



PART 23 – END OF THE AGES

- What do Christians believe about how the world will end?
- What happens to people when they die?

How will the world end?

People have many theories about how life on earth may come to an end, including global warming, an asteroid collision or nuclear war. The Bible, however, teaches that the future of the Universe is tied to the future of humankind because we are God's most precious creation and the earth was made for us to inhabit and enjoy. Just as God created the Universe, setting it in motion, He will bring it to an end at a date He has set. The Bible does not give us all the details about the end of the world, but it does teach that the world will become more evil until God intervenes when Jesus returns to earth to judge all human beings, living and dead.

When Jesus came to earth in 4 BC, He lived and died as the Suffering Servant foreseen by the Old Testament prophets, refusing to be made King in Israel and choosing the cross. This was necessary to pay for sins and make forgiveness possible. Other Old Testament prophecies, about God's Conquering King, remained to be fulfilled. God raised Jesus to the position of highest authority (at His right hand) where He reigns as Lord over all, but **Jesus must return to finally restore God's Kingdom**. Jesus spoke about this:

- *John 14:1-4* – Jesus told His disciples He was going to leave them to prepare a place in His Father's house for them to live and promised to return one day to take them to be with Him.
- *Matthew 24:26-31,36-44* – Jesus said that when He returns He will appear in the sky in power and great glory and everyone will see Him. He will gather all His people to Himself. No one knows when this say will be, so people should be ready.

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

- *1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:3* – when Jesus returns, dead Christians will be raised to life, then those still alive on earth will be lifted up with them to meet Jesus in the air. No one will know the date – it will be sudden.
- *1 Corinthians 15:35-58* – the resurrection body of Christians will be different from our present bodies as it cannot die or decay. It will be full of power and capable of living forever like Jesus' resurrection body.

The book that says most about the future is Revelation, which uses much figurative language. Some details are difficult to understand with certainty, but the overall message is clear. When Jesus returns, He will destroy the enemies of God, bring about final judgement and usher in God's new creation.

The Final Judgement

God must judge and punish sin. He cannot ignore it. There is no hope for a future perfect new creation if sin is allowed to continue. **Revelation 20:11-15** tells about the final Day of Judgement after Jesus returns:

- Jesus Christ will sit on the throne in judgement (v11a);
- All people will stand before Him to be judged – there will be nowhere to hide (v11b-12);
- God knows everything we have done – our actions are recorded in His books (v12b);
- All whose names are not written in another book, the Book of Life, will be thrown into a lake of fire (v15).

The final judgement will be fair and just, with all the evidence taken into account and no miscarriages of justice (see also Romans 2:5-11). The evidence against people will be the sins they have committed, but the reason they will be condemned to Hell will be because they have not received new life from God.

According to Jesus, people are either free from the coming judgement if they have believed in Him or they will face that judgement. In fact, those who reject Him have already been judged because they have rejected the truth God has shown them (see John 3:18-21). Christians, however, will not be condemned on the Day of Judgement, because their sins have been forgiven (Romans 8:1). The return of Christ will mean salvation for them (1 Thessalonians 5:9; 1 Peter 1:13). The New Covenant promises that God will keep no record of the sins of His people (Hebrews 8:12). Christians will, however, give account for their lives at the Judgement Seat of Christ, receiving rewards for faithful service (Romans 14:10-12; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Where Do People Go After Death?

Jesus taught that human beings have invisible souls (the centre of thinking, emotions and the will) as well as bodies (Matthew 10:28). When the body dies, the soul returns to God. Human beings only live once then they face judgement (Hebrews 9:27). We do not get a second chance. The souls of Christians who die go to be with Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). They belong to Him and so can be in God's presence. We do not know if these people remain conscious. The souls of non-believers, meanwhile, await the future Day of Judgement. Jesus taught that there are only two possible permanent destinies for people after the final judgement: eternal punishment and eternal life (Matthew 25:46). These two alternatives are often called Hell and Heaven.

HEAVEN (the New Earth) – Eternal Life

By 'heaven', the Bible simply means the place where God lives, while the plural 'heavens' means the sky and outer space. In popular usage, people talk about 'going to heaven' when they die. In reality, Christians will live forever in resurrected bodies on a new earth in a renewed Universe. The prophet Isaiah foresaw this (Isaiah 65:17-25) and Peter told Christians to look forward to it (2 Peter 3:13). Revelation 21:1 describes this new creation being revealed. Life on the new earth will be different from now because:

- It seems that all animals will be vegetarian, just as they were before the Flood (Isaiah 65:25);
- Everyone will be right with God and there will be no more sin (2 Peter 3:13);
- There will be no death, sorrow, or crying or pain as the curse of Genesis 3 is undone (Revelation 21:4);
- People can eat again from the Tree of Life and so live forever (Revelation 22:2).

On the new earth, human beings will live in harmony with God, with one another and with the universe, just as God intended. Sin and all its effects will be gone.

HELL (the Lake of Fire) – Eternal Punishment

The Bible often describes Hell as a place of great suffering and Revelation describes it as a lake of burning fire (Revelation 20:14). This suffering results both from the person's rejection of God and God's punishment. The Lake of Fire was prepared for the Devil (Revelation 20:10), but people who have not responded to God in faith will also be cast into it after the final judgement. There is no hope of escape.

The Challenge

The promise that Jesus will return brings hope and purpose to Christians. Many New Testament passages challenge Christians to change their behaviour in light of it. The following are just two examples:

The apostle John – 1 John 3:2-3

- Christians are God's children and the nature of the resurrection body has not yet been revealed (v2a).
- When Jesus returns, Christians will see Him in His glory and will become like Him (v2b).
- Christians should, therefore, aim to live like Jesus now, in pure devotion to God (v3).

The apostle Peter – 2 Peter 3:3-14

- Some people will mock the idea that Jesus will return, just as they deny that God created the world (v 3-7).
- God is not slow in keeping His promise but patient, giving people an opportunity to repent (v8-9).
- The "day of the Lord" will come suddenly ("like a thief in the night"), bringing judgement for godless people, the melting down of the Universe and creation of a new Universe (v7,10,12-13).
- Christians should be holy and godly because they are looking forward to the day of God. Christ's return will bring their final deliverance from the presence of sin, and they should live focussed on God because everything in this world will pass away (v11,14).

SUMMARY: God will restore the universe and judge every human being justly

- The ultimate destiny of saved humankind is to live in a restored universe in resurrected bodies.
- Those who are not saved cannot enter God's new creation and will be eternally separated from God.