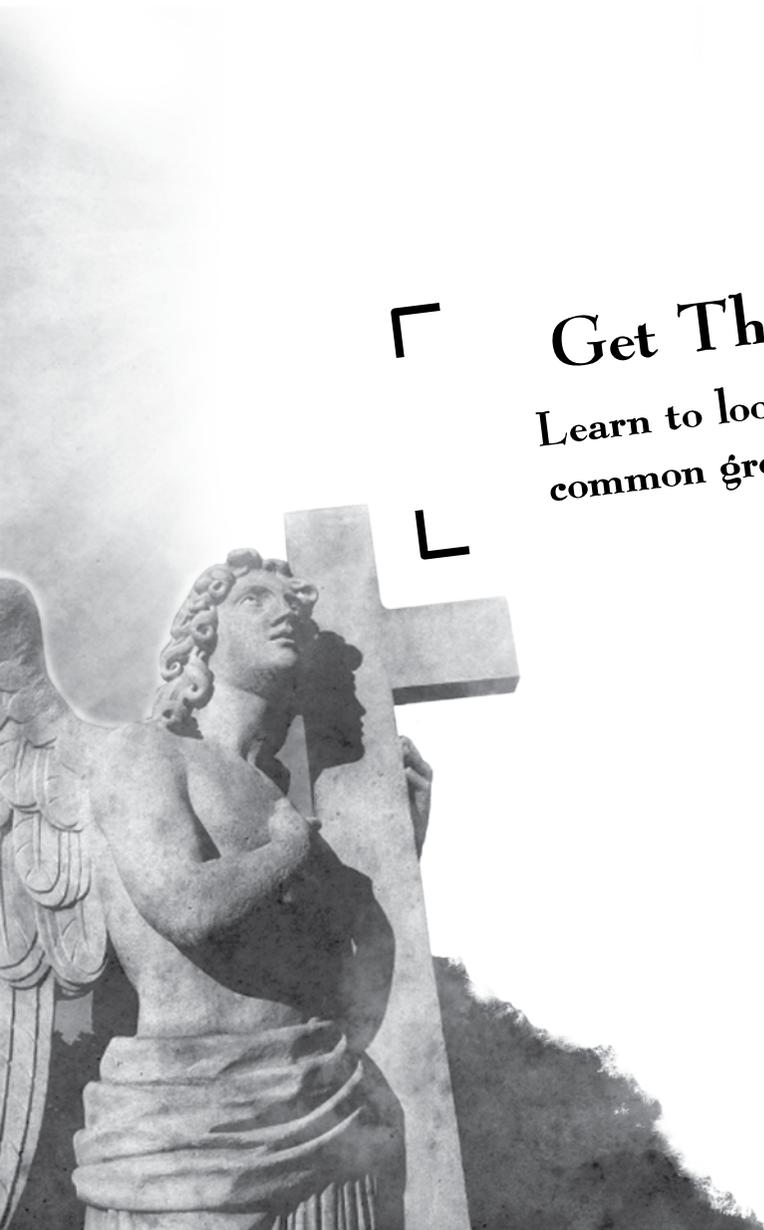


SESSION TWO

Four Ways to End the World

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Learn to look for
common ground.



Session 2 Outline

Four Ways to End the World

1. The book of Revelation is apocalyptic
 - a. Contains visions and extravagant imagery
 - b. Arose from the Jewish community
 - c. Uses numbers symbolically
2. Revelation is *not* pseudepigraphical writing
 - a. Written by the apostle John
3. Two times that Revelation could have been written:
 - a. Emperor Nero (AD 54–68)
 - b. Emperor Domitian (AD 81–96)

4. The opening of Revelation
 - a. To the seven churches
 - b. God the Almighty (Pantokrator)
 - c. Three key things in Revelation
 - Tribulation
 - Kingdom
 - Patient endurance

5. Four ways Christians view the end of time
 - a. Historical Premillennialism
 - b. Dispensational Premillennialism
 - c. Amillennialism
 - d. Postmillennialism

Key Terms

Amillennialism There will be no (“a-”) physical millennium. The millennium is the present, spiritual reign of Jesus with his people.

Apocalyptic Literature Genre of ancient Jewish literature presented in the form of visions that figuratively pointed to hidden truths for the purpose of assuring God’s people of the goodness of God’s plans during periods of persecution.

Asia Minor Region also known as Anatolia, comprising most of the modern nation of Turkey (see Map of Asia Minor).

Dispensational Premillennialism God will “rapture” Christians from the world before the great tribulation. Jesus will return to earth after the great tribulation, before (“pre-“) the millennium described in Revelation 20.

Domitian Ruled the Roman Empire, AD 81–96. According to the ancient historian Suetonius, “Domitian issued an encyclical in the name of his governors that declared ‘Our Master and our God bids that this be done.’” (Suetonius, *Vita Domitianus*, 13:2)

Eschatology Study of the events leading up to the end of time. From Greek *eschaton* (“final” or “last”) and *logos* (“word” or “idea”).

Historical premillennialism Jesus will return to earth before (“pre-“) the millennium described in Revelation 20, following a time of tribulation.

John the Elder The earliest references to the authorship of Revelation suggest that John the apostle wrote the Gospel of John as well as Revelation and probably 1 John. In the fourth century, Eusebius suggested that the apostle John and John the Elder might be two different people and that John the Elder may have written 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation. The fact that the author of Revelation presents himself simply as “John” (Revelation 1:4) and speaks with authority as a representative of Jesus suggests that John the apostle wrote the book of Revelation and that the same “John” was both the apostle and the elder.

Nero Ruled the Roman Empire, AD 54–68. After a fire in Rome, a rumor circulated that Nero had started the fire. According to the ancient historian Tacitus, “To get rid of this report, Nero accused and inflicted exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, the ones called Christians.” (Tacitus, *Annales*, 15:44) This persecution seems to have been limited to the regions around Rome.

Pantokrator / Autokrator The Roman emperor was known as autokrator (“sole ruler”). Pantokrator means “all ruler” or “almighty.” In Revelation 1:8, John refers to God as pantokrator.

Patmos Island off the west coast of Asia Minor. According to Tacitus, people who threatened the peace of the Roman Empire were sent to coastal islands such as Patmos. Fourth-century church historian Eusebius reported that Emperor Domitian exiled John in AD 95. Eighteen months later, after Domitian's death, John was allowed to leave the island (see Map of Asia Minor).

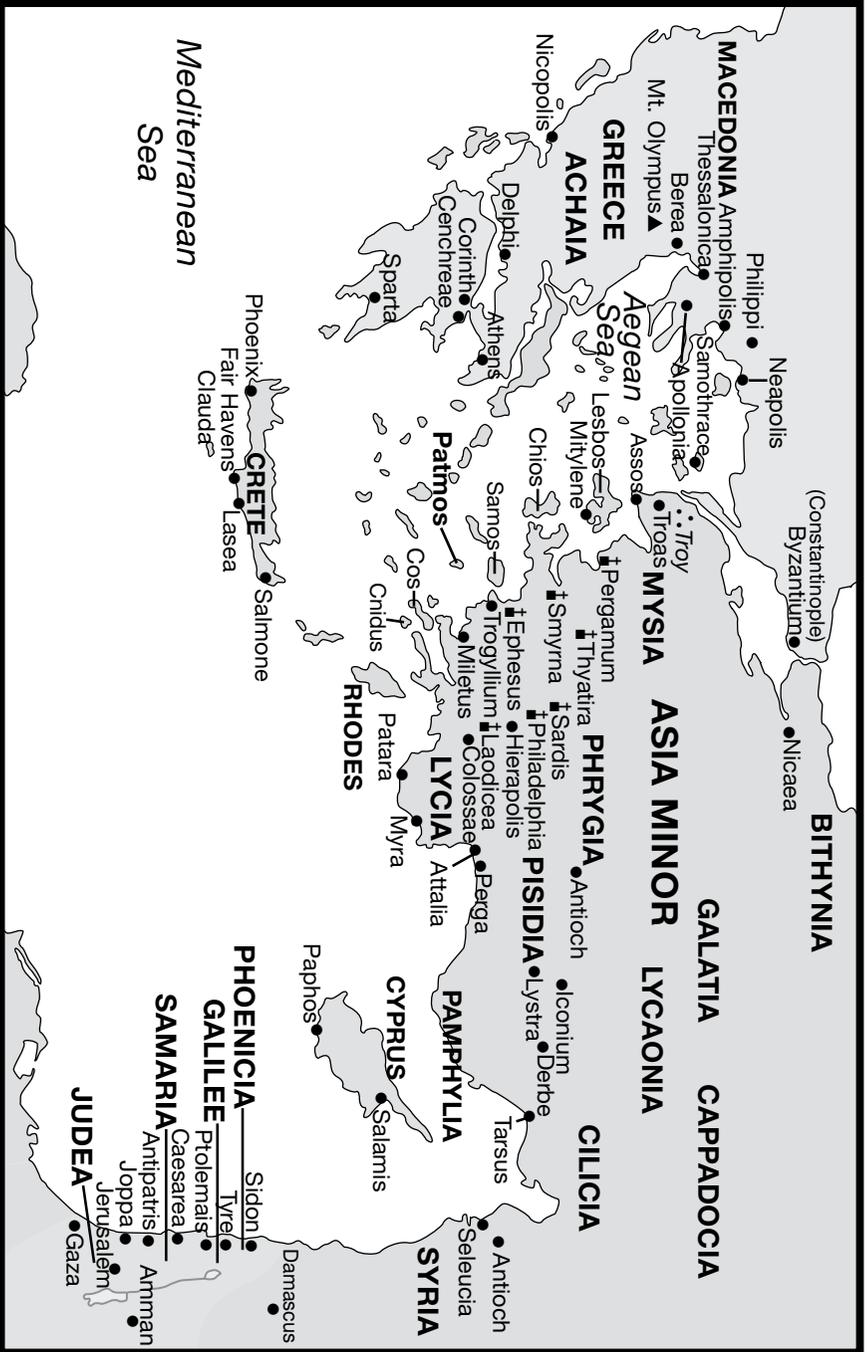
Postmillennialism Jesus will return to earth after ("post-") a millennium when the overwhelming majority of people throughout the world embrace the gospel.

Pseudepigrapha Writings ascribed to individuals who could not possibly have written the book. Often times, the ascribed author lived hundreds of years before the time the book was actually written. The book of Revelation is not pseudepigraphical because John lived during the time Revelation was written.

Seven Churches of Revelation The churches in Asia Minor to which John addresses the book of Revelation. The churches are: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (see Map of Asia Minor).

Map of Asia Minor

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†	One of the Seven Churches of Asia (Rev. 1-3)
●	City or Town
⋯	Ancient Ruins/Sties
▲	Mountain
⊕	Modern Capital Cities

Revelation as Apocalyptic

Even if you don't know a lot about the Bible, one thing becomes quite clear as you read the book of Revelation: It is very different from other books in the New Testament! Revelation refers to historic events—but it isn't a historical text like the Gospels or Acts. The book includes letters to seven churches—but these letters aren't anything like the correspondence that Paul sent to churches throughout the Roman Empire.

So why is the book of Revelation so different from other New Testament texts? The book of Revelation draws from an ancient literary style known as apocalyptic [ah-POKK-ah-LIPP-tikk]. The word “apocalyptic” comes from the Greek *apokalupsis* (“revelation”), a term that also happens to be the first word in the Greek text of Revelation! Apocalyptic writings included visions that figuratively pointed to hidden truths for the purpose of assuring God's people of the goodness of God's plans during periods of persecution. In Revelation, the primary hidden truth that is revealed is the centrality of Jesus in all of history.

Parts of Daniel and Ezekiel in the Hebrew Scriptures are also written in apocalyptic style. Plus, there are apocalypses that do not appear in any Hebrew or Christian Scriptures at all—one that falsely claims to come from Enoch, for example, and others that allege origins in the lifetimes of Moses and Noah. Revelation is not completely apocalyptic, but several common apocalyptic traits do appear in the book of Revelation.

- After carefully reading the definition of “apocalyptic literature,” glance through the books of Ezekiel and Daniel in your Bible. Based on the definition provided here, which chapters in Ezekiel and Daniel seem to be apocalyptic?

Apocalypse Now—and Then

There have tended to be four approaches to biblical apocalypses. Some people read apocalyptic literature futuristically, others read it historically

or idealistically, while others take a preterist perspective. None of these four approaches completely excludes the others. In fact, nearly every interpreter of the end times draws from more than one of these approaches when reading biblical books such as Daniel and Revelation.

§ Four approaches to interpreting apocalyptic literature

Futurist	A futurist treats the text as a predictive prophecy about events that, even now, have not yet occurred. If I read Revelation futuristically, I search for predictions in Revelation to help me to understand events that will occur near the end of time.
Historicist	Historicism treats apocalyptic writings as symbolic retellings of certain epochs of history; if someone reads Revelation in this way, that person might assume, for example, that John is using lavish language to retell the rise and fall of the Roman Empire or some other series of historical events.
Idealist	When read idealistically, apocalypses are seen as symbolic expressions of struggles between good and evil that occur in every age. If idealism makes the most sense to you, you would treat each scene in Revelation as a symbol of some ongoing conflict between the reign of God and the powers of evil. Such struggles will continue until the end of time.
Preterist	The word “preterist” comes from the Latin <i>praeteritus</i> (“past” or “bygone”) and suggests that most or all the events described in apocalyptic text have already passed. A preterist reading of an apocalyptic writing understands the text to describe events that happened near the time when the text was written. There are two types of preterists: (1) Orthodox preterists (also known as partial preterists) interpret some visions in Revelation as descriptive of events in the first century AD, but they also recognize other portions of the book—particularly descriptions of the return of Jesus to earth—as futurist. (2) Full preterists think that biblical prophecies describe only events that happened in the first century. According to full preterists, Jesus has already returned to earth spiritually, and he will not actually return to earth in any physical way. Full preterism is a heresy that rejects truths clearly found in Scripture and in the ancient creeds. Orthodox Christians throughout history have refused to accept full preterism.

In the chart on the four approaches, highlight or underline key words that will help you to remember each approach to apocalyptic literature.

☞ Look up and read Revelation 1:1–8

In Revelation 1:1, “soon” may imply that, while some events described in Revelation remain in the future, many aspects of John’s prophecy occurred soon after John wrote this text. The word could also mean “quickly” or “without warning.”

- Do some research and determine the most appropriate meaning for the word “soon” as it is used in Revelation 1:1. Write your conclusion in the space below:

In Jewish apocalyptic literature, the number seven almost always pointed to “completeness.” The phrase “seven spirits” (1:4) probably refers to the completeness or sufficiency of the Holy Spirit. This phrase might be paraphrased as “sevenfold Spirit” or “all-sufficient Spirit.” The task of the Holy Spirit is to testify to the truth that is found in Jesus (John 15:26).

- What does it mean for your daily life to say that the Holy Spirit is “complete” or “sufficient”?

What approaches might this view take to ...

... the 7 churches in Revelation? (<i>Rev. 1-3</i>)	... the great tribulation? (<i>Rev. 4-19</i>)	... the millennial kingdom? (<i>Rev. 20</i>)	... the new creation? (<i>Rev. 21-22</i>)
<p>Orthodox Preterist: John was describing seven actual churches in the first century.</p> <p>Idealist: Each church symbolized a type of church that can be found in every age.</p>	<p>Historicist: Describes distresses that God's people have endured throughout history.</p> <p>Orthodox Preterist: Describes first century persecutions and conflicts.</p> <p>Idealist: Symbolizes distresses that God's people endure in every age.</p>	<p>Idealist: Symbolizes the reign of Jesus in the lives of his people.</p> <p>Historicist: The reign of Jesus through his people from the establishment of the church to the end of time.</p>	<p>Futurist: God will glorify all who trusted Jesus and condemn all who rejected him.</p>
<p>Orthodox Preterist: John was describing seven actual churches in the first century.</p> <p>Idealist: Each church symbolized a type of church that may be found in every age.</p>	<p>Historicist: Describes distresses that God's people have endured throughout history.</p> <p>Orthodox Preterist: Described first-century persecutions and conflicts.</p> <p>Idealist: Symbolizes distresses that God's people endure in every age.</p> <p>Futurist: Describes a time of distress immediately before the millennium begins.</p>	<p>Historicist: The reign of Jesus through his people.</p> <p>Futurist: Describes a future time when Jesus begins to reign through his people.</p>	<p>Futurist: God will glorify all who trusted Jesus and condemn all who rejected him.</p>
<p>Amillennialism</p>			
<p>Postmillennialism</p>			

	<p>... the 7 churches in Revelation? (<i>Rev. 1-3</i>)</p> <p>Orthodox Preterist: John was describing seven actual churches in the first century.</p> <p>Historicist: Each church represents an era of church history.</p>	<p>... the great tribulation? (<i>Rev. 4-19</i>)</p> <p>Futurist: Describes a seven-year time of distress between the rapture and Jesus' return to establish his millennial kingdom.</p>	<p>... the millennial kingdom? (<i>Rev. 20</i>)</p> <p>Futurist: Describes a future time when Jesus will physically reign on earth.</p>	<p>... the new creation? (<i>Rev. 21-22</i>)</p> <p>Futurist: God will glorify all who trusted Jesus and condemn all who rejected him.</p>
<p>Dispensational Premillennialism</p>	<p>Orthodox Preterist: John was describing seven actual churches in the first century.</p> <p>Idealist: Each church represented a type of church that may be found in every age.</p>	<p>Historicist: Describes the distresses that God's people have endured throughout history.</p> <p>Orthodox Preterist: Described first-century persecutions and conflicts.</p> <p>Idealist: Symbolizes distresses that God's people endure in every age.</p> <p>Futurist: Describes a time of distress immediately before Jesus returns to establish his millennial kingdom.</p>	<p>Futurist: Describes a future time when Jesus will physically reign on earth.</p>	<p>Futurist: God will glorify all who trusted Jesus and condemn all who rejected him.</p>
<p>Historical Premillennialism</p>				

Unveiling Through Visions: The content of apocalyptic literature

Ancient apocalypses claimed to unveil divine truths that could not be discovered through human effort. Like other apocalypses, the book of Revelation presents fantastic visions that use mysterious language and numbers to point to larger realities. Unlike other apocalyptic writings, what is revealed first and foremost in Revelation is not a plan but a person. Over and over, Jesus stands at the center of John's visions. Jesus is the Lion and Lamb who breaks the Seven Seals (Revelation 5–8). It is he who takes his stand on Mount Zion (14:1) and he who embraces his people as his beloved bride (19:7). In the end, Jesus is the conquering King of kings, the Lord of lords, and the light who illumines his people's lives forevermore (17:14; 21:23; 22:3). From the very first sentence, the book of Revelation is a revelation “of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1). (For *Iesou Christou* in Revelation 1:1 as subjective genitive, see George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*; Eerdmans, 1972)

Encouragement During Persecution: The context of apocalyptic literature

Apocalyptic writings developed during times of exile or persecution. That's clear even in the first verses of Revelation: There, John described himself as “your brother and co-participant in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance in Jesus... on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the witness of Jesus” (1:9). In some cases, the apocalyptic literary style concealed elements of the message that the dominant political powers might have perceived as subversive. John seems to have written Revelation either during the reign of Emperor Nero in the AD 60s or in the AD 90s when Emperor Domitian ruled the Roman Empire.

Here are a few reasons why many scholars place Revelation in the reign of Domitian: In the first place, the second-century writer Irenaeus of Lyons—a student of Polycarp, who knew the apostle John—recalled that John had penned Revelation during Domitian's reign. (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 5:30:3) Furthermore, Revelation seems to have been written at a time when Christians in the cities of Asia Minor were experiencing harassment for their faith (Revelation 1–3). In the 90s, Domitian did indeed persecute families around Rome for their refusal to recognize him as divine. Pressure to worship the emperor as “Lord and God” probably spread to Asia Minor. An image of the emperor even seems

to have been constructed in the city of Ephesus, in Asia Minor. (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*; Eerdmans, 1999; p. 712) (See map on page 24)

A strong case can also be made for a date in the mid-60s, however. Scholars who place Revelation in Nero's reign emphasize how, in Revelation 11, John speaks of the Jewish temple as a present reality, as if the temple was still standing. The Roman army burned the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. On this basis, these scholars contend that the book must have been written before that time, probably during the reign of Nero.

Assurance of God's Goodness: The purpose of apocalyptic literature

When people today read apocalyptic literature, the first question that is often asked is, "What will be the precise order of events between now and the end of time?" When apocalyptic writings first circulated, however, that probably wasn't people's primary question. What readers then were likely asking was not what or how but who: "Who's really in charge of history?"

When Daniel proclaimed his prophecies, for example, it seemed like the Babylonians, Medes, and Persians controlled the world. To many Israelites, it looked as if God was no longer working for the good of his people. Through divinely-disclosed visions, Daniel made it clear that God's kingdom was "an everlasting kingdom" and that Israel's oppressors would one day be condemned to "everlasting contempt" (Daniel 2:44; 4:3, 34; 12:2). What God provided through Daniel's prophecies was hope rooted in eschatology—an assurance that God was working in a definite direction and, in the end, God would make all things good, right, and new.

When John wrote Revelation, the Roman Empire ruled the known world. Christians were losing their positions, their property, and even their lives because they refused to offer sacrifices on the emperor's behalf. The Jewish faith remained legal—albeit unpopular—in the Roman Empire. As a result, some Christians may have downplayed their trust in Jesus and tried to blend in at local synagogues (see Revelation 2:9; 3:9).

In this context, John proclaimed that the rightful king of the world was not the emperor in Rome; Jesus was the King of kings, and his power extended far beyond the heavens to encompass every kingdom on earth (11:15; 21:23). Like Daniel, John also offered his readers eschatological assurance and hope:

Not only was God working even in times of persecution, someday God would consign his foes to a pit of fire, re-create the fallen cosmos once and for all, and wipe every tear from his people's eyes (20:12–21:8).

- What does the word “eschatology” mean?

- Who or what stands at the center of John's eschatology?

- Name at least one essential truth that Christians must believe about the end of time.

Looking for the common ground

So what are the essential truths that Christians must believe about the end of time? The ancient Apostles' Creed declares that Jesus “ascended to the right hand of God the Father; from there, he will return to judge the living and the dead.” Later in the same creed, Christians state their belief in “the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” The Nicene Creed echoed and expanded this essential confession: “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. ... We await the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” Regardless of their view of the end times, Christians throughout the world and throughout time share this common confession: Jesus who was crucified returned to life, ascended to his Father, and will return physically to earth.

The Themes that Matter Most: Kingdom, Tribulation, and Patient Endurance

“I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”—*Revelation 1:9 ESV*

KINGDOM

The overwhelming majority of Christians throughout church history have agreed that God the Father inaugurated a kingdom in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The good news of Jesus is, after all, the good news of the kingdom! (Matthew 3:2; 4:17, 23). Another term for the kingdom of God is “the kingdom of heaven”;

when we compare parallel passages in the Gospels, it is very clear that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven are two different phrases that describe one identical reality (compare Matthew 8:11 with Luke 13:29, or Matthew 11:11 with Luke 7:28).

The kingdom of God is God’s people living in God’s domain under God’s rule.

(G. Goldsworthy, Gospel and Kingdom; Paternoster, 1994; ch. 5)

TRIBULATION

At the same time, Christians recognize that this Christ-inaugurated kingdom has not yet been fully realized on earth. God’s people experience persecution, tribulation, and distress. All creation “groans together” with the children of God (Romans 8:22). One day, the kingdom that the Father inaugurated in Jesus will be consummated so completely that, for those who have taken their stand with Jesus, every form of tribulation will end.

PATIENT ENDURANCE

Until the consummation of the kingdom, Christians wait and work with patient endurance. Patient endurance is very different from laziness or passive waiting. Patient endurance means working together to express and to expand the kingdom of Christ in the lives of people around us while patiently resting in the goodness of God’s providence here and now.

- Describe each of the three key themes in your own words:

Kingdom _____

Tribulation _____

Patient endurance _____

Why Study the End Times?

By this point, perhaps you have asked yourself, “If there’s so much common ground among Christians, why are there different views of the end time? Why can’t everyone agree on one perspective?” These are good questions, but they aren’t easily answered! The entire issue would be far simpler if all Bible-believing Christians held one particular view while all slanderers of Scripture pursued other perspectives. But that’s simply not the case when it comes to studying the end times. When it comes to the study of eschatology, Christians who sincerely trust the truth of Scripture have arrived at very different perspectives. That’s been the case at least since the second or third century and will probably continue until the end—at which time God might prove us all wrong!

Why then should we even study the end time? Why not simply be “pan-millennialists” who say, “It will all pan out in the end”? Or how about “pro-millennialists” who declare, “Whenever God does it, I’m for it”? Why concern ourselves with differing perspectives on the end of time? Here’s why: As you study the differences between each perspective, you will become more able to distinguish which issues in eschatology really matter most. As you begin to understand each view, you will develop richer and deeper perspectives on how God may consummate his kingdom at the end of time. Perhaps most important of all, as you learn to appreciate others’ perspectives, you should find yourself focusing less on particular end-times events and more on how each viewpoint exalts Jesus.

With that in mind, here are four primary perspectives on the end times that have emerged throughout the history of Christianity. All four of these views have been held by people who authentically trust Jesus and accept the truth of Scripture. Most important, all four perspectives agree that Jesus rose from the dead, ascended to his Father, and will someday return physically to judge all humanity.

Amillennialism:	There will be no (“a-”) physical millennium. The millennium is the present, spiritual reign of Jesus with his people.
Postmillennialism:	Jesus will return to earth after (“post-”) a millennium when the overwhelming majority of people throughout the world embrace the gospel.
Dispensational Premillennialism:	God will rapture Christians from the world before the great tribulation. Jesus will return to earth after the great tribulation, before (“pre-”) the millennium described in Revelation 20.
Historical Premillennialism:	Jesus will return to earth before (“pre-”) the millennium described in Revelation 20, following a time of tribulation.

So how and why have Christians developed such dissimilar perspectives on the end of time? Remember the three themes that we considered earlier? Kingdom, tribulation, and patient endurance. On the point of patient endurance, all four views stand together: Christians should patiently endure distress. Where the views diverge is in the precise nature and relationship of the other two themes: kingdom and tribulation.

All four viewpoints recognize that God’s people endure trials and tribulation—but when it comes to the great tribulation described in Revelation 7 and in Jesus’ end-times discourse with his disciples (Mark 13), the perspectives begin to differ. Dispensational premillennialists place the return of Jesus for his church immediately before a seven-year great tribulation. Other perspectives treat the great tribulation as a representation of distresses that God’s people have experienced throughout the ages or as a description of conflicts that happened in the first century.

People from all four perspectives agree that the kingdom of God will be fully consummated at some point in the future. But when it comes to the millennial kingdom described in Revelation 20, each viewpoint turns a slightly different direction. From the perspective of amillennialists and some postmillennialists, the millennial kingdom is a present, spiritual reality. For historical premillennialists, the kingdom is both a present experience and a future, physical reality. According

to dispensational premillennialists, the modern state of Israel will still receive all the land that God promised Abraham.

As you study each millennial perspective, notice carefully how each one differs when it comes to the great tribulation and the millennial kingdom. As you pay attention these differences, pay even closer attention to how each viewpoint exalts Jesus.

- Which view of the end times makes the most sense to you right now? Locate at least one Scripture that seems to support this perspective.

- Which view of the end times makes the least sense to you right now? Try to find at least one Scripture that could support this perspective.

It's Not Just about the Future

Kingdom. Tribulation. Patient endurance. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus, these three themes are not simply theoretical aspects of your future life. They are woven into every moment of your life here and now. You have confessed Jesus as the king of all kings. Yet your gas tank still gets empty, your baby's diaper still gets full, and some months still outlast the balance in your checking account. What's more, sometimes you still struggle to submit yourself to the Messiah's reign in your life. Other times, you may be treated unjustly because of your faith in Jesus.

And so, what do you do? You patiently endure tribulation; you rejoice in God's ever-present presence while never ceasing to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in the heavens." The themes of kingdom, tribulation, and patient endurance are as near to you as the events of this very day. What are you doing to expand God's kingdom here and now? How are you responding to times of tribulation? And where do you need to learn what it means to endure distress with patience?

Now What?

PRAY: “Heavenly Father, reign in me so that I reflect your kingdom. Messiah Jesus, work in me so that I glorify you even in times of tribulation. Sevenfold Spirit, reveal through me your perfection and sufficiency. God in Three Persons, to your name be the glory. Amen.”

LEARN: Read chapters 1, 2, and 3 in the book of Revelation. Look for the themes of kingdom, tribulation, and patient endurance in John’s letters to the seven churches. Memorize Revelation 1:9.

DO: In the space below, list three areas of life in which you need to learn “patient endurance.” This week, in each of these areas, seek specific ways to submit this area of your life to the kingship of the living Lord Jesus.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____