

Let me start by saying that this subject should be approached with great humility (since there is much that is speculation, and many Godly people that land different places), great joy (over the glory that awaits all believers), and great compassion (over the reality of hell for those who reject Christ). We can be confident of this – as followers of Jesus Christ, this is not our home. What we see with our physical eyes is not all there is. And our life is but a vapor so we should live soberly and purposefully during our short days here on earth.

Leroy Community Chapel Statement of Faith – Article VI

“We believe that Jesus Christ will return to bring all things to judgment, to set up His kingdom, to bring this age to a close, and to initiate the new heavens and earth. We believe every person will be resurrected from the dead; the believers to an eternal life of blessedness and joy, unbelievers to everlasting punishment, and Satan forever put down in the Lake of Fire (Matthew 25:46; Revelation 20:5-6, 11-15).”

Historic Church Documents

- Belgic Confession (1618)

“Finally we believe, according to God's Word, that when the time appointed by the Lord is come (which is unknown to all creatures) and the number of the elect is complete, our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, bodily and visibly, as he ascended, with great glory and majesty, to declare himself the judge of the living and the dead. He will burn this old world, in fire and flame, in order to cleanse it. Then all human creatures will appear in person before the great judge-- men, women, and children, who have lived from the beginning until the end of the world. They will be summoned there by the voice of the archangel and by the sound of the divine trumpet. For all those who died before that time will be raised from the earth, their spirits being joined and united with their own bodies in which they lived. And as for those who are still alive, they will not die like the others but will be changed "in the twinkling of an eye" from "corruptible to incorruptible." Then "the books" (that is, the consciences) will be opened, and the dead will be judged according to the things they did in the world, whether good or evil. Indeed, all people will give account of all the idle words they have spoken, which the world regards as only playing games. And then the secrets and hypocrisies of men will be publicly uncovered in the sight of all. Therefore, with good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to wicked and evil people. But it is very pleasant and a great comfort to the righteous and elect, since their total redemption will then be accomplished. They will then receive the fruits of their labor and of the trouble they have suffered; their innocence will be openly recognized by all; and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring on the evil ones who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world. The evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and shall be made immortal-- but only to be tormented in the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. In contrast, the faithful and elect will be crowned with glory and honor. The Son of God will "confess their names" before God his Father and the holy and elect angels; all tears will be "wiped from their eyes"; and their cause-- at present condemned as heretical and evil by many judges and civil officers-- will be acknowledged as the "cause of the Son of God." And as a gracious reward the Lord will make them possess a glory such as the heart of man could never imagine. So we look forward to that great day with longing in order to enjoy fully the promises of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. [Article 37]

- Westminster Confession (1646) & Baptist Confession (1689)

I. God has appointed a day, wherein He will judge the world, in righteousness, by Jesus Christ, to whom all power and judgment is given of the Father. In which day, not only the apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds; and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil.

II. The end of God's appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord; but the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished

with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.

III. As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin; and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity: so will He have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly, Amen [Chapter XXXIII] & [Baptist: Chapter 32]

Key Terms & Definitions

Eschatology This word designates the study of theology concerned with the “last things” as the Greek word *eschatos* describes. It deals with having a Biblical understanding of the events connected to the end of the world, the future Kingdom of God, and the resurrection of all men to eternal bliss or eternal judgment. This arena of theology is *not* to be placed above the doctrine of salvation or the doctrine of God. Many over the years (and even now) have gotten far too enamored with speculation and opinion regarding the End Times and have been far too unenthusiastic about the work of the cross. Is it important? For sure. Is it of the greatest importance to know just which end time chart and timeline is correct? No. Please keep this in its proper perspective. Perhaps a quote from Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones will help as we begin - *We must not divide on the question of prophetic interpretation: pre-, post-, a-millennialist, and so on. Not one of them can be proved, so we must not put them into the category of essentials. You have your views; hold them. Let us discuss them together; let us reason together out of the Scriptures; but if we divide on these matters, I maintain that we are guilty of schism. We are putting into the category of essentials what is non-essential.*

Maranatha This is an Aramaic word used by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:22 and it means – “Our Lord Come.” It is used to express a yearning for the return of Christ. It calls out to God in request, wanting to be with Him in our glorified bodies more than enjoy the temporary pleasures of this fallen world.

The Great Tribulation This term comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 24 verse 21, and describes a period of hardship and suffering prior to the return of Christ. Verse 29 describes the scene after the tribulation where the Son of Man appears in the clouds and returns to earth with great power and glory. Of course debate comes in here of the exact timing of the tribulation in the scheme and flow of the return of Christ and just who will go through the tribulation. *[Before I go any further let me just remind you of the clear statement of the LCC Statement of Faith and our desire to go as far as the Bible definitively goes, of which the timing of the rapture and the nature of the millennial kingdom are not included. That being said, as Elders we land at different spots on these things. So, as I write on some of these ‘B-level’ issues, I am giving you my opinion based on my best study of the text and story of Scripture at this point in my theological maturity ...fair enough?].* I believe that believers will go through the Great Tribulation, and that only recently (19th and 20th centuries) have other eschatological positions arisen to rapture the Church out of the Tribulation. I believe this has come about in an effort to remove the idea that believers might actually go through suffering and hardship and not be protected from evil or made more comfortable by God during difficult times.

Imminent This word describes the Bible truth that Jesus could return at any time and that we should be prepared for His coming. Be careful not to confuse this term with the term *eminent* or *pre-eminence* which is used to describe the greatness of Jesus (Colossians 1:15ff). The return of Christ is imminent and might occur at any moment. We know not how the conditions that the Bible speaks of needing to be completed for His return will be accomplished or if they have already been accomplished. So we live with a watchful readiness for the glorious return of Jesus.

The Millennial Kingdom This refers to the Kingdom of God set up on earth prior to the final judgment of Satan and complete victory over every enemy of heaven. It is a period of a thousand years (as described in Revelation 20:4-5) where Christ will physically reign. Again, there is much debate over when God sets up this millennial kingdom, who is in this kingdom, and the actual state of humans who participate in the kingdom (e.g.: whether believers have glorified bodies on earth in the millennium). *Opinion alert* – I believe the Bible speaks of a literal Kingdom on earth that lasts for 1,000 years after the Great Tribulation, the return of Christ, and the resurrection and glorification of believers (dead and alive). At this time Christ will reign and Christians will reign with Him. The earthly millennial kingdom will then end with the loosing of Satan, the great last battle where Christ is victorious over all, and the final judgment of unbelievers to hell and believers to the eternal state in a recreated heaven and earth.

Rapture This term is used to describe the secret “snatching up” of believers to be with Christ prior to His return. Some believe this will occur before the tribulation (pre-tribulation rapture), others believe that it will occur at some point during the tribulation (mid-tribulation rapture), and others that it will occur after the tribulation as one event at the return of Christ to establish the millennial kingdom (post-tribulation rapture). If you’ve been reading carefully up to this point you have already observed that I hold to a post-tribulation rapture. This amounts to a single return of Christ, where believers meet Him in the air as the King then proceeds into the city with His throng of faithful subjects to set up His millennial kingdom. *Again PLEASE hear this ... timing is NOT the primary issue, the ACTUAL return of Christ IS! Got it? Good.* Now let’s move on

Hell This is the place of eternal conscious punishment reserved for Satan, fallen angels, and those who have rejected Christ in this life. It is *eternal* because if sin could be paid for in a finite measure of time, then the holiness of God and His wrath toward sin is not perfect, but able to subside over time. It is *conscious* because God made men in His image to enjoy His pleasures and the converse is the real punishment of rejecting those pleasures. This is the scariest doctrine in the Bible, and should produce immense compassion and urgency for the Church to declare the gospel and call people away from the wrath of God their sin deserves.

Heaven This is the place of blessing where the redeemed experience the greatest joy ever known in the presence of God with absolute perfection. God’s glory is perfectly revealed and the result is angels, heavenly creatures, and perfected mankind worshipping the Lamb of God.

New Creation The Bible speaks of a new heavens and a new earth. This is the final

dwelling place of redeemed creation. God created, man sinned and creation was subjected to futility, and in the end God re-creates, making all things new. This is the forever location of the glories of God. Exactly what God does in making this new creation, or how man functions within this new heavens and earth remains a great mystery. But this we know, it is beyond anything man can conceive of and in it joy explodes on the scene as man operates perfectly as God created him.

Foundational Biblical Data

John 14:3 “I will come again and take you to myself”

What a cool promise! Here our Lord is speaking to the disciples as the hour grew closer for him to head to the cross. Like a good leader, he is speaking words to bring them comfort and hope for the future. What is that hope he offers? It is the hope of a future with him. He tells them of the house of his Father and the rooms being prepared for them as well. What do we make of such “house full of rooms”? First, that Jesus is speaking of heaven as a real place that He came from, will return to, and then at a later date will bring his followers to reside in with him. Second, that his departure from the earth is not a final departure, but only an interim period until it is the Father’s time for all the adopted sons and daughters to come home also. Third, that while Jesus is away (back in heaven) he and the Father are not unaware of what is happening on earth, but are involved in preparing for the future events to unfold. It’s not like they’re cleaning house and making beds, but metaphorically the plan of salvation is at work in calling other children to Himself and in sanctifying His own to be ready for that great day. And lastly, he speaks of a “taking away” of his own to be with him. We know from this that at the return of Christ, His followers will be Him and remain with Him forever. Our future is only glorious because it is about greater intimacy with the Son!

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven”

This is one of those clear passages regarding the return of Christ with great glory and authority. We are taught here that dead believers will be resurrected at his coming, followed by the alive believers who will meet Him in the air. This is the first resurrection, where those who have “fallen asleep” will be reunited body and soul with the Lord at His return. Well, where were they? Their bodies were in the grave and their souls were in heaven with God the moment they died. “We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). So, the Lord returns with the sound of a trumpet, the yell of the archangel, and the dead in Christ rise first. That is to say, the souls of believers who have already died are reunited with their bodies, which were in the ground but are now resurrected as imperishable. Then, the text is clear; those who are alive are caught up with the Lord and are transformed as well. And both groups of people will be with the Lord for the rest of eternity!

2 Peter 3:10-13 “we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”

In each of these passages there is so much material to deal with, and regarding this

subject the material has multiple possible interpretations, the right one which will only be revealed in the end when these things actually come to pass. My goal here in these study guides is not to be exhaustive, but brief in surveying the key material and giving you enough to then study further at your leisure. So ... this Peter passage builds on our understanding of the end of times in a few ways. One – In v.10a we get the concept of the imminence of the return of Christ – that it will come like a thief in the night. It will be unexpected, and catch us unaware. Two – In v.10b we get the concept of the current heavens and earth being burned up and dissolved. Crazy! Whether the universe itself is obliterated and God starts over, or the contents of the universe are dissolved and God re-creates is not as important as ... Three – In v.13 the truth of new heavens and a new earth that we will enjoy for eternity. I love the line in an old Keith Green song that describes the earth as not good enough and how it's like living in a garbage can compared to what's coming. Amen to that!

Matthew 24:15-31 “then there will be a great tribulation such as has not been seen from the beginning of the world until now”

If you took the time to read that complete text you would have recognized that it is describing a pretty awful time of human history. One of the things that is always hard in interpreting prophetic passages is that we aren't given the time of those prophecies being fulfilled. Often we are given certain clues, and sometimes the clues point to a fulfillment during a particular era of history, and then other clues point to perhaps a later event. The Word speaks of future events often with near fulfillments and far fulfillments. If we don't keep this in mind we can force a lot of fulfillment into future events and demand certain conditions be “set in place” for those prophecies to be fulfilled. My point ... crazy stuff is described by our Lord in this passage. How much was fulfilled when Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD and how much is yet to be fulfilled in later days? That's the million-dollar question. We have a direct reference to those who are in Judea fleeing to the mountains (24:16), which could draw our attention to a tragedy that has already struck Jerusalem in history past (past for us, but not for the original listeners of Jesus' words). And we have references to the sun darkened and stars falling from heaven, which if I have my history right hasn't yet happened. My point? Glean the clear principles from the text and keep speculation in the category of speculation. The main point here is that a great tribulation is going to come upon the earth that brings with it much hardship like never before, and then the end will come.

1 Corinthians 15:51-52 “we shall all be changed”

This passage describes the resurrection of the dead into life imperishable. It points to not all sleeping (having died) when Christ returns, but all being transformed. How long does it take for this transformation to happen? The twinkling of an eye ... in a moment! God's power will so be put on display that a whole army of faithful followers will be united together behind their King, no longer clothed in frail humanity, but clothed in immortality. What comfort for us who have lost believing loved ones and we long to be reunited with them. What hope for courageous living knowing that death can't hold us down. This mystery is indeed a great and glorious victory!

2 Corinthians 5:9-10 “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ”

The judgment that comes at the end of the age is not the same for believer and unbeliever. For the unbeliever this judgment results in punishment and eternal conscious suffering in hell. For the believer who has been delivered from the wrath of God through the work of the Son, this judgment is for a rewarding of life well spent. Will some have a mansion and some a shack in heaven? No, we think to earthly and concrete. Rather, all who are in Christ will experience the glory of their salvation brought to fruition, there are none who will be lost. Listen to Sam Storms here: *A believer's judgment is not penal, but retributive, not a declaration of doom, but an assessment of worth; eternal destiny not at issue; eternal reward is; an evaluation of faithfulness and service within God's family; this judgment does not determine entrance into the kingdom, but rather the status of those already admitted.* So, in some mysterious other-worldly way, rewards will heighten the experience of glory without that diminishing anyone else's experience of joy. How can this be if you get something great that I don't get? I'm not sure cuz I ain't never been to heaven ... yet! But I can't wait, and in the meantime I want to live with great focus and passion to “make in my aim to please Him” (5:9).

Revelation 20:1-6 “they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years”

Five times in the span of six verses the time period of a thousand years is recorded as the duration of a period of time where Satan is bound, and the dead in Christ are resurrected and reigning with Christ. This is the millennial kingdom. Granted, the book of Revelation holds great mystery and difficult interpretations, but the clarity of such words are hard to ignore in the case of a literal kingdom where Christ is reigning on earth. Some interpret these verses as metaphorical and not referring to an actual kingdom on earth, and while I disagree with that, I gladly call those who are amillennial ('a' meaning 'no' literal millennial kingdom) my brothers!

Revelation 20:7-15 “then I saw great white throne”

The next set of verses describes what occurs at the end of the millennial kingdom. And it goes like this: First, Satan is released for one final time of deception. Second, those who are deceived and align with Satan gather for the last battle (we call this Armageddon). Third, the devil is thrown into the lake of fire. Fourth, the great white throne judgment where those who have died without embracing Jesus are resurrected (this is called the second resurrection) and judged. Fifth, those whose names are not found written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire forever to experience the consequence of rejecting the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Frequently Asked Questions

1- Could Jesus really return at any time?

Yes. There are passages in the Bible that speak of certain things that need to happen before the end comes, but we are never made aware of just how we'll know when those conditions are met perfectly. Let me give you just one example – Matthew 24:14 – *“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.”* So, there is a condition that the gospel is preached to all peoples of the earth before the world as we know it will come to an end. But how will we know if this has occurred? We know that there are many people groups yet to be reached in the world, but what we don't know is how God determines when a group is considered “reached.” Is it when one person hears the gospel in another language? When they have the Bible in their own heart language? When a church is established in their local community? You can see these are questions that we have no insight into regarding the mind of God. So, yes, there are certain conditions for the return of Christ, but also, YES, Jesus can return at any moment because we know not if certain conditions have already been met or what remains to be met or how it is to be met. The bottom line – Be ready, watchful, and expectant for the glorious return of Christ.

2- Do Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins know something I don't ... will I get “Left Behind”?

I'm not trying to pick a fight here, I read most of the “Left Behind” series and found it a fun read. What I am trying to do is make the point that if you are in Christ you won't be left behind. This isn't a guessing game or a disappearing act. Regardless of the timing of the return of Christ (rapture) we can know for certain that we will be included in that great day, whether dead or still alive. I also point this out to say, don't get your theology of End Times from these fictional novels. They do have an eschatological position and they certainly try to remain faithful to that, but much of what is described in Revelation as to how these things will play out is of great mystery to us ... mystery that Tim and Jerry seem to have removed in their telling of the story. Read the Bible, hold fast to what is clear, humble in what you think is sorta clear, and keep the mystery in what is unclear as we await God bringing all things to light.

3- Can you give me clarity on all those pre, post, a – millennial positions?

Of course anytime you seek to define a position there are always aberrations from each one. It would take forever to list out every detail and distinction within all the proposed end time schemes ... and I'm not sure I could even list all of them out in a way I even understand. So, let's just look at the main positions in a way that gives you a clear and simple grasp of them. These were fuzzy for me for a long time, so don't feel like you have to memorize these or be able to explain every detail, rest in having at least a general knowledge of these positions.

Another chart ... or actually set of charts, you ready?

4- Is hell really forever?

Some have suggested that after some period of time in hell people are annihilated (cease

to exist). They argue that to believe in an everlasting punishment is just to sever a doctrine and unbecoming to a loving God. This is called the doctrine of “annihilation.” First let me say that there are evangelical people who hold to this doctrine, so as much as I don’t believe it to be Biblical, I put this in the arena of non-essential doctrine. How can that be? Do away will hell? NO. Sin is indeed punished, of that we are on the same page. The wrath of God is poured out on those who reject Christ. The difference is in the duration of that punishment. First, it appears quite obvious to me that the Bible describes hell as a place of everlasting torment (Revelation 20:10). Second, I can’t see how you can make heaven eternal and hell temporary if the evidence of the texts of Scripture and not just human compassion is truly driving you. Third, sin is so heinous as a violation of a holy God, that to say that it can somehow be finally paid for outside of the death of Christ, feels blasphemous to me at worst, and a downgrading of the cross at best. Is hell forever? Yes. Do I like that doctrine? No. It does bump into my human compassion, but the glory of God is far more important, and to diminish hell is to diminish the holiness of God.

5- Will Christians go through judgment ... are all my sins gonna be on a Big Screen in heaven?

This thought freaked me out as a teenager. The thought that I’d just squeak into heaven because I’d believed in Jesus, but I’d get shamed in the process as everyone watched on a high definition jumbo-tron all the sins I’d ever committed. It’s just not true, so breathe a sigh of relief. God has forever dealt with your sin if you have trusted in Christ. Your sin has been removed as far as the east is from the west. You have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ. You are free from the guilt of and condemnation for the sins of your past, present, and future. Jesus paid it all ... all to Him I owe! Hold that tight, never let it go. Now, Christians will go through a judgment, but not to determine whether you’re “in or out”, nor to hold any sin against you, but rather to lavish reward on you for the way you delighted in Christ and made Him know in the world. This is a hard concept to understand because in rewarding each believer there obviously are different quantities of reward. How then do we all experience joy upon joy? Because a good God gives good and unique gifts, so that each individual will enter the glories of eternity with just exactly what heightens their enjoyment of God. Live life on purpose, don’t waste it!

What Do I Do With This?

In My Head

Don’t get all fanatical about the details of the End Times. Don’t start thinking you’ve got some special insight into who the antichrist is or how to help Israel rebuild the Temple ... that’s all crazy talk. Be a person of purpose here and now as you give yourself to thinking rightly about the Gospel’s impact on those in your arena of influence. Think about hell a little more than you used to so it compels you into witness for Christ. Think about heaven a little more than you used to so it creates a greater sense of awe and anticipation for God’s glory to be revealed. And as always, think about the cross a little more than you used to so it floods your soul with humility and grace to redeem the time God gives you each day.

In My Heart

There is no reason to fear! God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, of love, and of self-control (2 Timothy 1:7). Speak truth to yourself about death and dying. Speak truth to yourself about living life to the fullest for the Lord. Speak truth to yourself about those around you without the work of Christ applied to their soul. Be watchful ... and prayerful, so that you act with readiness today for what tomorrow may hold!

For Further Study

Heaven. Randy Alcorn. Tyndale. 2004.

Are You Ready For The End Of Time? J. C. Ryle. Christian Focus. 2001.

One Minute After You Die. Erwin Lutzer. Moody. 1997.

Things To Come. J. Dwight Pentecost. Zondervan. 1958.

For Family Discipleship

Questions for Discussion

- (1) What simple, true statements can you make about how the world ends?
- (2) What happens to those who reject Christ? Those who love and embrace Christ?
- (3) Discuss some of the applications for living because of the final judgment?

Memory Verse

“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

– Matthew 24:44

Song

Do not let your heart be troubled;
Trust in Him, trust in Him.
For I know He won't forget us
He's coming soon, He's coming soon

[Chorus]

In my Father's house there's room for me.
He has prepared for eternity.
In my Father's house I'll finally see
Heaven beyond my wildest dreams!

Do not let your heart be troubled;
Trust in Him, trust in Him.
We are children of His Kingdom
Forevermore, forevermore.

[Chorus]

A Catechism for Young Children

Q. What will become of the wicked in the day of judgment?

A. They shall be cast into hell.

Q. What will become of the righteous?

A. They shall be taken to heaven.

Q. Will Christ come again?

A. Yes, at the last day Christ will come to judge the world.