day. He wrote to the Thessalonians: **“What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy”** (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20).

Paul’s aim in being the Lord’s missionary to the Gentiles was very clear. He wrote to the Corinthians: **“Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more. ... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the Gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with you”** (1 Corinthians 9:19, 22-23). To Timothy he wrote: **“I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory”** (2 Timothy 2:10).

Eternal life – that is our goal. Eternal life – that is the goal we desire for all others. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to reach this goal. Participating in the Gospel ministry in the ways God has appointed for us is the only way we can help others attain this goal.

Questions

1. What do you understand by the term “eternal life”?
2. What are some of the other terms the Bible uses for eternal life?
3. Prove that the Bible teaches that believers in Christ will see God.
4. List some of the things that will not be found in heaven.
5. Why will Satan not be able to disturb us in heaven?
6. Why does it seem likely that we will know one another in heaven?
7. In what ways will the new heavens and new earth be different from the current ones?
8. What must we always remember about our eternal salvation?
9. How can we participate in bringing others to eternal life?
10. What makes the goal of eternal life a greater goal than all others?