

A BRIEF STUDY OF ESCHATOLOGY

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I. Background on the kingdom of God

A. The O.T. ends on a note of unfulfilled hope. It was clear that in one sense God always had ruled the world from the time of creation. He was on his heavenly throne (e.g., Ps. 11:4; Isa. 6:1) and reigned over all (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:31; Ps. 93:1, 96:10). But there was some sense in which his kingly rule was not being fully expressed. He was allowing creation to go on out of step with his ultimate intention for it, to continue in a state of sin and suffering that was contrary to his ultimate purpose and vision.

B. But the prophets saw that a day was coming in which God would express his rulership of creation in such a way that all things would be brought into harmony and conformity with his ultimate will and purpose.

1. His creation would be redeemed from the dreadful consequences of sin that had invaded it. This world of rebellion, sin, hostility, fragmentation, suffering, and death would be rescued by God, transformed by him into a true utopia, a perfect reality of love, joy, and eternal fellowship with God and one another. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen write in *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 122:

The people of Israel thought of history being comprised of two very distinct periods: *the present age* and *the age to come*. In *the present age*, which had begun with Adam's rebellion against God's rule, the whole of creation had been stained by sin. Inevitably, therefore, evil would continue to flourish in the world throughout the present age, even among God's own people of Israel, who had been called out to provide the solution to that evil. But in *the age to come*, God would intervene to cleanse and renew his creation.

2. On that day God would express his authority over creation in a way he was not doing at present; he would in his sovereign power bring his creation to its ultimate fulfillment. At that time, he *will be* king over all the earth (Zech. 14:9) in a manner unlike the present.

a. Robert Saucy states in "The Eschatology of the Bible" in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 1:105:

According to the Scriptures, there is a sense in which God has always ruled and is even now the King over all creation (1 Chron 29:11, 12; Ps 103:19; 145:13). But there is another thread of truth that views the kingdom as yet to come (Zech. 14:9; Mat. 6:10). It is this last theme that dominates the eschatological hope of Scripture. . . . While [God] rules over the affairs of the earth with nothing occurring apart from his permissive will, he has allowed sin and rebellion to enter history and Satan to have a certain dominance as the "god of this age" (2 Cor 4:4). God's rule might be said therefore to be *over* the earth, but not directly *on* the earth. It is the coming of God to establish this latter condition, to bring his kingdom to earth in the vindication of his sovereign holiness, that has constituted the hope of God's people throughout all time.

b. As I. Howard Marshall expresses it in *Jesus the Savior* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 218, "[T]he [kingdom of God] is the full and powerful manifestation of the sovereignty that God already exercises over the world."

C. The O.T. uses different imagery to refer to this blessed state that God is going to create.

1. The imagery varies in how sharply it distinguishes the blessed state from this present existence, but all of it says, in forms relevant to ancient Jews, that a time of divine blessing is coming. It says that the failures and sufferings of the present age would be put to rights by the coming of the new age.

2. Sometimes the O.T. speaks of (e.g., Isaiah 2, 11, 25, 51:6, 61, 65:17-25; Jeremiah 31; Daniel 7, 12; Amos. 9:13-15; Micah 4; Joel 2): the restoration of Israel to greatness and of the coming of a new king like the great king David; God's healing the world's sicknesses and hatreds; God's people being freed from oppression; renewed prosperity and justice for the poor; war and weapons of war being abolished; death being swallowed up and tears being wiped away; alienation between God and man being removed; God's Spirit being poured out in a new way; and a new heaven and a new earth.

D. In the first century, Israel was weak, poor, and under the rule of pagans (the Romans).

1. Graeme Goldsworthy writes in *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 196, "The return from exile results in only a pale shadow of the predicted glorious kingdom for the people of God." Thomas Schreiner states in *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 44-45:

The prophets promised a new creation, a new temple, a new covenant, and a new king. The exile would be over, and the wilderness would bloom.

The great promises in the prophets, however, were not fulfilled when the exile ended in 536 B.C. Israel did return from Babylon and a temple was built, yet the temple was insignificant in comparison to the Solomonic temple. Nor was the nation enjoying glorious prosperity, the kind of glory envisioned in Isa. 40-66. Israel was small, struggling, and under the oppression of former powers. Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi document the low spiritual state of the nation. Nor did matters improve in the four hundred years before the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. Israel was a pawn in the struggle between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. A brief period of freedom dawned with the Hasmoneans in the second and first centuries BC, but the interlude was brief, and soon the Romans swept in and subjugated Israel, appointing the Herodians and procurators to rule the land.

2. The people longed and prayed for the coming of God, for his final intervention when he would set all things right and rule in the fullest sense to the blessing of his people. In Mk. 15:43 Joseph of Arimathea is described as one who was "waiting for the kingdom of God" (TNIV). He was waiting for that state in which God expresses his sovereignty by "heavenizing" creation, by transforming this fallen creation into the divine utopia, into an eternal state of love, joy, peace, and ultimate fellowship.

3. It was into that religious, social, and political environment that Jesus came saying, "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk. 1:15) and "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mat. 12:28) and "for behold, the kingdom of God is among you [in your midst]" (Lk. 17:21b).¹

E. Jesus came announcing the arrival of God's final intervention in history, the ultimate expression of his kingly rule on the world.

1. Wenham writes (p. 25):

To sum up: in proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus was announcing the coming of God's revolution and of God's new world, as promised in the Old Testament. God was at last intervening, Jesus declared, to establish his reign over everything, to bring salvation to his

¹ Note that the "kingdom of heaven" probably is just another way of referring to the kingdom of God. Wenham writes (p. 23):

[T]he phrase 'kingdom of heaven' is just an alternate way of saying 'kingdom of God' . . . Matthew, writing his distinctively Jewish gospel, uses the alternative expression because it refers to God indirectly (as Jews often did) rather than directly, and perhaps because it makes it clear that the kingdom in question is not a purely this-worldly kingdom. And yet the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed was not just up in heaven; it was more like an invasion of earth by heaven!

people and renewal and reconciliation to the world. But fortunately Jesus did not announce his message in such general theological terms; he announced it primarily through vivid, concrete parables.

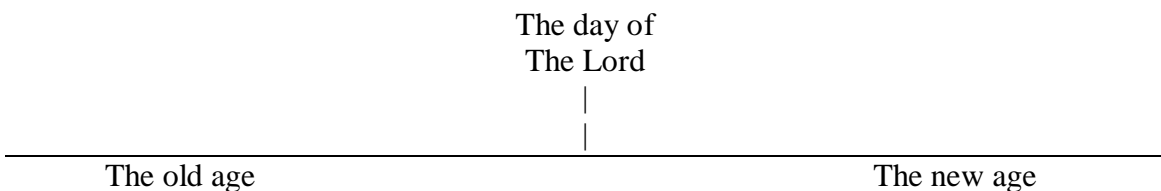
2. This naturally created excitement in some quarters and suspicion and opposition in others. It also led to misunderstanding because of incorrect ideas the Jews had about the coming and nature of the kingdom of God.

a. Many of them thought the kingdom would arrive through or in conjunction with human military conquest, and more specifically, through or in conjunction with the expulsion of the Romans and their supporters from Palestine. But as Wenham notes (p. 23):

Jesus had in mind a bigger revolution than that: God's revolution was to be a total revolution overthrowing Satan and evil and bringing earth and heaven back in harmony, and this would not be accomplished by force of arms, but – unbelievably so far as the disciples were concerned, and who blames them? – through suffering and death.

b. They also expected the kingdom to come suddenly and decisively. They thought God's final intervention would be a one-shot deal – the Day of the Lord – where the old age would be terminated abruptly and the new, glorious age would begin. You remember in Lk. 19:11 where the people supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately upon Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem.

(1) That aspect of their thinking has been diagrammed as follows (Wenham, 63):



(2) This caused people to wonder how Jesus could be ushering in the kingdom of God when the hallmarks of the old age – death, decay, suffering, etc. – still were present. You remember how even John the Baptist began to question as he sat in Herod's jail whether Jesus was in fact the one who would bring in the kingdom of God (Mat. 11:2-3; Lk. 7:18-19).

(3) Jesus explained in a number of parables (and elsewhere) that the kingdom comes in two stages. It is introduced or inaugurated,² then there is an

² The kingdom was inaugurated through a complex of events – through Christ's ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the Spirit – which are seen as a unit. It was present prior to Pentecost in the sense its inauguration had already begun in the person and work of Jesus, but that inauguration was not completed until Pentecost.

interval of time, and then there is a decisive intervention when the kingdom is consummated or finalized.

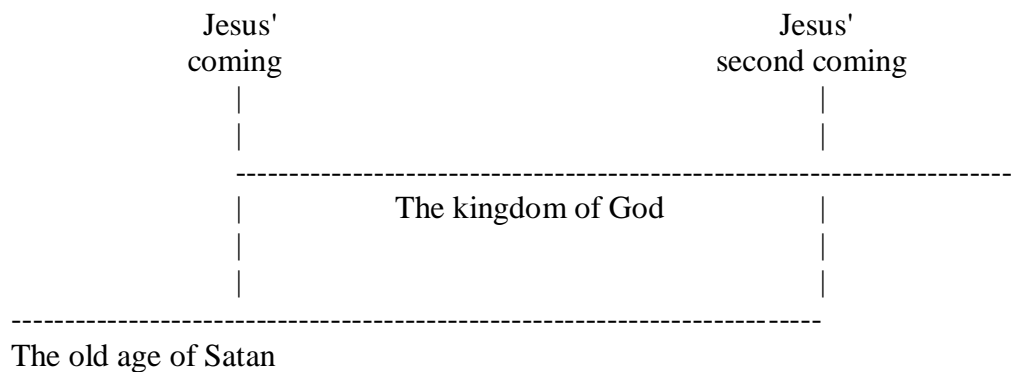
(a) Samuel Mikolaski states in "The Theology of the New Testament" in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 1:471:

While Scripture recognizes the reign of God as being eternal, it acknowledges that his sovereignty in the evil-infected world is only partial. Scripture declares that God's universal reign will be achieved at Christ's second advent. This reign, however, has already broken into history in the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

(b) Preben Vang and Terry Carter state in *Telling God's Story: The Biblical Narrative from Beginning to End* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 199:

According to Jesus, the kingdom of God is already here. Jesus inaugurated it! The "age to come" has broken into the "present age." God is making his presence felt already now. Yet the kingdom of God is not here in full. Evil still exists. God does not yet fill "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). This will only happen at the time of consummation when Christ comes back. We now live between the times. The promised "age to come" has already begun but is not here in full. The "old age" is still here as well.

(4) Wenham (p. 63) diagrams the concept like this:



F. There are texts in addition to the parables that indicate the kingdom of God is a present reality between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ, and there are texts in addition to the parables that indicate the kingdom of God is a future hope. Thus, Robert Stein writes in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *The Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 453:

The kingdom of God is both now and not yet. Thus the kingdom of God is "realized" and present in one sense, and yet . . . future in another sense. This is not a contradiction but simply the nature of the kingdom. The kingdom has come in fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. A new covenant has been established. But its final manifestation and consummation lie in the future. Until then, we are to be good and faithful servants (Luke 19:11-27).

G. It is at Christ's return that the redemption he began nearly 2,000 years ago will come to completion.

1. That is the time when in Rev. 11:15 the heavenly voices say, "The kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." And that is the time when in Rev. 11:17 the twenty-four elders say, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power *and begun* to reign." At Christ's return, the kingdom he inaugurated with his first coming will be consummated or finalized.

2. This expectation is what is behind Peter's statement in Acts 3:20-21 that Christ must remain in heaven "until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (TNIV).

3. And it is the coming of the kingdom in this consummated sense for which Jesus instructed the disciples to pray in Mat. 6:10: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

II. Some Aspects of the Second Coming

A. The N.T. leaves no doubt that Christ will return.

1. Jesus promises to return or speaks of his return in numerous passages of Scripture (Mat. 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 42, 44, 25:31, 26:64; Mk. 13:26; Lk. 21:27; Jn. 14:1-3; Rev. 22:20). Peter and Paul also speak frequently of the event (Peter – Acts 3:17-21; 1 Pet. 1:7, 13; 2 Pet. 1:16, 3:4, 10, 12; Paul – 1 Cor. 1:7, 15:23; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Thess. 2:19, 3:13, 4:15-17, 5:23; 2 Thess. 1:7, 10, 2:1, 8; 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8; Tit. 2:12-13). John refers to the Second Coming several times (1 Jn. 2:28, 3:2; Rev. 1:7), and James, Jude, and the writer of Hebrews each mention it (Jas. 5:8; Jude 14-15; Heb. 9:27-28). Even the angels declare that Jesus is returning (Acts 1:10-11).

2. Millard Erickson rightly concludes, "Certainly the second coming is one of the most widely taught doctrines in the New Testament." Erickson (1985), 1187.

B. The Second Coming described in Scripture is a personal return of Christ. It is Jesus himself who is coming back, not simply the influence of his teaching or the consequences of his judgment.

1. In Jn. 14:3, Jesus consoles his disciples regarding his imminent return to heaven by assuring them, "I will come again and will receive (or take) you to myself, so that where I am you also may be."

2. In Acts 1:11, the angels say to the disciples who just watched Jesus ascend to heaven, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

3. In keeping with that angelic proclamation, Paul says in 1 Thess. 4:16, For the Lord *himself* will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.

4. John says in 1 Jn. 3:2 that when Jesus appears "we shall see *him* as he is."

5. This personal return will be bodily, visible, and glorious (Mat. 24:27, 30, 25:31, 26:64; Mk. 13:26; Lk. 21:27; Acts 1:10-11; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 2 Thess. 1:6-10; 2 Pet. 3:3-4, 8-13; Rev. 1:7). There will be no mistaking the Second Coming. It will be as obvious as lightning that lights up the entire sky.

C. The time of Christ's return has not been revealed.

1. As Jesus said in Mk. 13:32-33, "But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is." See also, Mat. 24:44, 25:13; Lk. 12:40; 1 Thess. 5:1-2. History is littered with people and groups who claimed to know when the Lord was returning, all of whom turned out to be wrong. J. Garrett (1995), 714-715.

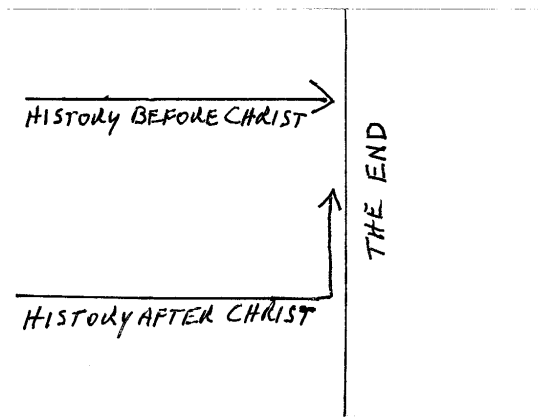
2. Though God has revealed that certain things will precede the Second Coming, which in my understanding includes the rise of Antichrist and the accompanying rebellion and deception, Jesus may come "at any time" in the sense that all the precursors can occur quickly. It is similar to when someone who lives where the weather is volatile says "It can rain here at any time." He does not mean it can rain at any *instant* or *moment*, that it can rain without clouds having gathered; he means that clouds can gather and pour down rain quickly.

3. With the Christ event, the end has drawn near in that the *necessary grounds or basis* for the final eternal state has occurred. The victory has been won by Christ; his atoning death purchased not only our reconciliation but that of all creation, which was cursed in connection with Adam's sin. From the time of Christ's redemptive work, the final state has been, as we might say, "a done deal." All that remains is for the consequence of Christ's achievement to play out.

a. When the victory that has already been won by Christ will be "cashed out" or fully expressed, when God will send the Christ to consummate the

kingdom, to bring history to a close with the eternal state, is a matter of God's unknown timing. Peter specifically cautions his readers in 2 Pet. 3:8-10 not to allow the apparent slowness of Christ's return to become a cause for doubting the certainty of it. He tells them that God operates in his own dimension of time – with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day – so that he cannot be judged by human perceptions of slowness.

b. Since Christ's achievement, creation has been on the verge of the end. This (poorly drawn) diagram may help you in conceptualize the idea. It's from J. H. Newman, a 19th-century pastor, and was cited in the commentaries on 1 John by F. F. Bruce, I. Howard Marshall, and Gary Burge. As long as this reality, history as we know it, continues, it does so on the brink of Christ's return and the consummation of all things. However long God in his purposes extends the time since Christ, Christ's coming is ever at our door.



c. Further illustrating the concept

(1) To use a mundane analogy, it is as if all the defenders in a football play had been blocked so hard that they were rendered unconscious. When the last defender is knocked out, the touchdown is already secured at that point; the only question is how long the runner will choose to take before crossing the goal line.

(2) Or think of a will that calls for the executor to bestow on the heirs an inheritance at whatever time the executor chooses. Once the testator dies, the inheritance draws near in the sense it now may come at any time. With the testator's death, what is necessary for the exercise of the executor's discretion has occurred. From the testator's death on, the heirs live on the brink of their inheritance but without knowing when it would arrive.

d. Here's how Douglas Moo puts the general point in *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 224:

With the death and resurrection of Jesus and pouring out of the Spirit, the "last days" have been inaugurated. This final age of salvation will find its

climax in the return of Christ in glory. But – and here is the crucial point – the length of the age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the "last days" would last (cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical timetable, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, "near," or "imminent." Every generation of Christians lives (or should live!) with the consciousness that the *parousia* could occur at any time and that one needs to make decisions and choose values based on that realization. So it was as true in James's day as it is in ours: we need to *be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near*.

e. Some claim that the N.T. writers erred in saying that the end had drawn near or that Jesus was returning "soon" because history revealed that he did *not* come soon. But in the sense explained above, Christ's coming was "soon" in every generation. Robert Shank writes in *Until: The Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1982), 395-396:

Said a professor of theology whom I know

The apostolic Church believed Christ would return in their day. He did not, and they were wrong. Other generations of the Church believed that Christ would come in their day, but time proved them all wrong. If we expect Christ to return in our day, time will no doubt prove us wrong.

Not at all. In every generation of the Church, all who expected Christ to return in their time were right, and all who did not were wrong, terribly *wrong*. Christ, the apostles, and the entire NT enjoin upon us no other attitude than to expect Jesus to return in our time. Whether he returns in our day is God's responsibility; whether we expect his return is our responsibility, for which we must give account. Whether he returns in our generation or not, we are wrong if we fail to expect him. In every generation of the Church, "the Lord is at hand." This is the time frame of the NT, including the Revelation.

III. Resurrection of the Dead

A. Regarding the resurrection of the dead, there are a couple of direct statements about it in the O.T. (Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2) and some allusions to the subject in Psalms (Ps. 17:15, 49:15, 73:24-25), but the matter is not clearly spelled out until the N.T.

1. In Jn. 5:28-29 Jesus says "an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice and shall come forth." When he was questioned by the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection, he accused them of error and went on to argue for the truth of the resurrection on the basis of the O.T. (Mk. 12:18-27).

2. In 1 Cor. 15:12-20 Paul says that the future resurrection of the dead is as certain as the past resurrection of Christ.

B. The resurrection of the dead (and transformation of the living) will occur when the Lord returns (1 Cor. 15:20-26, 51-54; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Thess. 4:13-16; 1 Jn. 3:2). Both believers and unbelievers, the saved and the condemned, will be raised to life at that time (Dan. 12:2; Jn. 5:28-29; Acts 24:14-15; see also, Mat. 25:31-46 and Rev. 20:11-15). Note that sometimes a reference to the resurrection relates exclusively to the resurrection of the redeemed, what Jesus calls in Lk. 14:14 "the resurrection of the righteous."

C. It is important to understand that in the resurrection at Christ's return the *body* will be restored to life (or transformed in the case of those living on earth at the time – 1 Cor. 15:50-52; 1 Thess. 4:13-17).

1. In other words, the resurrection is not about the mere post-death survival of the spirit or soul. That is simply death, not victory over death!

a. In Rom. 8:11, Paul says: "And if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your **mortal bodies** through his Spirit who dwells in you."

b. In Rom. 8:23, Paul says: "and not only [that], but even ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we ourselves also groan in ourselves while eagerly awaiting [our] adoption as sons, the redemption of **our bodies**."

c. In Phil. 3:20-21, Paul says: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious **body**."

d. This is the central idea of 1 Corinthians 15 (see especially, vv. 20-23, 42-44, 49). Christ was raised bodily – the tomb was empty – and in vv. 20, 23 he is described as the *firstfruits* of those who will be raised in his footsteps. Our resurrection is tied to his, so much so that in 2 Cor. 4:14 Paul says "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also *with Jesus*." We are all the same harvest. Paul says in Col. 1:18 that he is "the beginning, the *firstborn* from the dead" (see also Rev. 1:5).

e. Jesus said in Jn. 5:28-29 that "an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." This is the *raising up* that will occur on the last day according to Jn. 6:39-40, 44, 54.

f. A bodily resurrection is implicit in Paul's condemnation of Hymenaeus and Philetus for claiming that the resurrection had already occurred (2 Tim. 2:18). As many commentators recognize, these heretics probably were claiming that the

resurrection happened in the Christian's conversion, in his or her dying and rising with Christ *spiritually*, and thus they denied the bodily nature of the promised resurrection.

2. On the other hand, the resurrection body is not simply a resuscitated natural body. Rather, our natural body will be transformed into a supernatural body, what Paul in 1 Cor. 15:44 calls a "spiritual body."

a. Paul does not say the dead body is raised "a spirit"; he says it is raised "a spiritual *body*." The contrast is not between a *physical/material* body and a *spiritual* body but between a *natural* body and a *spiritual* body. Resurrection bodies are "spiritual" not in the sense of being nonphysical (made of spirit), which would be an oxymoron given the inherent physicalness of the word "body," but in the sense of being supernatural, in the sense they are imperishable, glorious, and powerful. This is recognized by a broad range of scholars.

b. Gordon Fee, for example, states:

[T]he two adjectives "natural" (*psychikos*) and "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*) are used with the noun "body" (*soma*) to describe its present earthly and future heavenly expressions respectively. . . .

[T]hey do not describe the "stuff" or composition of the body; . . . Rather, they describe the one body in terms of its essential characteristics as earthly, on the one hand, and therefore belonging to the life of the present age, and as heavenly, on the other, and therefore belonging to the life of the Spirit in the age to come. It is "spiritual," not in the sense of "immaterial" but of "supernatural," . . .

The transformed body, therefore, is not composed of "spirit"; it is a *body* adapted to the eschatological existence that is under the ultimate domination of the Spirit.

c. N. T. Wright states in *Surprised By Hope* (p. 43-44):

[F]rom the start within early Christianity it was built in as part of the belief in resurrection that the new body, though it certainly will be a body in the sense of a physical object occupying space and time, will be a *transformed* body, a body whose material, created from the old material, will have new properties. . . .

It is of course Paul, in a much misunderstood passage in 1 Corinthians 15, who sets this out most clearly and to whom many, though not all, subsequent writers look back. He speaks of two sorts of body, the present one and the future one. He uses two key adjectives to describe these two bodies. Unfortunately, many translations get him radically wrong at this point, leading to the widespread supposition that for Paul the new body would be a spiritual body in the sense of a nonmaterial body, a body that in Jesus' case wouldn't have left an empty

tomb behind it. It can be demonstrated in great detail, philologically and exegetically, that this is precisely not what Paul meant.

3. 1 Cor. 15:50 does not bar all things physical from entering the eternal state. Paul there says, "Now I say this, brothers, that flesh and blood is not able to inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." He is referring to flesh and blood *as presently constituted*, that is, as subject to weakness, decay, and death. He was not saying that a natural body that was miraculously transformed into a supernatural ("spiritual") body (being imperishable, glorious, powerful, and immortal) could not, in some sense, be said to consist of flesh and bone (or blood). Indeed, Christ's resurrection body was a transformed body that was no longer subject to death (Rom. 6:9), but the Lord still described it in Lk. 24:39 as "flesh and bones." And our lowly bodies will be transformed so that they will be like his glorious body (Phil. 3:21).

4. The idea that Christians will spend eternity with God as spirits in some nonphysical realm has seeped into much Christian thinking, but it is wrong. Listen to how Wright states it in *Surprised By Hope* (p. 194):

Mention salvation, and almost all Western Christians assume that you mean going to heaven when you die. But a moment's thought, in the light of all we have said so far, reveals that this simply cannot be right. Salvation means, of course, rescue. But what are we ultimately to be rescued from? The obvious answer is death. But if, when we die, all that happens is that our bodies decompose while our souls (or whatever other word we want to use for our continuing existence) go on elsewhere, this doesn't mean we've been *rescued from* death. It simply means that we've died.

And if God's good creation – of the world, of life as we know it, of our glorious and remarkable bodies, brains, and bloodstreams – really *is* good, and if God wants to reaffirm that goodness in a wonderful act of new creation at the last, then to see the death of the body and the escape of the soul as salvation is not simply slightly off course, in need of a few subtle alterations and modifications. It is totally and utterly wrong. It is colluding with death. It is conniving at death's destruction of God's good, image-bearing human creatures while consoling ourselves with the (essentially non-Christian and non-Jewish) thought that the really important bit of ourselves is saved from this wicked, nasty body and this sad, dark world of space, time, and matter! As we have seen, the whole of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, speaks out against such nonsense. *It is, however, what most Western Christians, including most Bible Christians of whatever sort, actually believe.* This is a serious state of affairs, reinforced not only in popular teaching but also in liturgies, public prayers, hymns, and homilies of every kind.

5. Roger Olson writes in *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 311, 314:

The bodily resurrection of all people at some time after death has played a prominent role in Christian teaching throughout history. In spite of a pronounced tendency among untutored lay Christians to focus attention on immortality of souls and neglect bodily resurrection, the fathers of the church, medieval Christian thinkers, all the Protestant Reformers and faithful modern biblical scholars and theologians have emphasized the bodily resurrection as the blessed hope of believers in Christ. . . .

It would be impossible to discover any single point of greater agreement in the history of Christian thought than this one: *the future bodily resurrection of the dead is the blessed hope of all who are in Christ Jesus by faith*. Over two millennia the church's leaders and faithful theologians have unanimously taught this above the immortality of souls and as more important than some ethereal intermediate state between bodily death and bodily resurrection when Christ returns. And yet, as we lamented earlier, it seems that the vast majority of Christians do not know this and neglect belief in bodily resurrection in favor of belief in immediate post-mortem heavenly, spiritual existence as ghost-like beings (or even angels!) "forever with the Lord in heaven."

IV. New Heavens and New Earth

A. Not only will our bodies be transformed to be suitable for eternity with God, but all of creation will be transformed, as Paul explains in Rom. 8:18-23.

1. According to Eph. 1:7-10, God's will for the handling of the end of history, his will for the management of the completion of the ages, is to unify heaven and earth in Christ. The eternal state, which will come about in conjunction with Christ's return, will be a redeemed and transformed creation, a "heavenized" creation from which sin and all its consequences have been expunged. The curse will have been lifted (Rev. 22:3), and creation itself will have been freed from its slavery to decay (Rom. 8:20-21). It is what the Bible calls the new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-3; see also, Isa. 65:17, 66:22), the divine utopia in which Christians will dwell forever in resurrection bodies and in which there will be no evil, no death, no mourning, no crying, and no pain (Rev. 21:1-4).

2. Some have misread certain texts as being at odds with the notion of our eternal existence being lived out in a redeemed creation.

a. When Jesus said in Jn. 18:36 that his kingdom was not "of this world," he was not saying it had nothing to do with this physical world. He was saying that his kingdom does not originate or derive from this world. As Colin Kruse notes in *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 359, he was saying that "[h]is kingdom is given by God, not established by human struggle. His kingdom is active in this world, and will one day come with power, but its power is not of this world, it is of God."

b. Lk. 17:21 should be translated the kingdom of God is "among you" or "in your midst" rather than the kingdom of God is "within you." There is a reason it is so translated by the NAS, NASU, RSV, NRSV, NEB, REB, ESV, NET, NJB. The NIV went with "within you," but that was changed in the TNIV to "in your midst." The notes to the NET (New English Translation) state that "[in your midst] is a far better translation than 'in you.' Jesus would never tell the hostile Pharisees that the kingdom was inside them. The reference is to Jesus present in their midst. He brings the kingdom." So this verse should not be used to argue that the kingdom of God is some kind of internal perception that is divorced from anything physical.

c. Jn. 14:2-3 is not inconsistent with the idea that saints will spend eternity on a redeemed physical creation. Those verses state (NASU): "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, [there] you may be also." I think Jesus is saying that through his death, resurrection, and ascension (his going) he is making it possible for them to spend eternity with God the Father (preparing dwelling places in God's house). Having done that, he will come again, not to take them away to some nonphysical heavenly realm but to receive them to himself in the consummated kingdom, in the new heaven and new earth that will be created at his return. That is where he will be and thus where we will spend eternity with him.

c. The reference in 1 Thess. 4:17 to resurrected and transformed saints being caught up together in the clouds to meet the descending Lord in the air does not mean we will be taken from the earth. The phrase translated "to meet" may well be a technical term that refers to the ancient civic custom of publicly welcoming important visitors to one's city. Daniel Lewis states in his book *3 Crucial Questions About the Last Days* (p. 114), "What this word envisions is Christians leaving the 'gates of the world' to welcome Christ back as he returns to earth."

3. As Wayne Grudem states in *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 613:

We as resurrected men and women will live forever in "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13). We will live in a renewed earth that "will be set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:21) and become like a new Garden of Eden. . . . In this very material, physical, renewed universe, it seems that we will need to live as human beings with physical bodies, suitable for life in God's renewed physical creation. Specifically, Jesus' physical resurrection body affirms the goodness of God's original creation of man not as a mere spirit like the angels, but as a creature with a physical body that was "very good." We must not fall into the error of thinking that nonmaterial existence is somehow a better form of existence for creatures: when God made us as the pinnacle of his creation, he gave us physical bodies.

B. "Within the Protestant world, there has been disagreement as to whether the earth is to be destroyed completely and replaced, or just changed and renewed" (Grudem, 1160). I think Grudem has it right when he states (p. 1160-1161):

The [radical-transformation] position seems preferable here, for it is difficult to think that God would entirely annihilate his original creation, thereby seeming to give the devil the last word and scrapping the creation that was originally "very good" (Gen. 1:31). The passages above that speak of shaking and removing the earth and of the first earth passing away may simply refer to its existence in its present form, not its very existence itself, and even 2 Peter 3:10, which speaks of the elements dissolving and the earth and the work on it being burned up, may not be speaking of the earth as a planet but rather the surface things on the earth (that is, much of the ground and the things on the ground).

C. At his first coming, Jesus not only announced the kingdom's arrival but also demonstrated its character and gave us a foretaste of it. John Piper remarks in a sermon titled "Christ and Cancer":

The answer to why Jesus did not raise all the dead is that, contrary to the Jewish expectation, the first coming of the Messiah was *not* the consummation and full redemption of this fallen age. The first coming was rather to purchase that consummation, illustrate its character, and bring a *foretaste* of it to his people. Therefore, Jesus raised some of the dead to illustrate that he has that power and one day will come again and exercise it for all his people. And he healed the sick to illustrate that in his final kingdom this is how it will be. There will be no more crying or pain any more.

V. The Judgment

A. Following the resurrection, there will be a great final judgment of all people (Mat. 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50, 16:27, 24:29-31, 25:31-46; Acts 17:30-31; Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Thess. 1:6-10; 2 Pet. 3:7; Jude 14-15; Rev. 20:11-15, 22:12). Even angels, at least the rebellious ones, will be judged at that time (1 Cor. 6:3; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6).

B. The criterion of the final judgment will be one's relationship with Jesus Christ (Mat. 13:24-30, 36-43, 25:31-46; Jn. 5:24, 14:6; Rom. 5:9-11, 6:23, 8:1; Rev. 20:15, 21:27). Those verses that speak of looking to one's works as a basis of judgment (e.g., Mat. 7:21-23, 25:31-46; Jn. 5:29; Rev. 20:12) simply reflect the fact that biblical faith is accompanied by faithful living. Our obedience does not gain our standing with God; it merely attests to the presence of saving faith.

C. The judgment at Christ's return will be permanent and irrevocable. The righteous and the ungodly will be sent as resurrected or transformed persons to their respective places

– heaven and hell – where they will live for eternity (Mat. 25:34, 41, 46). For the resurrected, those who died prior to Christ's return, the judgment will be in keeping with their initial separation at death, the separation by which their spirits were assigned to different locations (heaven or the sorrowful realm of *Hades*).

D. The redeemed will dwell forever in the very presence of God in a new creation, what in several places is called "new heaven(s) and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17, 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-3).