

The End and The New Heavens, New Earth

By Bobby Harrington (End Times Class)

We will all die. Every human being must face this hard truth. It is a dark cloud that hovers over our lives. The Christian, however, knows the great mystery that others do not know: God has wonderful plans for us in the next life.

The purpose of our lives is to be in relationship with God now and in eternity. This is the purpose for which Christ came into this world. This is why Jesus Christ inaugurated God's kingdom. Through the events surrounding Jesus' earthly ministry, the time of the end began (Hebrews 1:2; 1 Peter 1:20; Acts 2:17).ⁱ King Jesus is the king, he has a law (Word), he has a people, and he reigns over them through his Holy Spirit.

In this chapter, we want to look at the concept of the Promised Land in Jesus' kingdom. The consummation of the end, when God's kingdom plan will be fully realized, lies in the future. The ultimate land of *milk and honey* is God's promise of new heaven

and a new earth. The teaching on the new heaven and new earth will help us to see how God plans to restore the original experience Adam and Eve shared, but now even more richly with countless numbers of people.

There are six phases that provide an outline to the events occurring between an individual's death and history's culmination in the new heaven and new earth.ⁱⁱ The full biblical teaching on these "last things" would also include additional topics that we have already discussed in the End Times Class. I will describe the six main phases through which the dead pass on the journey to the new heaven and new earth, because these are the doctrines central to the biblical message as a whole. They are also very helpful to understand when loved ones die, so that we have a sense of where they are in death and where they will be going.

Phase One – Passing to the Realm of the Dead

The Bible indicates that all people who die go to one of the two-part waiting places for the dead, where they will be conscious in a soul state, either *Hades* or *Paradise*.ⁱⁱⁱ These two places are the result of the temporary, but immediate judgment at death by God. To be sure, the quality of this temporary judgment is set and will be confirmed at the end of human history, at the final judgment. But these two places are waiting places. And a chasm has been fixed; a person cannot move from Hades to Paradise or Paradise to Hades (Luke 16:26).

Positively, think of the analogy of a couple who go on a luxury cruise to a tropical island as a retirement celebration *before* they settle into a new home in a beautiful retirement village in Florida. Or negatively, think of someone who commits a horrendous murder and is put in prison to await a trial *before* they will surely be sent to prison for life. Each person experiences an immediate foretaste of the final destination to which he or she is moving.

Those who had active faith in Jesus Christ in this life move immediately to Paradise in death. When Jesus was crucified on the cross, there was a thief who was being crucified with him. The thief placed his faith in Christ right there, on the cross. He asked Jesus to remember him in his death. He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).

The book of Revelation describes something similar when it pictures those who have died and are waiting for human history to come to an end. In the book of Revelation, they are constantly praising God and being blessed by him, in paradise, awaiting the return of Christ and the final judgment. They are aware of injustice on the earth and so they cry out to God. Using symbolic language, the writer of Revelation describes their plea for justice:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the

inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been (Revelation 6:9-11).

Various other Scriptures in the Bible point to the transition to paradise and the presence of the Lord in death. For example, the apostle Paul simply stated that to be away from the body was to be “at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8; see also Acts 7:59; 20:37-38; 2 Corinthians 12:2; Luke 9:29-36; 16:22-23; and 23:34).

In this same way, Hades is the destination of those who did not receive the grace of Jesus Christ. This is the place of punishment and torment. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus describes the state of the rich man. It simply says, “The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment . . .” (Luke 16:22-23). It is a chilling description. The Bible teaches that this place of torment is also where the angels who rebelled against God are being held, waiting for the final judgment (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6).

Those who dwell in the realm of the dead are waiting for the end of human history as we know it. The Bible teaches that this will happen when Jesus Christ returns to this world. His return is the single most important event in the future.

Phase Two - The Second Coming of Jesus Christ

When Jesus Christ returns, human history as we know it and time for those living in the realm of the dead will come to an end. What we mean by the second coming of Christ is that one day soon, the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven in the first century, will return. There are at least four descriptions that will characterize his second coming.

First, it will be a visible event. People will know Jesus has returned because they will be able to see him. In Revelation 1:7, we read,

“Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all the peoples of the earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen.

Elsewhere, Jesus himself said that all the nations of the earth will mourn when they “will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26). This event will be as visible to people as lightning in the sky.

At that time if anyone says to you, “Look, here is the Christ!” or, “There he is!” do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you ahead of time. So if anyone tells you, “There he is, out in the wilderness,” do not go out; or, “Here he is, in the inner rooms,” do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:23-27).

This is also confirmed by a comparison with his ascension to heaven. When Jesus left his disciples to return to heaven, he went up into a cloud before their eyes (Acts 1:9). While the disciples were still looking intently up into the sky, two angels appeared to them and said: “Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

The second characteristic of the second coming is that it will be sudden and unexpected. People will be caught off guard. The imagery that is often used to describe the second coming is that of a thief who robs people in the night when they are not expecting it.

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. . . . Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him (Matthew 24:36, 42-44).

The apostle Paul described the suddenness in a similar way:

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3).

By this we realize that the exact time of Christ’s second coming is unknowable.^{iv} Though numerous people have speculated as to the exact time and date of his return in the past, and numerous people will continue to do so in the future, those who follow the Bible know that the exact timing is impossible to know.^v

The third characteristic is that the second coming of Jesus will bring him glory and honor. His power will silence all opposition. When Christ came the first time, it was in great humility. He was born in a cave to very poor and humble parents (Luke 2:7, 24). He lived out his childhood as a refugee and under great suspicion (Matthew 2:13-23; 13:53-58). As an adult, he was mocked as a glutton, drunkard, and one working with the prince of demons (Matthew 10:25; 11:19). Then, in his death, he was abandoned by everyone, and he became the object of insults (Matthew 27:32-40).

But when Christ returns the second time, it will be in great glory. Every knee will bow in heaven and on earth (Philippians 2:10). Every tongue will confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the father (Philippians 2:11). He will be counted worthy to receive honor, glory, and praise as “king of kings and lord of lords” (Revelation 19:16). He will destroy death (1 Corinthians 15:53ff), and he will cast Satan into the lake of fire and brimstone to be punished forever and ever (Revelation 20:10). This is why Jesus said

that “at that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26). This is why the Bible says we look forward to “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

The fourth characteristic is important to all who have lost a loved one who trusted in Jesus Christ. The second coming will mean the gathering of those Christians who have previously died, together with those Christians who are alive on the earth when Jesus Christ returns. We will all be gathered together when he returns. Firstly, his followers who have died and are in paradise *will come with Jesus*, and then, secondly, his followers who are living on earth when he returns will rise up, to meet them in the clouds. From that point on, both groups will go to be with him forever.

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

The second coming will result in the *fulfillment* of hope, but also the *end* of hope for non-believers. This is why the second coming has been delayed so long—to increase opportunity for unbelievers to come to Christ. When Christ returns, the opportunities for repentance will be over and unbelievers will be left without hope. Because of this, God is waiting, hoping that more people will repent (2 Peter 3:1-9).

Phase Three - The Resurrection of the Dead

The second coming of Jesus will bring about the resurrection of all people in new bodies. The Bible teaches the resurrection of two groups: the righteous and the unrighteous.

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever (Daniel 12:2-3).

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. ²⁵Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live (John 5:24-25).

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned (John 5:28-29).

The resurrection of the bodies of the righteous and the unrighteous will occur after the second coming of Jesus. As the apostle Paul said, “The Lord himself will come down from heaven . . . and the dead in Christ will rise (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

For Christians, the resurrection of the dead will be an exciting event. This is because Christians will be given new spiritual bodies. Our bodies will not be made of mere flesh and blood; rather, they will be imperishable, glorious, and powerful. The apostle Paul described it this way:

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown in a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

Paul goes on to describe how it will happen:

I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality (1 Corinthians 15:50-53).

Our bodies will be ideally suited for an eternal life of intimate communion with God.

Phase Four - The Final Judgment

After the resurrection of the dead, all humans who have ever lived will stand before God for a final judgment of their lives. The final judgment is described several times in the Bible. It is a sober yet vital reality to which all of our lives are moving.

First, the final judgment will be universal. All people who have ever lived will appear before God. This includes non-Christians and Christians. As the apostle Paul

said, “We will all stand before God’s judgment seat,” and “Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (Romans 14:10-12). This knowledge spurs us on toward love and good works (2 Corinthians 5:10). This is also why Christians seek to persuade non-Christians about the grace of Christ—one day they too will stand before God in judgment, and without Christ they have no hope (2 Corinthians 5:11).

Second, the final judgment will be comprehensive. The book of Revelation describes the final judgment graphically:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

The final judgment will be an evaluation of everything we have done. This concept is also taught elsewhere: Paul said that God would judge everyone according to their deeds (Romans 2:6). Peter said that God judges everyone’s deeds impartially (1 Peter 1:17), and Jesus himself even said that on the day of judgment everyone will have to give an answer for every careless word they have spoken (Matthew 12:36). This is not to say that salvation is by works. Salvation is always by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). As theologian Robert Mounce says, “The issue is not salvation by works but works as the irrefutable evidence of a man’s actual relationship with God. Man is saved by faith, but faith is inevitably revealed by the works it produces.”^{vi}

Those who will spend eternity with God have their names written in the book of life. Those who do not will be punished in the eternal “lake of fire.” The book of life is referred to elsewhere in the Bible; it is a listing of those who will be saved (Daniel 12:1; Revelation 21:27, etc.). These people approach the final judgment with concern for the way that they have lived, but not with fear. They know that they will have to give an account of their lives to God, but they also know that through Jesus, God will declare that they are forgiven from all sins and acquitted through the blood of Christ (1 John 1:7-2:2; 4:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9, etc.).

Thirdly, it is important to note that the final judgment will be fair. As Peter put it, God will judge each person’s work impartially (1 Peter 1:17). The apostle Paul described the fairness of the final judgment this way:

God “will repay each person according to what they have done.” To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the

Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism (Romans 2:6-11).

True Christians are those who seek good (and glory, honor, and immortality), and they will be rewarded. Those who reject the truth and follow evil (i.e. unbelievers) will experience anger, wrath, trouble, and distress. God will treat people fairly, according to how they have dealt with God and other people.

Lastly, the judgment is absolutely final. Scripture nowhere gives any indication of a second chance, of purgatory (where you spend a certain amount of time being punished before being released), or of any other way for lost people to get back into a right relationship with God after death.^{vii} Once people die, they have set themselves on a course for all eternity.

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (Hebrews 9:27-28).

Therefore, the Bible puts a strong emphasis on the fact that people must turn to God now, before it is too late (Hebrews 3:12-14). In the words of Jesus, there are only two roads in eternity, and the one that leads to eternal life is narrow (Matthew 7:13-14). It is a road that people must choose in this life, for in the afterlife it will be too late.

Phase Five – Hell, the Place of Final Punishment

These days, few people have difficulty believing in a God of love, but our readiness to believe in a holy, just, and righteous God who punishes people for their disobedience and sin is another matter. Yet, if we take the Bible as our guide—and we must not shrink back at this point—it clearly teaches that God will hold the unrighteous accountable, and they will enter into hell, the place of eternal punishment.

Before we consider the biblical passages in detail, it will be helpful for us to stop and briefly consider God's nature. Love is a dominant characteristic of God, but it is only one of God's attributes. And the Bible's definition of love differs from the lenient, affirming type of "love" that people often want from God. If this form of "love" were the only consideration, then Adam and Eve would never have been banished from the Garden of Eden. God would have never sent the flood, and God would never have punished anyone in history. To understand God properly, we must recognize that his love cannot be considered without also giving due recognition to his holiness, justice, and righteousness. God has no choice but to punish those who sin. God must be just and fair—and give the proper punishment for evil actions. To do less than this would require God to be less than who he is. To impose punishment of this sort in eternity is the only option for a just and holy God.

The word often used to describe this punishment is “hell.” English Bibles translate various Greek words into our English word “hell.” In the teachings of Jesus, the word used is most commonly a translation of the Greek word “Gehenna.” Most likely, Gehenna was a valley southeast of Jerusalem where, in Christ’s time, garbage, dead bodies, and other refuse was thrown. The imagery that this place brought to the minds of the early disciples served as a symbol of the eternal state of the enemies of God. It was just as frightening then as it is now. There are many aspects to the biblical teaching on hell, but for our purposes we will restrict ourselves to four.

First, as far as the biblical evidence indicates, hell is the destination of all who did not trust Christ in this life. The judgment of unbelievers in eternity will be a disclosure of the ramifications of the decisions they made in this life. Accordingly, unbelievers have not given their allegiance to God’s Son (John 3:18), and God’s wrath remains on them because of their sins (John 3:36). The Bible teaches that those who do not possess the Son of God do not have life (1 John 5:12). Unbelievers will be punished according to their sins, and for this they have no one to blame but themselves (Romans 2:5ff). The Bible makes it abundantly clear, however, that God doesn’t want anyone to be lost (2 Peter 3:9). What God really wants is for all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). But God can only save people who turn in faith to Christ.

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10a).

Theologian Adrio Konig puts everything into perspective:

God . . . determines to abandon the unbeliever, who refuses his help and will not tread the path back to happiness opened by God in his goodness. In this way God remains the king, the sovereign Lord, but the lost have no one but themselves to blame for their condition. This is in complete harmony with the New Testament preaching of damnation, according to which the damned are in every case themselves responsible for their state, never able to “answer God back” (Romans 9:20).^{viii}

Either our sins are taken away through Christ’s sacrifice, or we must go into eternity to pay the penalty ourselves. It appears from studying the Bible that these are the only two options left to us.^{ix}

Second, the fate of the unrighteous in eternity will be worse than any fate that can be experienced in this life. There are situations in this life often described as “hell on earth.” But none of these situations, as bad as they may be, are comparable to hell. Jesus often warned people about hell with words such as these:

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell (Matthew 18:8-9).

I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him (Luke 12:4-5).

To be maimed, crippled, or killed cannot compare with the horror of hell. Jesus hoped that this kind of warning would cause people to seriously consider their lives and repent. In the book of Revelation, John uses graphic language to describe the fate of the unrighteous. He says that their place is the fiery lake of burning sulfur—where the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever (Revelation 14:8-12; 20:11-15; 21:8).

Third, the quality of punishment for the unrighteous in eternity will correspond to the quality of blessings for the righteous. Those who are blessed will be blessed for eternity; those who are punished will receive a punishment lasting for eternity. Jesus pointed this out in his discussion on the final judgment in Matthew 25. He compared the righteous to sheep, who dedicated themselves to loving one another, and then he compared the unrighteous to goats, who did not. At the end of the parable, Jesus announced the final verdict for the two groups of people. Both went into eternity according to their actions, but they went in two entirely different directions.

Then he will say to those on his left [the unloving “goats”], “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me. . . . Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life (Matthew 25:41-43, 46).

The Bible often speaks of the destiny of the righteous as “eternal life” (John 3:16), and the destiny of the unrighteous as “everlasting destruction” or “eternal punishment” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). In Mark 9, Jesus described hell, using imagery out of Isaiah, as the place where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (9:48). In contrast to the promise of blessings that last forever, Jesus warned the unrighteous that the consequences of their punishment would also last forever.^x

Lastly, the Bible teaches that there will be different degrees of punishment in hell. All the unrighteous will be separated from God for eternity and punished, but not all the unrighteous will be punished to the same degree. As we mentioned earlier, the Bible teaches that God will be fair in his judgment (Romans 2:5ff; 1 Peter 1:17). God will punish people according to how they have lived, and some people have lived worse lives than others. God knows everything about our lives and will judge us accordingly. Some

people have had more opportunity than others. God will consider all of these factors. Jesus put it this way:

The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked (Luke 12:47-48).

This also explains why Jesus said that unrighteous religious leaders who make a show of their position and mistreat widows will be “punished most severely” (Mark 12:40). And it also explains why Jesus said that it would be more bearable for the people of Sodom on the day of judgment than it would be for the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida (Matthew 11:20-24). God is fair; he will punish people according to what they have done and what they deserve.

The Bible teaches that there are eternal consequences to our actions. Eternal punishment is an eternal state of pain that negatively parallels the joys of eternal life. It is the final place of universal justice—where everyone gets exactly what they deserve. The horror of this truth should lead us to turn to God, who wants to shower us instead with love and the joys of eternal life.

Phase Six – New Heaven and New Earth

We were created for an eternal relationship with God. Our ultimate hopes, dreams, and desires can only find their true fulfillment in the eternal kingdom with God after death. When the Bible speaks of our lives in eternity after death, it speaks of a glorious existence—a close intimate relationship with God.

Christians often speak of life after death as a life in heaven. To a large degree, this is true because that is where our citizenship is held (Philippians 3:20), where our hopes are stored (Colossians 1:5), and where our inheritance is kept (1 Peter 1:4-5). In the Bible, the term “heaven” can mean many things, but it mostly refers to the abode of God.^{xi} So, in this sense, it is biblical to think of life after death as life in heaven, even though this concept falls short of the full biblical picture.

The biblical focus is that God will create an entirely new mode of existence for his people where he will dwell among them in “the new heaven and the new earth.”^{xii} We can better understand this destination and the eternal life of the faithful with God in eternity if we grasp four related concepts.

The first and most important concept is that God himself will personally and intimately dwell among us in eternity.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:3).

The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 22:3a-5).

The real joy in eternity is that we will be God’s sacred dwelling place. We will experience his full and direct presence.

In this way, all the hopes and dreams of the Old Testament (where God wanted to have a people to dwell among; see Exodus 19:5-6) and the New Testament (where God, in the form of his Spirit lives in Christians; see 1 Corinthians 6:19) find their ultimate fulfillment. God will no longer dwell in the physical Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and temple as in the Old Testament (1 Kings 6:20). I. Howard Marshall puts it this way:

The fellowship between man and his Creator, which was broken by sin, is now fully restored. God’s presence among his people is no longer confined to his temple, as in the imagery of the Old Testament (but see also Isaiah 57:15), or to his unseen presence among believers (Matthew 18:20); he is visibly in the midst of them, and they can see his face. Both the Father and the Son are the light of the new Jerusalem, and the Spirit of God summons men to enter the city (Revelation 22:17). Thus, finally, redeemed men and women enter into that fellowship of love which binds Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together, and the holy love of God becomes a final and full and victorious reality (1 Corinthians 13:13). God is at last all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28).^{xiii}

The original goal of creation will be fulfilled in eternity. God will be our God and we will be his people.

A second concept focuses on our dwelling place—the new heaven and new earth. Creation itself has been subjected to frustration through the fall (Romans 8:19ff), and in eternity all things will be re-created. God’s people have always looked forward to a renewed life where toil, difficulty, and death will be removed. This was the future for which the Israelites longed (Amos 9:11-15; Isaiah 11:6-9; etc.).^{xiv} Now, in the new heaven and the new earth, all of the hopes of God’s people will see their ultimate fulfillment. Note the following passages that refer to the new heaven and new earth:

See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create (Isaiah 65:17-18a).

But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13).

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away (Revelation 21:1a).

This existence will not be subject to decay (Revelation 22:3-5), and we will live in new spiritual bodies—bodies that are powerful, imperishable, and glorious (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

A third concept is that we will live without the curse of the fall.^{xv} We will be God’s Holy City, the new Jerusalem, and the bride of Christ. Because God will dwell among us, we will live through eternity in sheer happiness. We will not experience pain, crying, mourning or death, for everything will be made new.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:3b-5a).

We will not be subject to Satan (Revelation 20:10), demons, false prophets, or ungodly governments. We will be a people living in absolute and eternal security (Revelation 21:10-17). No one who has rejected God and embraced evil will be allowed to join us (Revelation 21:8, 27; 22:15). We will be constantly rejoicing with each other and praising God. We will experience the peace and joy of God’s presence and God’s rest throughout eternity (Hebrews 4:1, 6, 9-11).

A fourth concept is that eternal life will be similar to life in the Garden of Eden. We will have access to the tree of life, and this access will ensure endless living and endless healing. The tree of life itself will bear fruit all the time, for all the people. Everything will be made new.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1–2).

We will experience a Garden of Eden-like existence” and God himself will ensure that it will never end. Nothing will ever destroy it.

In summary, we look forward to eternal life because we know that it will bring with it the fullness of a close intimate relationship with God, where God will actually dwell among us, as we live in a new heaven and new earth. We will experience the bliss of sheer blessed happiness in a Garden of Eden-like state. It will be a state of ultimate peace, joy, and love—the ultimate fulfillment of our lives.

Conclusion

The last days began when Jesus Christ inaugurated the kingdom. And we live now in these days, looking to the horizon for the consummation of the kingdom. We look forward to the end because we know it will mean the realization of our deepest and fondest utopian dreams. Here are six statements summarizing what the Bible teaches about the end:

1. When people die, they go to the realm of the dead.
2. Human history will be brought to an end when Jesus returns. His return will be a visible, unexpected, glorious, and rewarding event.
3. When Jesus returns, everyone who has ever lived will be resurrected from the dead.
4. Everyone will stand before God for the final judgment, a universal, comprehensive, fair, and final assessment of each person's life.
5. The unrighteous will face eternal punishment where unbelievers will experience the horrid fullness of God's righteous punishment for sin.
6. Those who trusted and followed Christ will enter into the fullness of God's kingdom and eternal life—living in the intimate presence of God, without the curse, in a new heaven and new earth, in Garden of Eden-like existence.

ⁱ Adrio Konig discusses the implications of this teaching in his book, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989).

ⁱⁱ For a full and complete discussion of material contained in this chapter, consult Anthony Hoekema's book, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979).

ⁱⁱⁱ See George Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1978) and Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and The Future* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979).

^{iv} This is not to say that we cannot know the season. In this regard, see 2 Thessalonians 2, Luke 21, and the book of Revelation.

^vFor a good historical survey of the various attempts to set a date, see Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1958), 334-341. For a good roundtable discussion on all of the issues about the end times, see John Walvoord, Gleason Archer, Alan F. Johnson, Anthony A. Hoekema, John Jefferson, and Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Our Future Hope: Eschatology and Its Role in the Church," *Christianity Today* 31 (February, 1987): 11-141.

^{vi} Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1977), 366.

^{vii} See Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 1236.

^{viii} Adrio Konig, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology*, 221-22.

^{ix} Many of us hope and pray that God will find a way to apply Christ's sacrifice to seekers and God-fearing people who did not hear the gospel in their lives, but we have a responsibility to not go beyond scripture on this point. So, we cling to the sure teachings of scripture, working and reaching out to everyone who will listen. And all the while, we trust in God's justice, goodness, and love, knowing that there may be more than what has been revealed and that the Judge of all the earth will do right (Genesis 18:25). See the wise warning by Robertson McQuilkin, *The Great Omission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) and a discussion of related issues in Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips, *More Than One Way?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

^x There are complex issues related to some of the details here. See William Crockett, *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992).

^{xi} Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1226.

^{xii}See Lee Wilson and Joe Beam, *The Real Heaven* (Webb City: Covenant Publishing, 2006), and Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004).

^{xiii}I. Howard Marshal, *Pocket Guide To Christian Beliefs* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 138-39.

^{xiv}Anthony Hoekema does a good job in showing how these promises find their ultimate fulfillment in the new heaven and new earth, not in a millennial state. See *The Bible and the Future*, 274-87.

^{xv}Though most Christians think that Revelation 21:1-22:6 is describing a place, it is not. It is describing the church in eternity. See Robert Gundry, "The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People," *Novum Testamentum* XXIX, 3 (1987): 254-264.