

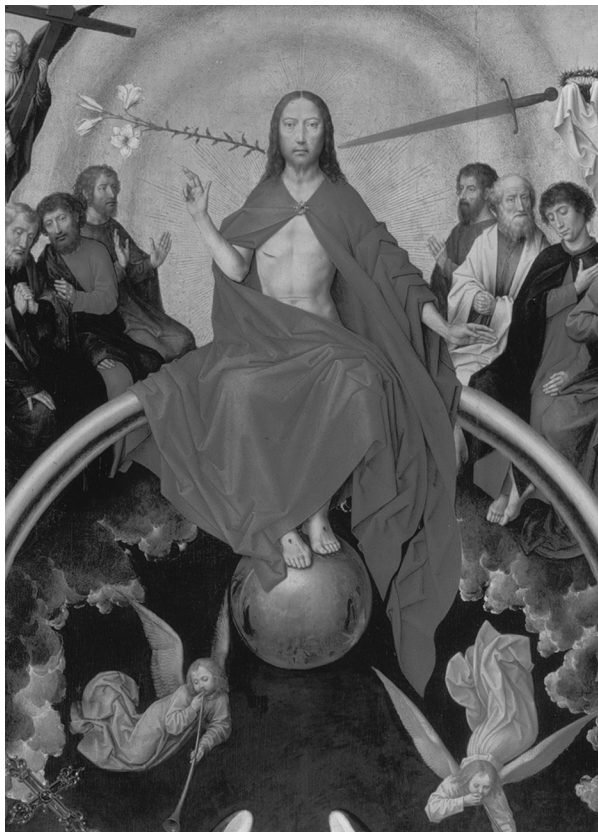


"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 1:4

End Times

LEADERS GUIDE

Hans Memling's *Last Judgment* (ca. 1467–71; found in the National Museum in Gdansk, Poland) focuses on the calling of Jesus Christ, who will judge the world on the Last Day (cf. Revelation 4:2–3). The sword extending from Jesus' mouth represents God's word of condemnation to those who reject the Lord and His ways (Revelation 19:15). The lily represents God's word of grace to those trusting in the Lord, who will share in His resurrection. As you study the end times, note how the Scriptures clearly teach both messages while emphasizing God's willing grace for all people (1 Timothy 2:4).



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Cover: *Last Judgment* (detail), by Hans Memling. SuperStock/SuperStock

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Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

In-depth means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership-team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;

- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other, outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership team and discussion leaders meetings.

The Small-Group Coordinator (*optional; the director may fill this role*)

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

The Small-Group Discussion Leaders

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 57.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (**see p. 55**);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;

- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion leaders training meetings.

Leadership Training

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

The LifeLight Weekly Schedule

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). Those congregations may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then, the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

Recommended Resources for Study and Worship

The Lutheran Study Bible. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009. This resource contains more than 26,000 study and application notes, a most thorough reference guide (pp. lxx-cx), and over 90,000 cross-references, as well as a 31,000-entry concordance, maps, charts, and timelines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

The Concordia Organist is a 31-CD collection of pipe organ accompaniments for all the hymns and liturgical music in *Lutheran Service Book*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no. 99-2264). Use these CDs for worship hymn accompaniment.

Last Things

Matthew 3:2, 11–12

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

The main purpose of this lecture is to offer reasons for a study of the end times. Students will learn that the second coming of Jesus (along with the resurrection and judgment) are essential elements in the Christian religion—elements that offer great motivation for Christian living and great comfort in Christian dying. Students will also learn that the Bible has a great deal to say about the end times. This theme is a vital part of the Christian religion.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. realize how important are God's promises about the last things;
2. learn that teachings about the last things are pervasive in the New Testament; and
3. prepare for the end in view of what God has revealed.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 57.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we begin this study of the end times, we pray for the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds that we may understand what You have revealed about the last things and to comfort our hearts with Your promises of resurrection and life everlasting; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

1 Introduction

Aristotle once wrote that a good drama has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and most of us would agree that such organization is helpful. Whether we're watching a play or a television show, or just reading a novel, we want things to make sense. An author cannot assume that his readers know what's going on before he tells them, and he shouldn't leave them with a lot of questions when he finishes. And, of course, something interesting has to take place between the first and last lines. Otherwise, the story fails. The writing may be excellent, but the story is not. It makes no sense.

To many people in the modern world, the story of humanity is a literary failure. It has a middle for sure, and a vague sort of beginning, but certainly no end—at least, not one that wraps up all the loose ends. Each individual life certainly comes to a conclusion. But what about the whole thing? Is humanity doomed just to muddle along as it has in the past? Or is there a goal, a final reckoning, an ending that makes sense?

Of course, not every story "makes sense" in the same way. Some leave us laughing and others weeping. Good often triumphs, but not always. In human history—fact, not fiction—evil sometimes wins, perhaps more often than not. We like to think that history is going somewhere good. Maybe this is even true from a technological and scientific standpoint, but what about social arrangements or even common morality? A major result of the Internet has been easy access to pornography. Is that good? Medical science has made it convenient to terminate a just-conceived human life with a pill. Is that

good? Nations around the world have changed their legal systems to accommodate and affirm homosexual relationships. Is that good?

Obviously, no. History may be going somewhere, but we can't always call it progress. So where is the world really going and how will it all end? The purpose of this course is to study the ending—the real one taught by the Bible.

2 Christians Confess the End

So this is where the Christian religion comes in. We believe not only that the world had a beginning (Creation) and a (glorious) middle (our Lord's death and resurrection), but that it will also have an end. For, as we confess in the Creed, "He will come to judge the living and the dead."

Unfortunately, many of us find this hard to believe. Like the scoffers to whom Peter once referred, we ask, (2 Peter 3:4) "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." Day after day, year after year, generation after generation, the world goes on as it has in the past. The narratives of the Bible may inspire us, and the truths of our faith may encourage us, but we still find ourselves longing for the promised ending—the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Without it, even the Christian "story" makes no sense.

In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul wrote: (15:19) "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." Paul knew that only the promised resurrection at the end of time would bring the fulfillment of everything that our Lord had accomplished through His own death and resurrection. Then and then only, would sin and death—the great plagues of human existence—be gone forever. Short of that, sin and death would remain in charge. The devil would remain in charge. So what kind of hope is there without an ending? None at all.

But Christians live by hope. God promises life, but all we see is death. God promises forgiveness, but all we experience is sin. So we must hope for the fulfillment of all that God has promised. Our faith means both "now" and "not yet." God's Word is good, and He doesn't lie. By Baptism and faith, we are the children of God; we are the heirs of all that God promises. There can be no doubt about it. Nevertheless, "now we see in a mirror

dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12), and we do not yet fully experience the blessings that God has bestowed. Hunger, thirst, heat, and tears remain the lot of every person, every Christian here, but God promises: (Revelation 7:16–17)

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be
their shepherd,
and He will guide them to springs of living
water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

So the Christian confession of the "end" is an essential element of our faith. God promises it, and we want it desperately. The Gospel is empty without it.

But if that's the case, then why does God delay? One answer, of course, is that God's ways are not our ways. He is in charge, and we are not in charge; and in our better moments, we all have to acknowledge that that is certainly for the best. We must simply trust in God our heavenly Father to do what is good and right for His people.

But in this particular instance—the timing of the end—God has revealed to us His motive for delay ("delay" only from our point of view, not His). In response to scoffers who question whether Jesus is coming back at all, Peter assured the faithful: (2 Peter 3:9) "The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance." God is not a creature of time; He is its Lord. He uses time to accomplish His purposes—His good and gracious purposes—in this case, time for the Word of the Gospel to go out and summon all men to repentance.

Our Lord Himself has told us: (Matthew 24:14) "This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." In Matthew 28, Jesus outlined the Church's task and history: (v. 19) "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Only when that task has been completed—only when the last possible person has been gathered in—only then will the end come. The sole reason for God's "delay" is God's grace, His love for lost sinners who need to hear the Gospel before the Last Day.

3 Jesus and the End Times

Statements about the end are pervasive in the New Testament, beginning with the Gospels. In fact, in the very first Gospel, when John the Baptist began to preach, he announced, (Matthew 3:2) “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” and then elaborated, (vv. 11–12) “He who is coming after me is mightier than I. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with *unquenchable fire* [emphasis mine].” Right from the outset, therefore, the New Testament sounds the motif of judgment in connection with Christ’s work.

Of course, in the Scriptures, the “kingdom” that John announced means more than just Judgment Day. First and foremost, the kingdom of heaven (or of God) refers to the new relationship with God that Jesus not only preached but also creates. After all, He is “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). Therefore, from His assault upon Satan’s rule by casting out demons, we should realize that “the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28) and that He can even say to the Pharisees who wanted to know when the Kingdom would come, “The kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21). After all, Jesus was right there in front of them!

However, there are many, many passages in which the theme of judgment and the end are prominent aspects of the kingdom of God. Just think, for example, of some of the well-known “Kingdom” parables, like that of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1–14) or of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1–13). Both begin with statements comparing the kingdom of heaven to the main themes of the story, a wedding feast in the one and maidens waiting for the bridegroom in the other. Both conclude with pictures of judgment. In the first case, a man without a wedding garment is cast into outer darkness, and in the second, the foolish virgins cannot get into the feast. In each parable, the meaning includes being ready for the end.

Jesus also spoke of the end very directly, not just in parables. Already in the Sermon on the Mount, He included what some have called “the little judgment scene”: (Matthew 7:21, 23) “On that day many will say to Me. . . . And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.’” Later in the same Gospel, we get the big judgment scene (Matthew 25:31–46), which sets the scene with the descrip-

tion “When the Son of Man comes in His glory” and concludes with the statement “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Such descriptions of judgment are paralleled in Mark and Luke. In the former, for example, we read Jesus’ description of the end: (Mark 13:26–27) “And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send out the angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” Luke includes similar passages, like this one: (Luke 21:27–28) “And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Luke and Mark, of course, are often similar to Matthew. We even give these three Gospels a special name, *synoptic*, to mark their similarities. So it is not surprising that all three include similar descriptions of the end times and assurances regarding the Last Day from the ministry of Jesus. The Gospel of John, however, is quite different from the others in the episodes that it recounts and in the language that it uses to describe our Lord’s life, work, and words. Often, the fourth evangelist seems purposefully to include episodes and themes that are not so prominent in the others and to omit others that are. The end times are one of these. They are not so prominent in John’s Gospel account.

But neither are they entirely absent. In the fifth chapter of John, our Lord talked explicitly about the task of judging mankind and claimed it for His own: (v. 22) “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.” A few verses later, the evangelist described that judgment: (vv. 28–29) “An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” The next chapter has similar passages, the “bread of life” discourse (such as John 6:39, 44, 54).

In John 11:24, we read that Martha, the sister of Lazarus, was relying on that promise even as she mourned her dead brother, for she told Jesus, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” But Jesus taught her that He was the key to that promise: (v. 25) “Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live.” So the raising of Lazarus was, in part, a demonstration that Jesus could deliver on the promise that He made regarding what was going to happen on Judgment Day regarding the resurrection of the dead.

Therefore, the “end times” are not an accidental theme in the teaching of Jesus. They are an essential part of the message He came to proclaim. Obviously, then, if we want to be faithful to that message and the Lord who gave it, we have to include His promises of reckoning and resurrection at the end of time in our own beliefs and teachings.

4 Elsewhere in the New Testament

But what about the rest of the New Testament? Do the other books discuss the last times? Indeed, yes. Although there are certainly differences in themes and emphases among the books, it is still true that besides the Gospels, the rest of the New Testament resonates with statements about the end times. In the Book of Acts, we see an affirmation of the resurrected Christ as the world’s final judge in the preaching of the apostles Peter (10:42) and Paul (17:31). Paul also discussed the final judgment in his own writings; for example, Romans 2:6–8: “He [God] will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, He will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.” Elsewhere, the apostle named Jesus as the One who is “to judge the living and the dead” (2 Timothy 4:1) and encouraged the faithful to look forward to “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). Christ’s second coming is an especially prominent theme in the apostle’s two epistles to the Thessalonians. In the first letter, we have that powerful description of the last trumpet, at the sound of which “the dead in Christ will rise first” (4:16); and in the second letter, Paul provided an extensive discussion of when the second coming would actually occur.

Other writers besides Paul also referred to the end times. James, for example, mentioned the “coming of the Lord” (5:8), and Peter referred to the time when Christ’s “glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:13). In his second letter—as we have already seen—Peter addressed the question of why the apparent delay in Christ’s return, and he affirmed confidently: (3:10) “The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”

The second coming of our Lord and a day of final judgment are prominent themes in the New Testament; and those who accept it as God’s Word will recognize that

such ideas were a basic part of what the first Christians taught and believed. Christianity is not just about what God has done or is still doing for people in Jesus Christ but is also about what He will do at the end of time.

5 When the End?

At the time of our Lord’s ascension, the angels assured the disciples: (Acts 1:11) “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come again in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven.” That’s the promise, and the Church has confessed it ever since. But we are always tempted to ask when. When is God going to keep His Word and bring the present state of affairs to an end?

The question is a natural one, and at times of great sorrow or suffering, it may seem pressing, even urgent. However, we always have to answer that we don’t know. No matter how many times we raise the question—probably as often as we hear the promise!—the answer remains the same. We don’t know; nor should we. When the first Christians at Thessalonica thought that the end was imminent or, maybe, that the Lord had already come, some of them practically went to pieces. So the apostle had to write them a second time and tell them “not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed” (2:2). Others seem to have drawn the conclusion that there was no more point in working and carrying out their day-to-day activities, so Paul had to rebuke them: (2 Thessalonians 3:11–12) “For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busy-bodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”

So God has not told us precisely when the end will arrive. The fact of our Lord’s second coming is enough. It encourages us in Christian living and sustains us in the face of suffering and evil. It is true that because Jesus is coming back, we do alter our behavior; not, however, by giving up the tasks to which God has called us, but precisely by carrying them out for the sake of others, including the great mission task that must be concluded before the end happens. “Do not grow weary in doing good” (2 Thessalonians 3:13) was Paul’s advice to the Thessalonians. But that’s meant for us too.

Our Lord Himself told the disciples: (Matthew 24:36) “Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” This passage may seem unsettling at first on account of

our Lord's including Himself as one who doesn't know. After all, doesn't the Bible teach that Jesus knows everything—just as Peter confessed after the resurrection (John 21:17)? Of course it does; Jesus Christ is the true God who knows and governs all things. But prior to His resurrection, Jesus "humbled" Himself by not always using His divine powers. That's why He grew hungry and thirsty, became weary when He traveled, and—as in this case—remained ignorant of when the Last Day would occur. He submitted Himself as true man to the lowliness of our situation in order that He might take our place under God's Law and save us.

So the point of Jesus' statement in Matthew 24 is to make clear that the time of His second coming is unknown to everyone and will remain unknown until it happens, for "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2).

But our ignorance of when the Last Day will arrive must not blind us to truth that it is, indeed, coming. The New Testament affirms this over and over again; and both the Gospels and Epistles include numerous "signs of the times"; that is, pointers to the coming end. For example, Jesus' last discourse in the Gospel of Matthew (ch. 24), begins with a question from the disciples, (v. 3) "What will be the sign of Your coming and of the close of the age?" The subsequent verses, therefore, contain several such indicators to remind us that the end is coming. Later in this course, we will spend some time looking at them.

In the epistles, the second chapter of 2 Thessalonians is also an important place for considering such signs, including the great end-time figure of "Antichrist." This chapter in the Bible also is a place that we will examine in this course, along with other passages that raise the issue of being ready for the end.

Also connected to the subject of signs of the end times is the Book of Revelation. This is a book of pictures and symbols, and many have gone wrong by treating at least some of the symbols as literal prophecies regarding the end. The most famous (or, rather, infamous) of these is the idea of a millennium or thousand-year reign of our Lord on earth before the Last Day. This, too, is a topic for later in the course.

But at this point, it is enough to realize that the Scriptures not only speak of the end—our Lord's second coming and a great Day of Judgment—but also urge us to be ready, in part, by recognizing the signs designated by God as reminders of what is going to happen. All things may seem to remain the same, and humanity

certainly looks stuck in a rut; but the reality is far different. There is an end, and it is coming—for sure.

Conclusion

Human beings do not write their own story—however much they may think they do. Not one of us is responsible for our own beginning and, of course, we cannot avoid our own end when the time comes. But the same thing is true of all humanity. We do not write our own story. The modern world has pretty much settled on the idea that human beings—in fact, the entire universe—don't have much of a story. They are just an accident, the result of time and chance. So if the human race does come to an end, it won't much matter. In fact, it won't matter at all.

But Christians believe that a personal and loving God has written the story of mankind and that history is the record of how His story plays out in time. Like the best of stories in literature, ours, too, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. But the divine Author has prepared a conclusion far greater than any of us could write or imagine, for His story ends in glory—the glory of Jesus' return and the resurrection of God's faithful into that glory forever. And the great thing about it is this: it's not just a story.

Concluding Activities

Conclude the session with an appropriate prayer and distribute the study leaflet for week 2.

Death and Dying

Romans 6:23

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

Participants will be reminded that besides the end of the universe, everyone has an individual end, “death,” for which we must all be ready. Many people want to think of death as “natural,” just a part of the way things are in a material universe. But that is not so. Death is the result of sin. Our Lord Jesus Christ has overcome sin and death so that believers can face the end of life with confidence.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word, will

1. realize that death is not a natural conclusion to human life but God’s punishment for sin;
2. learn that Christ’s death and resurrection are God’s answer to sin and death; and
3. on account of God’s love in Christ, live in expectation of eternal life and resurrection when they die.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 59.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It’s especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Lord of life, be with us as we contemplate the prospect of death and dying. Help us to realize that, just as there is forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, there are also resurrection and eternal life to all who believe in Him. Through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

1 Introduction

Life has a rhythm that everyone must follow. Summer, fall, winter, spring. Morning then evening, then morning again, and so on. Day follows day, month follows month, year follows year. We are born, we live, we die. In a sense, therefore, we are always living in the “end times,” our own personal end times, and the question of whether the universe has an end is practically irrelevant in view of our own inevitable death. And not only do human beings die, so also do the plants and animals. To be living is also to be dying. It’s all quite natural.

Or is it? Since the dawn of time, human beings have worked hard to come to terms with their own dying. The death of other creatures they can well tolerate—indeed, take advantage of—but not their own. So what’s going on here? Why do we die, why do we resent it, and what’s to be done about it?

2 The Cycle of Life—and Death

“It won’t be long now.” You’ve heard that before. It’s something we say in order to keep ourselves going when the going is rough but can’t last forever. In many parts of the world, you often hear it at the end of winter. “It won’t be long now.” The days are getting longer and the air is getting warmer; spring will soon be here! I suppose that most of us would agree that green is better than gray and rain is better than ice, but nonetheless every season of the year brings with it its own peculiar challenges; and in many places, the coming of spring means not only putting the snow shovel away but also bringing the lawn mower out and getting ready to use it.

At those times of year when the seasons are changing, we readily recognize the cycles of nature upon which we depend and in which we participate, for just as we rejoice at the beginning of spring in the rebirth of grass and trees and flowers, we know that in just six or seven months, whatever has escaped the mower or harvester will be far along the pathway to the decay and death of winter. But what many plants experience on an annual basis is also true of human beings over a period of years. There is a cycle to life that begins with birth and ends in death: (Isaiah 40:6–7) “For all flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass.” Just as we can mow down the grass as soon as it grows, so time and circumstances will cut us all down and send us into the grave.

In this respect then, the only real difference between us and the plant is that we are conscious of the fate that awaits us—we recognize that death is coming. Of every newborn baby, there is always one thing that we know for sure: this baby will die. This is a horrible truth, so most of us, most of the time, try to ignore it. We also try to delay death—by diet, exercise, and medicine. And when it begins to loom over us—frightening and unavoidable—the human organism is such that we fight against death with all our might and power; but, inevitably, we lose and death wins, “for all flesh is grass.”

So in this regard too, we must all admit, “It won’t be long now.”

But what are we supposed to do about it? Through the centuries, that has been the great question: what should we do about death? And men have proposed all kinds of answers, usually connected to some religious view or other; but for many in the modern world, increasingly the answer has become simply to accept it—accept that man is a part of nature and will die—an answer that is really no answer but is the best that modern man can come up with.

An American writer of the nineteenth century, William Cullen Bryant, expressed this point of view about as well as it could be in a poem entitled “Thanatopsis.”

First of all, he describes death in unvarnished terms,

Earth, that nourish’d thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock,

And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon.

That’s it—“To mix for ever with the elements, To be a brother to the insensible rock, And to the sluggish clod”! For modern man, death is no more than a return to the impersonal nature from which humanity came forth or, as the Scriptures themselves describe it, “For you are dust and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19).

But Bryant’s response to death’s inevitability is interesting and perhaps typical of the modern world also, for he tries to find comfort in the fact that death comes to everybody:

As the long train
Of ages glide away, the sons of men,
The youth in life’s green spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side
By those, who in their turn shall follow them.

Death is unavoidable, for it happens to everyone, so what’s to be done? Nothing, nothing at all. Bryant urges his reader just to accept it. “Approach thy grave,” he writes, “Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.” End of poem, end of life.

That is very good writing, a beautiful poem, but what a desperate philosophy! However optimistically framed, Bryant’s response to death undermines any form of human significance or achievement. You are a brother to the “insensible rock,” or maybe a sister “to the sluggish clod”—does it really matter? Indeed, what is the point of anything—good or bad, pleasure or pain, war or peace, life or death—when “all flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field”?

To questions like these, “Thanatopsis” has no answer and the modern world is speechless.

3 Any Way Out?

We need to hear a voice that is louder than our own—indeed, a voice that speaks from out of a tomb, the voice of an angel, “He is not here”; the voice of a Savior, “I am the resurrection and the life”; the Word of the Lord that endures forever!

But is a word—any word—enough to counter the death that confronts us? When we see the grass withering or the corpse of a loved one entombed, how does a word—even the Word of the Scriptures—overcome that reality?

What makes the biblical Word anything more than Bryant's "Thanatopsis"?

That's a fair question, and we are right to raise it; but the answer we give is also fair and more than enough; for the Word of the Gospel is the Word of the Lord. And the Lord is the One who not only speaks but does. In fact, His speaking is His doing; so the word of resurrection is the deed of resurrection!

But before we go any further, we need to back up for a moment to realize that death—our death—is also the result of a word, God's Word, that said, "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17), and that still says, "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20). We do not die because it is "natural," just one of those things that happens to everybody. If that were really true, why would we fight it? Why would we care? Bryant's answer would be everyone's answer, humanity's default position in the face of death; and yet, we resist, we fight, we refuse to give in right up until our last breath, because we know—instinctively, intuitively—that death is not the way it is supposed to be. God did not make us just to die. That was not His plan, and it still isn't His plan. (Ezekiel 18:32) "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live."

Easier said than done, "Turn, and live." Adam and Eve had free will. Created without sin, they could choose the good but did not. We, however, are bound to sin and, right along with sin, to death, the punishment for sin. But we should not think that "the bondage" of our will to sin somehow excuses us from the punishment, as if really in our heart of hearts we wanted to be good but cannot. No! What we really want is to sin. Temptation comes and we give in—because we want to. That's really what is so terrible about the human condition. We want what is bad. So we deserve our punishment.

Of course, people protest this accusation. How can you say, they ask, that I want to do evil when every day I resist and refuse to do wrong? When someone angers me, don't I refrain from hitting him? Or when I would like to take something—someone else's property or maybe even someone else's spouse—don't I leave it alone? Of course you do (although not always!), but unwillingly. In your heart, you would like to give in. If you followed your desires, you would certainly succumb. So why don't you? You are afraid of scandal, or of gossip, or of getting caught. Or maybe you think that doing the "right" thing will bring a reward—a good reputation, perhaps, a chance for promotion, or maybe even that

God will be pleased with your choice—but again, it's not because you really want the good in and of itself, in your heart of hearts. There—if you could only get away with it—there you want what is wrong!

The Bible teaches clearly what each of us knows about his inner self. (Genesis 8:21) "The intention of man's heart is evil from his youth." (Romans 8:7–8) "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." (Ecclesiastes 7:20) "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." Even the Christian has to admit with Paul, (Romans 7:19–20) "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me."

That is why we die. Not because it is "natural," but because it is punishment for our sins. And we are trapped. There's no way out. Or is there?

4 A Real Way Out

There certainly is a way out, but not because of us. One could almost say, in spite of us! (Romans 5:8) "But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." In this simple statement, we have the most profound truth. Our escape from death rests solely upon God's undeserved love for us in Jesus. Over and over again, the Scriptures tell us not only what God has said but also what He has done in time and space in order to rescue humanity from the curse of death by redeeming us from sin, the cause of death. God's saving activity is not a myth or pipe dream—something designed just to make us feel better in the face of the inevitable. Instead, it is reality—a reality as real as the person writing this or the person reading it or the persons hearing it read. God's Son really became a human being, really took humanity's sin upon Himself and really died on a cross to pay the penalty, and then really arose from the dead.

Many people today find the biblical accounts of our Lord's life, death, and resurrection hard to believe. But this is not just a modern phenomenon. When Paul preached about the resurrection of Jesus to the Athenian intellectuals on Mars Hill, how did they react? (Acts 17:32) "Some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this.'" They put Paul off or they scoffed at his claims. So there have always been skeptics, people like the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume,

who famously said about accounts of the miraculous, "It is contrary to experience that a miracle should be true, but not contrary to experience that testimony be false." In other words, it is more likely that the witnesses are lying or deceiving themselves than it is that a miracle has actually happened.

Maybe. Mostly. But certainly not always. God knew that people might not believe the Gospel—in fact, right from the beginning there were those who did not want to believe. Remember, for example, how the chief priests and elders reacted to the report of the guards at the tomb of Jesus (Matthew 28:11–15). What did they do? They bribed the guards to lie by saying that the disciples had stolen the body while they were sleeping! Talk about hard to believe! That unarmed and untrained disciples would take on professional soldiers to steal a corpse when they were already afraid that the authorities would be after them for their involvement with Jesus. Very unlikely, to say the least.

As strange as it may seem, however, for some—like the Jerusalem leaders—the good news is threatening. To accept the resurrection of Jesus and the rescue from death and sin that He has obtained means commitment to a new kind of life—a life no longer centered on self but on others, a life defined by faith and love. No longer self-indulgent but self-sacrificing, no longer committed to pleasure or pride or possessions, but instead to the Word and work of Christ, believers model a life that all too many resist. Believing in Jesus makes a difference—a difference that lots of people refuse. So they find (or imagine) reasons for rejecting the truth claims of the Christian religion, centering on the death and resurrection of Christ.

5 A Real Death and a Real Resurrection

Nevertheless, even in the face of such rejection, God has once again shown mercy to men and has given reasons for believing in Jesus. You can't argue someone into Christianity. It's the job of the Holy Spirit to convert. But the doubters need to deal with this, an incontrovertible truth: People just like them saw Jesus dead and then alive again.

Just recall how John began his first letter: (1 John 1:1, 3) "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life . . . that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you." John and the other

disciples saw, touched, and heard the Savior as much as any of us see, touch, or hear one another. Believe it or not, therefore, there really is a way out of death. Our Lord has provided it by Himself going through it and then coming out of it on the first Easter Sunday.

Our Lord chose ordinary people like John and Simon Peter, who were fishermen, and Matthew, who was a tax collector, to witness what He was doing for mankind, because He wanted people to know about it and believe. What sort of answer to the problem of death would Jesus' resurrection be if no one had ever heard of it? So God made sure that there were witnesses.

Even the first disciples recognized the significance of such witnesses for the future of the faith, for in the days immediately after the ascension of Jesus and before Pentecost, they replaced Judas Iscariot—by that time already dead—with another man, Matthias. His qualification was that he had accompanied Jesus during His ministry (from John the Baptist to the ascension) because he was joining the apostles to become, as Peter put it, "a witness to His resurrection" (Acts 1:22). Like them, Matthias would spend the rest of his life telling others what he had seen: Jesus died but was now alive again.

By that time already, Jesus had given His Church its marching orders, with the apostles at the forefront: (Matthew 28:19) "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." So Matthias would join the others as an official witness to the Gospel. He was a part of God's provision to publicize the saving work of Jesus, because people needed to know. Sin and death were done for, because Christ had arisen.

Later on, in his own preaching of the Gospel, Paul put the death and resurrection of Jesus at the center and presented himself as one of the divinely appointed witnesses. In fact, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul listed some of those who could actually testify to the resurrection: (15:5–8) "He [Christ] appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me." What the apostle was doing in these verses was challenging the skeptics. "If you don't believe me," he was saying, "ask the witnesses, the ordinary flesh-and-blood people who actually saw the risen Christ. And, oh, by the way, I am one of them. Years after His ascension, Jesus appeared also to me!"

So the Lord Jesus died—that's for sure; His disciples saw it. But the Lord Jesus also rose again—that's also for sure, and His disciples saw that too; indeed, they touched Him and talked with Him, for Jesus was alive! They gave their witness, even though for many of them, it cost them their lives. So hostile was the world to the Gospel that it not only ignored or scorned these first Christians but it also beat, imprisoned, and executed them. Yet they remained true to their witness because their witness was true. Jesus Christ had triumphed over death.

Therefore, this answer to death is different from all others, for it is God's answer, not man's. It is real, it is true. And because it is God's answer, this Word of the Gospel has continued to exercise power among men in all the centuries since the first Easter—power to rescue sinners by the redemption that is in the crucified and risen Lord, power to transform sin-cursed lives by the sanctifying presence of Christ's Spirit, and power to comfort and strengthen us all in the face of death.

Conclusion

Now, we began this lecture by quoting a poem that reveals the hopelessness of many in the face of inevitable death. But there's another poem that fits, and it's far better than "Thanatopsis." Written by John Donne, an Anglican clergyman, who lived a couple of centuries prior to Bryant, this poem also treats the subject of death but does so from an entirely different point of view. "Death," wrote John Donne,

Be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me. . . .
Why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And Death shall be no more. Death, thou shalt die!

"Death, be not proud." "Death, thou shalt die!" Those are Donne's words, but the sentiment is God's—His answer to death; God's, not man's. "Death and resurrection" are our inevitable reality because of Jesus' death and resurrection. We can count on it, because it is the promise of the Lord. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

Concluding Activities

Conclude the session with an appropriate prayer and distribute the study leaflet for week 3.