

The Millennium and the End of Sin

Throughout history there have been those who have waxed eloquent about the horrors of hell, playing on people's fear in an attempt to bring them to worship God. But what kind of god do they portray?

How will God finally get rid of evil? What will happen to Satan? What will keep sin from erecting its ugly head once more? How can a just God also be loving?

Events at the Beginning of the Millennium

During the millennium, the thousand-year period of which the twentieth chapter of Revelation speaks, Satan's influence over the earth will be restricted, and Christ will reign with His saints (Rev. 20:1-4).

The Second Advent. Revelation 19 and 20 belong together; there is no break between these chapters. They describe Christ's coming (Rev. 19:11-21) and immediately continue with the millennium, their sequence indicating that the millennium begins when Christ returns.

Revelation represents the three powers that gather the nations of the world to oppose Christ's work and His people immediately before the Second Advent, as a dragon, a beast, and a false prophet (Rev. 16:13). When "the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies" assemble to make war against Christ at the time of His return, the beast and the false prophet are destroyed (Rev. 19:19, 20). What follows in Revelation 20, the chapter on the millennium, deals with the fate of the third member of the demonic trio, the dragon. He is taken captive and cast into the bottomless pit, where he remains for 1000 years.

As we saw in chapter 24, it is with Christ's second advent, when the kingdoms of this world are destroyed, that God sets up His kingdom of glory—a kingdom that will last forever (Dan. 2:44). It is then that His people will begin their reign.

The First Resurrection. At the Second Advent the first resurrection takes place. The righteous, the "blessed and holy," are raised—for "over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years" (Rev. 20:6; see chapter 25 of this book).

The Righteous Go to Heaven. After the resurrection of the righteous dead, they and the living saints are caught up "to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17). Then Christ will fulfill the promise He made just before He left this world: "I go to prepare a place for you. And 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" (John 14:2, 3). Jesus described the place to which He will take His followers as "My Father's house," where there are "many mansions," or dwelling places (John 14:2). Here Jesus refers to the New Jerusalem, which does not come to this earth until the end of the millennium. At the Second Advent, then, when the righteous "meet the Lord in the air," their destination is heaven—not the earth that they have just left. Christ does not establish His kingdom of glory on the earth at this time. He does that at the end of the millennium.

LAST DAYS	1000 YEARS (Millennium)	ETERNITY
	First Resurrection	Second Resurrection
Christ Returns	Saints Reign With Christ (in Heaven) Engage in Review Phase of Judgment	Christ, Saints, City Descend
Saints Taken to Heaven (both the resurrected dead and the living)		Wicked Resurrected
Living Wicked Slain (wicked dead remain in graves)		Satan Loosed (organizes attack on holy city)
Satan Bound (Confined to earth)		Executive Phase of Judgment Satan, Sinners, Effects of Sin Are Destroyed
Earth Desolated (last plagues; earthquake; impact of second advent)		Earth Renewed as Eternal Home of the Saints

Christ's Enemies Are Slain. Christ compared His return to what happened at the Flood and in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 24:37-39; Luke 17:28-30). His comparison makes two points: first, that the destruction that came caught the wicked by surprise; and second, that what came was destruction—the Flood "took them all away" (Matt. 24:39). The fire and brimstone that rained down upon Sodom "destroyed them all" (Luke 17:29; see also Matt. 13:38-40). At the Second Advent Christ will descend from heaven with His armies as the rider on the white horse whose name is "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" and strike the rebellious nations of the world. After the beast and the false prophet are destroyed, "the rest" of Satan's followers will die and there will be no survivors, for they "were killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse. And all the birds were filled with their flesh" (Rev. 19:21).

Describing this scene, Scripture has said, "The Lord comes out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; the earth will also disclose her blood, and will no more cover her slain" (Isa. 26:21).

The Earth Becomes Desolate. Since the righteous ascend to be with the Lord and the wicked are destroyed at His appearing, the earth stands for a time without human inhabitants. Scripture points to such a situation. Jeremiah said, "I beheld the earth, and indeed it was without form, and void; and the heavens, they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and indeed they trembled, and all the hills moved back and forth. I beheld, and indeed there was no man" (Jer. 4:23-25). Jeremiah's use of the terminology found in Genesis 1:2, "without form, and void," indicates that the earth is to become as chaotic as it was at the beginning of Creation.

Satan Is Bound. The events that take place at this time were foreshadowed in the scapegoat ritual of the Day of Atonement in Israel's sanctuary service. On the Day of Atonement the high priest cleansed the sanctuary with the atoning blood of the Lord's goat. Only after this atonement was fully completed did the ritual involving Azazel, the goat that symbolized Satan, begin (see chapter 23). Laying his hands on its head, the high priest confessed "all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions,

concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat" (Lev. 16:21). And the scapegoat was sent into the wilderness, "an uninhabited land" (Lev. 16:22).

Similarly, Christ, in the heavenly sanctuary, has been ministering the benefits of His completed atonement to His people; at His return He will redeem them and give them eternal life. When He has completed this work of redemption and the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, He will place the sins of His people upon Satan, the originator and instigator of evil. In no way can it be said that Satan atones for the sins of believers—Christ has fully done that. But Satan must bear the responsibility of all the sin he has caused those who are saved to commit. And as "a fit man" led the scapegoat into an uninhabited land, so God will banish Satan to the desolate and uninhabited earth (see chapter 23 of this book).

John's vision of the millennium vividly portrayed the banishment of Satan. He saw that at the beginning of the thousand years "the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan" is chained and confined to "the bottomless pit" (Rev. 20:2, 3). This symbolically conveys the temporary ending of Satan's activities of persecution and deception; "he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished" (Rev. 20:3).

The term John uses—"bottomless pit" (Greek, *abussos*)—appropriately describes the earth's condition at this time. Battered by the seven plagues that immediately precede Christ's coming (see particularly Rev. 16:18-21) and covered with the bodies of the wicked, the earth is a scene of utter desolation.

Confined to this earth, Satan is "bound" by a chain of circumstances. Since the earth is devoid of any human life, Satan has no one to tempt or to persecute. He is bound in the sense that he has nothing to do.

Events During the Millennium

Christ in Heaven With the Redeemed. At His second advent Christ takes His followers to heaven, to the dwelling places He has prepared for them in the New Jerusalem. Like Moses and the Israelites, the redeemed, filled with gratitude, sing a song of their deliverance—"the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: 'Great and marvellous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!'" (Rev. 15:3).

The Saints Reign With Christ. It is during the millennium that Christ will fulfil His promise to give the overcomers "power over the nations" (Rev. 2:26). Daniel saw that after the destruction of Christ's enemies "the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High" (Dan. 7:27). Those whom Christ raises in the first resurrection will reign with Him for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4). But in what sense can the saints be said to reign if they are in heaven and all the wicked are dead? Their reign will consist of involvement in an important phase of Christ's governing.

The Judgment of the Wicked. John saw that during the millennium the saints would be involved in judgment; he saw "thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them" (Rev. 20:4). This is the time of the judgment of Satan and his angels that Scripture notes (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). It's the time when Paul's declaration that the saints would judge the world and even the angels (1 Cor. 6:2, 3) will come to pass.

The millennial judgment does not decide who is to be saved or lost. God makes that decision before the Second Advent; all those who were not either resurrected or translated then are forever lost. The judgment in which the righteous participate serves the purpose of answering any questions the righteous may have as to why the wicked are lost. God wants those to whom He has given eternal life to have full confidence in His leadership, so He will reveal to them the operations of His mercy and justice.

Imagine you were in heaven and you found that one of your loved ones whom you certainly expected to be there was not. Such a case might cause you to question God's justice—and that kind of doubt lies at the very base of sin. To lay to rest forever any occasion for such doubts—and so to ensure that sin will never rise again—God will provide the answers to these questions during this review phase of the millennial judgment.

In this work the redeemed fulfil a crucial role in the great controversy between good and evil. "They will confirm to their eternal satisfaction how earnestly and patiently God cared for lost sinners. They will perceive how heedlessly and stubbornly sinners spurned and rejected His love. They will discover that even seemingly mild sinners secretly cherished ugly selfishness rather than accept the value system of their Lord and Saviour."

Satan's Time for Reflection. During the millennium Satan will suffer intensely. Confined, with his angels, to a desolate earth, he cannot carry on the deceptions that had constantly occupied his time. He is forced to view the results of his rebellion against God and His law; he must contemplate the part he has played in the controversy between good and evil. He can only look to the future with fear for the dreadful penalty he must suffer because of all the evil for which he is responsible.

Events at the End of the Millennium

At the end of the thousand years "the rest of the dead"—the wicked—will be resurrected, thus releasing Satan from the inactivity that has imprisoned him (Rev. 20:5, 7). Deceiving the wicked once again, he leads them against "the camp of the saints and the beloved city [the New Jerusalem]" (Rev. 20:9), which, with Christ, have descended from heaven by this time.

Christ, the Saints, and the City Descend. Christ descends to earth again, with the saints and the New Jerusalem, for two purposes. He will end the great controversy by executing the decisions of the millennial judgment, and He will purify and renew the earth so that He can establish on it His eternal kingdom. Then, in the fullest sense, "the Lord shall be King over all the earth" (Zech. 14:9).

The Resurrection of Condemnation. Now the moment has arrived that will complete the fulfilment of Christ's promise that "'all who are in the graves will hear His voice'" (John 5:28). At His second advent Christ brought the righteous dead from their graves in the first resurrection, "the resurrection of life." Now the other resurrection Jesus spoke of will take place, "the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:29). Revelation also refers to this resurrection: "The rest of the dead [those who were not raised in the first resurrection] did not live again until the thousand years were finished" (Rev. 20:5).

Satan's Captivity Ends. The resurrection of the wicked at the end of the thousand years releases Satan from his captivity "for a little while" (Rev. 20:3). In his last attempt to challenge God's government he "will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four

corners of the earth" (Rev. 20:8). Since the wicked are raised with the same rebellion spirit they each possessed when they died, his work will not be difficult.

The Attack on the City. In his final deception Satan seeks to inspire the wicked with the hope of capturing the kingdom of God by force. Gathering the nations of the world, he leads them against the beloved city (Rev. 20:8, 9). "The wicked who stubbornly refused an entrance into the City of God through the merits of Christ's sacrificial atonement, now determine to gain admission and control by siege and battle."

The fact that the wicked, as soon as God gives them life again, turn against Him and attempt to overthrow His kingdom confirms the decision He has made about their fate. In this way His name and character, which Satan has sought to besmirch, will be fully vindicated before all.

The Great White Throne Judgment. John indicates that when God's enemies have surrounded the city and are ready to attack it, God sets up His great white throne. As the entire human race meets around this throne—some secure inside the city, others outside, terrified in the presence of the Judge—God will carry out the last phase of judgment. This is the time Christ spoke of when He said, "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out" (Luke 13:28).

To carry out this executive phase of the judgment, God's record books will be opened. "And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books" (Rev. 20:12). Then God pronounces the sentence of doom.

Why does God raise these people to life only to end their existence again? During the millennium, the redeemed have had an opportunity to examine the justice of God's treatment of every intelligent being in the universe. Now the lost themselves—including Satan and his angels—will confirm the justice of God's ways.

It is at this great white throne judgment that Paul's words, "We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (Rom. 14:10), will be fulfilled. There all creatures—unfallen and fallen, saved and lost—bow the knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10, 11; cf. Isa. 45:22, 23). Then the question of God's justice will have been forever resolved. Those who receive eternal life will have an unshakable faith in Him. Never again will sin mar the universe or wreak havoc on its inhabitants.

Satan and Sinners Destroyed. Immediately upon their sentencing, Satan, his angels, and his human followers receive their punishment. They are to die an eternal death. "Fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured" all the unsaved (Rev. 20:9). The very surface of the earth outside the city appears to melt, becoming a vast lake of fire for the "judgment and perdition of ungodly men" (2 Peter 3:7). The "day of the Lord's vengeance" (Isa. 34:8), upon which He will perform "his strange act" (Isa. 28:21, KJV) of destroying His enemies, has arrived. Said John: "And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:15). The devil and his associates also suffer this fate (Rev. 20:10).

The context of the entire Bible makes clear that this "second death" (Rev. 21:8) that the wicked suffer means their total destruction. What then of the concept of an eternally burning hell? Careful study shows that the Bible teaches no such hell or torment.

1. Hell. Biblically, hell is "the place and state of punishment and destruction, by eternal fire in the second death, of those who reject God and the offer of salvation in Jesus Christ."

English versions of the Bible frequently use the word "hell" to translate the Hebrew word *sheol* and the Greek *hades*. These terms generally refer to the grave where the dead—both righteous and wicked—await, in a state of unconsciousness, the resurrection (see chapter 25). Because today's concept of hell differs so greatly from what these Hebrew and Greek terms imply, a number of modern versions avoid the word "hell," simply transliterating the Hebrew word as "Sheol" and the Greek as "Hades."

In contrast, the Greek word *geenna*, which English versions of the New Testament also translate with the word "hell," denotes a place of fiery punishment for the impenitent. In the Bible, then, "hell" does not always have the same meaning—and the failure to note this distinction has often led to great confusion.

Geenna is derived from the Hebrew *Ge Hinnom*, "Valley of Hinnom"—a gorge on the south side of Jerusalem. Here Israel had conducted the heathen rite of burning children to Molech (2 Chron. 28:3; 33:1, 6). Jeremiah predicted that because of this sin the Lord would make the valley a "Valley of Slaughter," where the corpses of the Israelites would be buried till there was no more place for them. The remaining bodies were to be "food for the birds" (Jer. 7:32, 33; Isa. 30:33). Jeremiah's prophecy undoubtedly led Israel to view *Ge Hinnom* as a place of judgement of the wicked, a place of abhorrence, punishment, and shame. Later rabbinical tradition considers it a place for burning carcasses and rubbish.

Jesus used the fires of Hinnom as a representation of hellfire (e.g., Matt. 5:22; 18:9). So the fires of Hinnom symbolized the consuming fire of the last judgment. He stated that it was an experience beyond death (Luke 12:5) and that hell would destroy both body and soul (Matt. 10:28).

What is the nature of hellfire? Do people in hell burn forever?

2. The fate of the wicked. According to the Scriptures, God promises eternal life only to the righteous. The wages of sin is *death*, not eternal life in hell (Rom. 6:23).

The Scriptures teach that the wicked will be "cut off" (Ps. 37:9, 34); that they will perish (Ps. 37:20; 68:2). They will not live in a state of consciousness forever, but will be burned up (Mal. 4:1; Matt. 13:30, 40; 2 Peter 3:10). They will be destroyed (Ps. 145:20; 2 Thess. 1:9; Heb. 2:14), consumed (Ps. 104:35).

3. Everlasting punishment. In speaking of the punishment of the wicked, the New Testament uses the terms "everlasting" and "eternal." These terms translate the Greek word *aionios*, and apply to God as well as to man. To avoid misunderstanding, one must remember that *aionios* is a relative term; its meaning is determined by the object it modifies. So when Scripture uses *aionios* ("everlasting," "eternal") of God, it does mean that He possesses infinite existence—for God is immortal. But when it uses this word of mortal human beings or perishable things, it means as long as the person lives or the thing exists.

Jude 7, for example, says that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered "the vengeance of eternal fire." Yet those cities are not burning today. Peter said that that fire turned those cities into ashes, condemning them to destruction (2 Peter 2:6). The "eternal" fire burned until there was nothing left to burn, and then it went out (see also Jer. 17:27; 2 Chron. 36:19).

Similarly, when Christ assigns the wicked to "everlasting fire" (Matt. 25:41), that fire that will burn up the wicked will be "unquenchable" (Matt. 3:12). Only when there is nothing left to burn will it go out.

When Christ spoke of "everlasting punishment" (Matt. 25:46) He did not mean everlasting *punishing*. He meant that as the "eternal life [the righteous will enjoy] will continue throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity; and the punishment [the wicked will suffer] will also be eternal—not eternal duration of conscious suffering, however, but punishment that is complete and final. The end of those who thus suffer is the second death. This death will be eternal, from which there will not, and cannot, be any resurrection."

When the Bible speaks of "eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12) and "eternal judgment" (Heb. 6:2), it is referring to the eternal results of the redemption and the judgment—not to an endless process of redemption and judgment. In the same way, when it speaks of eternal or everlasting punishment, it is speaking of the results and not of the process of that punishment. The death the wicked die will be final and everlasting.

4. Tormented forever and ever. Scripture's use of the expression "forever and ever" (Rev. 14:11; 19:3; 20:10) has also contributed to the conclusion that the process of punishing Satan and the wicked will go on throughout eternity. But like "everlasting," the object it modifies determines the meaning of the word "forever." When it is associated with God, its meaning is absolute—for God is immortal; when it is associated with mortal humans, its meaning is limited.

Scripture's description of God's punishment of Edom yields a good example of this usage. Isaiah says that God would turn that country into burning pitch that would "not be quenched night or day" and that its smoke was to "ascend forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one shall pass through it forever and ever" (Isa. 34:9, 10). Edom was destroyed, but it is not still burning. The "forever" lasted until its destruction was complete.

Throughout Scripture it is clear that "forever" has its limits. The Old Testament says that a slave could serve his master "forever" (Ex. 21:6), that the child Samuel was to abide in the tabernacle "forever" (1 Sam. 1:22), and that Jonah thought he would be in the belly of the great fish "forever" (Jonah 2:6). The New Testament uses this term in a similar way: Paul, for example, counseled Philemon to receive Onesimus "forever" (Philemon 15). In all these instances "forever" means "as long as the person lives."

Psalms 92:7 says that the wicked will be destroyed forever. And prophesying of the great final conflagration, Malachi said, "'The day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,' says the Lord of hosts, 'that will leave them neither root nor branch'" (Mal. 4:1).

Once the wicked—Satan, evil angels, and impenitent people—are all destroyed by fire, both root and branch, there will be no further use for death or hades (see chapter 25 of this book). These also God will eternally destroy (Rev. 20:14).

So the Bible makes it very clear that the *punishment*, not the *punishing*, is everlasting—is the second death. From this punishment there is no resurrection; its effects are eternal.

Archbishop William Temple was right when he asserted, "One thing we can say with confidence: Everlasting torment is to be ruled out. If men had not imported the Greek and unbiblical notion of the natural indestructibility of the individual soul, and then read the New Testament with that already in their minds, they would have drawn from it [the New Testament] a belief, not in everlasting torment, but in annihilation. It is the fire that is called aeonian [everlasting], not the life cast into it."

The full penalty of God's law having been executed, the demands of justice are satisfied. Now heaven and earth proclaim the righteousness of the Lord.

5. The principle of punishment. Death is the ultimate penalty for sin. As a result of their sin, all who refuse the salvation God offers will die eternally. But some have sinned flagrantly, demonic in the delight they have taken in causing others to suffer. Others have lived relatively moral, peaceful lives, their guilt mainly that of rejecting the salvation provided in Christ. Is it fair that they suffer the same punishment?

Christ said, the "servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much will be asked" (Luke 12:47, 58).

Undoubtedly, those who have rebelled against God the most will suffer more than those who have not. But we should understand their ultimate suffering in terms of Christ's "second death" experience on the cross. There He bore the sins of the world. And it was the awful separation from His Father that sin brought that caused the agony He suffered—a mental anguish beyond description. So with lost sinners. They reap what they sow not only during this life but in the final destruction. In God's presence, the guilt they feel because of the sins they have committed will cause them to suffer an indescribable agony. And the greater the guilt, the greater the agony. Satan, the instigator and promoter of sin, will suffer the most.

The Cleansing of the Earth. Describing the day of the Lord, when all traces of sin will be eliminated, Peter said, "The heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10).

The fire that destroys the wicked purifies the earth from the pollution of sin. Out of the ruins of this earth God will bring "a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Rev. 21:1). From this cleansed, re-created earth—the eternal home of the redeemed—God will forever banish mourning, pain, and death (Rev. 21:4). Finally the curse sin brought will have been lifted (Rev. 22:3).

In view of the coming day of the Lord, in which sin and impenitent sinners will be destroyed, Peter says to all, "What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming." Basing his hope on the promise of Christ's return, he affirmed, "We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him" (2 Peter 3:11, 13, 14).