

JOHN 11:25–26. (EHV)

Jesus said to her, **“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never perish. Do you believe this?”**

Our synod’s publishing house, Northwestern Publishing House, has produced a series of books known as the People’s Bible Teachings series, which covers basic teachings of the Bible. Most of them, like this one (*Prayer* by Joel Petermann), are fairly short—meaty and packed with content, but relatively short.

But one notable exception is this one, *End Times*, which probably would have been the largest no matter who wrote it. Not only does the Bible speak about the end times in many different places and in many different ways, but people also ask many questions about the end of life and the end of the world that have to be acknowledged, whether the Bible answers those questions or not. Plus, there are so many ways that people in the visible Christian church have veered from the simple, straightforward teaching of the Bible on the subject.

Today we want to cover that simple, straightforward teaching of the Bible without wandering down every possible rabbit hole. We want to consider the end of time in general, the end of our lives on earth, Judgment Day, and eternity, whether in heaven or in hell.

1. The End of Time in General

The Bible generally describes the end of time in negative terms from the standpoint of our senses. “In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus said (John 16:33). Paul warned his protégé Pastor Timothy, “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (1 Timothy 4:1). In his second letter to Timothy, he repeated this thought: “Know this: In the last days there will be terrible times. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, blasphemous, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, not able to reconcile with others, slanderous, without self-control, savage, haters of what is good, treacherous, reckless, puffed up with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to an outward form of true religion but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:1–5a).

Jesus himself told his disciples, “Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will deceive many people. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, because all these things must happen; but that is not yet the end. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. But all these things are only the beginning of birth pains. Then they will hand you over to be persecuted, and they will put you to death. You will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away from faith. They will betray each other and hate each other. Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because lawlessness will increase, the love of many will grow cold. But whoever endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 24:5–13).

The apostle John in his revelation also describes Satan being released for a short time, or “a little season,” as the King James Version put it (Revelation 20:3, 7), right before Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. Thankfully, Satan’s release is brief and his efforts are described

as basically being over before they start, so we don't need to be worried about this little season. For all we know, we may be living in it right now. The point is that it will be darkest just before the dawn, so to speak.

These biblical descriptions go directly contrary to an evolutionary or New Age or crescendo worldview, which imagines that the world is getting better and more advanced as time goes on. Though there might be and have been advances in technology and medicine, when we keep the broader picture in mind, the Bible clearly tells us that things will get worse as the end of time approaches, not better. And if we are paying attention to the news and current events, especially as relates to spiritual matters, we can see that this is true.

However, Jesus also assures us that the gospel will be preached and will spread throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and that Satan, for all his raging, will not be able to stop it because he is already defeated and has lost the war. Jesus crushed Satan's head on Good Friday and remains in absolute control at God's right hand. He is using and guiding even all of the wickedness in such a way that it serves for the good of those who believe in him. As Paul says, "We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; perplexed, yet not despairing; persecuted, yet not forsaken; struck down, yet not destroyed." (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). As just one evidence of that, look at how many people are here to listen to God's word this morning, in spite of what Jesus says will happen to his followers as the end of time draws near. Gathering here to listen to God's word wouldn't make sense unless you realized that what Jesus offers us in the midst of this trouble is far greater than the trouble.

2. The End of Our Lives on Earth

The Bible does say that some Christians will still be around to see and experience the end of time, and it tells us that it could happen at any time and we should be ready for it at any time. However, if it turns out for us as it has turned out for the vast majority of Christians, we will experience our own personal end before *the* end. That is, we will die.

What will that be like? First of all, we need to realize that that too could come at any time. Isaiah says, "Youths grow tired and weary, and fit young men completely collapse" (40:30). And to the man in the parable who built up sufficient wealth to take life easy and eat, drink, and be merry with no thought for God, God called him a fool and told him that his life would be taken from him that very night (Matt. 8:20). It is okay for us to talk about someone being taken before his time from an earthly point of view, but realize that there is no such thing from God's point of view. Whenever we pass away, whether at a ripe old age or in the prime of youth or as an infant, it is because those were all the days ordained for us.

What will it be like when our last hour comes? The Bible describes this from two different perspectives—from the perspective of our souls and from the perspective of our bodies. From the perspective of our souls, as believers in Christ our souls immediately return to God and enjoy eternal bliss with him in heaven. One moment we are cognizant of being alive on earth, the next moment we are realizing the eternal joy of heaven. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, it says that Lazarus died and was immediately carried to Abraham's side and began to enjoy good things. Our soul is everything about us that is alive and experiences the world around us; therefore we should not imagine that we are going to be in some sort of dark, confused, or

neutral state until Judgment Day. When your loved ones die in the Lord, you can rightly say that they are with Jesus *right now*, and you can look forward to the same.

From the perspective of our bodies, God says that for believers, death will be like a sleep. About the twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus who had passed away, Jesus told the mourners, “The child is not dead, but asleep” (Matt. 8:39). When you fall asleep at night, the next thing you are aware of is the moment you wake up. You are aware that time has passed, but for all intents and purposes, it was as if you passed through the six or eight hours of your sleep in a single moment. That is what it will be like for us when we die. We will close our eyes in death, and the next thing we know it will be Judgment Day and the trumpet will be sounding and Jesus will be calling out to us as he did to Jairus’s daughter, “Son, daughter, I say to you, wake up!” And we will. We will not have to experience the rotting and decomposition of our bodies, because when Jesus calls us from our graves, we will already be put back together by his power and our souls will be reunited with our bodies and we will enter into heaven.

This is the focus of our verses here as well. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” We believers don’t have to fear death, because we will never experience death itself. The bridge between our lives on earth and our lives in heaven will be so seamless that each of us can honestly say, “In Christ I will never die.”

Paul calls the moment of our death a “releasing” (2 Tim. 4:6). As time passes, the consequences of sin take more of a toll on our lives through age, pain, and illness, not to mention the struggle with sin itself, and the world grows more wicked around us and presses us in more and more. What a joy, then, to think of that hour of death when, like a winged bird that has been pressed to the ground without being crushed and then the hand is finally and suddenly taken away, all the tension and struggle and pain will be gone and we will fly away, so to speak, and be released forever.

3. Judgment Day

That brings us to what we will experience next, the moment we die, namely Judgment Day. There are many mainstream Christians today that have turned the Bible’s teaching about Judgment Day into something very complex and convoluted through a teaching called millennialism. Millennialism is the teaching that there will be a literal thousand-year period of peace, prosperity, and blessedness on earth immediately before Judgment Day. There are some millennialists who do not understand it to be a literal thousand-year period, but still believe that things will get better on earth immediately before Judgment Day.

The author of the *End Times* book I mentioned earlier acknowledges that a teaching called premillennialism, the teaching that Christ will return at the start of this thousand-year period to set up a kingdom on earth, statistically could be the dominant teaching among Protestants (non-Roman Catholic Christians). There are indeed countless Protestants who would be floored if they found out that there were Christians who had never heard or thought about millennialism, as is true of many Lutherans. But there’s not just premillennialism, there’s also postmillennialism and dispensationalism, and within dispensationalism there is the teaching of a seven-year tribulation or period of great difficulty on earth before the millennium, which includes the rapture, or sudden snatching up of believers to heaven, either before, during, or after

that seven-year period, with the adherents calling themselves pre-trib, mid-trib, or post-trib. If you can't remember all of this, that's okay. Trying to make sense of it all is enough to make a person dizzy.

The three main problems with millennialism in all of its forms are that its followers a) take some of the details and numbers in the book of Revelation literally that are meant to be taken figuratively, b) they make these details the basis for their doctrine and then read them into other, clearer, more straightforward passages of the Bible that do not speak of them, and c) they thereby end up ignoring all the clear passages in the Gospels and in the Epistles in the New Testament that present the second coming of Jesus, the final judgment, and the resurrection of all people, believers and unbelievers, as a single event, on a single day.

The Bible clearly teaches that *a day* is coming—coming soon, but no one knows or will know exactly when—a day when Jesus will appear in the clouds in a manner so powerful and glorious that he will be seen by all around the world. The Bible says he will be accompanied by the angels, who will be God's agents in the final judgment. They will be the ones who will gather all the believers and will separate the believers from the unbelievers, the righteous from the wicked, and who will initiate the destruction of the earth as we now know it. The Bible says that his return will be accompanied by a loud command, by the voice of the archangel, and by the trumpet call of God. The Bible says that there will be a literal falling apart of the universe when he comes. Many times the Bible talks about the sun and moon being darkened, the stars falling from the sky, the earth and the heavenly bodies being shaken, and other cataclysmic events.

These events will terrify and horrify the unbelievers. They will burst into tears and will attempt to flee, but there will be no escape. But believers will stand up and lift up their heads because they know their redemption is drawing near.

When Jesus comes, the Bible says that the dead believers will rise first, and then the believers who are still alive will also be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. At the same time the bodies of all believers will be transformed in an instant into glorious bodies fit for heaven. The Bible also says that the unbelievers will be raised at the same time, and there will be a final judgment of all people, the living and the dead, as we heard in the Gospel. The apostle Paul also says that the believers, in addition to being judged themselves, will also participate in the judgment with God in some way.

4. Eternity

Then will come the realizing of eternity. I had a roommate in high school who forbade me from talking about eternity in his presence, because just the concept freaked him out. There are times it has freaked me out too. There is an old hymn that expresses the thoughts of many mortal minds as they try to contemplate eternity: “‘Eternity’—a thund’rous word! | My soul it pierces like a sword! | Beginning without ending! | ‘Eternity’—time absent time! | What cliff is there that I might climb, | above my daze ascending? | My heart with quaking fear is rocked; | my dry tongue in my mouth is locked.”

How can we mortals who are slaves to time even begin to comprehend eternity? One way that I have found is, instead of trying to think about eternity all at once, to break it up into chunks that we can handle. Imagine it as one day followed by another day followed by another day, and there is no last day. Or imagine it as a single day with one event followed by another event

followed by another event, and it never becomes evening; you never run out of time for the next event. If you have ever gone on a vacation, you know that there are basically two stages—the beginning stage when your whole vacation is stretched out before you and you have all the time in the world, and the stage where you realize your vacation is coming to an end and you’re running out of time for your activities. In eternity, you never leave the beginning stage.

But of course, no matter how you might break it up, there are two sides to eternity, and it is not pleasant to think about one of those sides. The Bible describes the eternity of unbelievers as banishment from the sight of God or exclusion from all of his grace and blessing. Just as fish are made for water, so mankind is made for fellowship with God. Take a fish out of water and watch it writhe in agony. Banish a human from fellowship with God and his agony is that much greater and, in this case, never ends. The Bible describes it as “trouble and distress” (Romans 2:9), being “in torment” and “in agony in . . . fire” (Luke 16:23–24), the place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48), and where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12). All of this is meant to give us a taste of what it is like to be eternally banished from fellowship with God.

As unpleasant as it is to think about, we must think about it, because it is going to happen to many. That is one of the main reasons I became a pastor, because I want to help people, and I especially want to help you who have called me, to avoid that place of horrors untold, and I want to help you help others to avoid it too.

And I want you to enjoy the place of bliss untold. The Bible describes that bliss in two main ways: We will be with God and we will see him face to face, as he really is. Please note this, brothers and sisters. The essence of heaven is not being reunited with your loved ones on earth. In fact, if you cannot imagine being happy in heaven only with your Savior and without any of your loved ones on earth, there is idolatry in your heart that needs to be addressed. The essence of heaven is being united with your Savior and being able for the first time to look into his glorified face unblinking and to behold his spectacular glory and beauty.

Have you ever stood before a spectacular sight on earth and been overwhelmed because there was no way you could take in all its beauty at once? Brothers and sisters, Jesus is infinitely more beautiful than that (cf. Psalm 45:2). Beholding him face to face will be truly breathtaking and thrilling and will fully engage all of our glorified senses for all eternity.

But there is more. One Lutheran teacher defined heaven as “an ineffable, perfectly full, and unending experience of inexhaustible good things.” Can you imagine? No more sin, sadness, crying, or pain? No more scorching heat, oppressive humidity, or bitter cold? No more failures or disappointments? Nothing disturbing or unsettling? Having the best possible food for every meal? Having work to do that is always enjoyable and satisfying, so that even your work is rest? Praising God with countless other believers from every generation of history? Delegates at a district or synod convention consistently report that one of the most enjoyable experiences was singing hymns during the opening service with all of those voices belting. Can you imagine what that will be like in heaven? Will all believers of all time sing in four-part harmony? Eight parts? Twenty? Sixty? Can you imagine the most enjoyable sensations you have experienced on earth jacked up to who knows what degree and never coming to an end? An inexhaustible treasure of good things that will never deteriorate or diminish in quality and will be completely without blemish or defect (cf. 1 Peter 1:4)?

Brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ has lived a holy life in your place. He has died to pay for all of your sins. Put your faith in him as your substitute and Savior. Make faithful use of his means of grace so that you are always ready for the end of time, ready for the end of your life, ready for his second coming and Judgment Day, ready for eternity. And patiently endure whatever trials the Lord puts you through in the meantime, knowing what awaits you on the other side. Then you will avoid the agony of hell and enjoy the bliss of heaven in the presence of Jesus for all eternity. God grant it for Jesus's sake. Amen.