

The Last Day

(John 6:39-40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48)

by Alan Bonifay

New Testament Usage

The phrase "the last day" appears in the New Testament only in the Gospel of John where it occurs seven times. Six of the seven have reference to the day of the general resurrection and the judgment of all men. The seventh appearance of this phrase, while not bearing directly upon the subject of our discussion, is nevertheless very significant in establishing the meaning of these words.

In His marvelous sermon on "The Bread of Life" (Jn. 6:28-71), Jesus declares four times that those whom the Father has given Him; those which see Him and believe on Him; those whom the Father has drawn to Him; and those who eat of His flesh and drink of His blood possess everlasting life and "at the last day" He will raise them up (Jn. 6:39, 40, 44, 54).

Just as in John 1:3, in the prologue, the universe is said, in accordance with fundamental Hebrew beliefs, to have been created at a definite time in the past, so here it is regarded as subject to a definite limit in the future.

On another occasion as Jesus and His disciples draw nigh to Bethany, where his friend Lazarus has so recently fallen asleep in death, Martha hearing of their arrival comes to meet them. In the ensuing poignant conversation, she replies to Jesus' unequivocal statement that her brother shall rise again. "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day"(Jn. 11.18-24).

Hendriksen comments,

It must not remain unnoticed that in what she said Martha took for granted, as entirely indisputable, the resurrection on the last day. Personal belief in individual resurrection is expressed in many Old Testament references (Ps. 16:9-11; 17:15; 49:15; 73:24, 26; perhaps also Job 19:25-27). Collective resurrection is implied in Ezekiel 37:1-14; Hosea 6:2; and clearly expressed in Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:1-2. Besides, it must be remembered that Martha was not merely a Jewess; she was a disciple of Jesus. We may assume that she had accepted by faith such teaching as that which we find in John 5:28-29.

Finally, in what appears to be a brief summary of his previous public teaching, John records these words of Jesus:

He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me. And he that seeth me seeth him that sent me. I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness. And if any man hear my words, and believe not I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak (Jn. 12:44-50).

All six of these references allude to the general resurrection of all men and the day of judgment. However, it is in John's seventh usage of this phrase that we begin to clearly perceive the meaning of these words.

In John 7:37 the record says: "In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink." While there is considerable controversy over whether "the last day"¹ of the feast was the seventh day or the eighth day, the point pertinent to our investigation is that "the last day" was a specific literal day and that both the word "last" and "day" are used in their normal way.

Defining the word for "last," the Analytical Greek Lexicon says, "farthest; last, latest, lowest, in the lowest plight." W. E. Vine gives: "last, utmost, extreme." E. W. Bullinger says "the last, the extreme, the most remote; with reference to time that which concludes anything." The word is used fifty-four times in the New Testament. It is translated "last" forty-eight times, "uttermost" twice, "ends" once, "lowest" twice, and "latter" once.

Defining the word for day, the Analytical Greek Lexicon gives, "day. the interval from sunrise to sunset; or the interval of twenty-four hours, comprehending day and night" Bullinger, Vine and others give essentially the same definitions. Of the some 388 times the word is used in the New Testament, about ninety-five percent of the time it is translated "day" or "days." The other renderings like "daily," "age," "years," "daytime," "time," "be," and "judgment" are all contextually clear.

Obviously, then, from the usage of this term in the New Testament we learn that "the last day" is a specific literal day (i.e., twenty-four hour

period) on which the resurrection of all men and their subsequent eternal judgment occurs.

Corroborating the expectation presented in John's gospel of a specific future day of judgment are statements in at least sixteen other New Testament books:

ML 10:14-15 (Mk. 6:11; Lk. 10:11, 12); ML 11: 20-24; ML 12:36; ML 24:36, 50 (Mk. 13:32; Lk. 17:30, 31); Acts 17:30-31; 1 Cor. 1:7-8; 5:4-5; 1 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6, 9-11; 2:14-16; 1 Thess. 5:24; 2 Thess. 2:1-3; 2 Tim. 1:18; 4:6-8; Heb. 4:8-9; 1 Pet 2:11-12; 2 Pet 2:9; 3:7-13; 1 Jn. 4:17; Jude 6.

Taken together these passages establish with abundant force the truth that at some future time there will be a day of judgment for all men.

The Nature of the Day

The Scriptures teach that the last day will be a perfectly normal day like all of those which have gone before: different only in that it will be the last day ever to be ruled by the concept of time (cf. ML 24:36-41; Lk. 17:24-36).

Also in each of the three parables in Matthew 25, life is portrayed as proceeding under normal influences when the Lord returns to reckon with his servants (cf. ML 25:6-13, 19, 31).

Throughout the New Testament the Lord's return is presented as sudden, unexpected, and without warning. In Matthew 24, Jesus gives numerous and precise indications as to when Jerusalem will be destroyed, but in sharp contrast to that, there will be no warnings preceding His second coming (cf. ML 24:36-51; 1 Thess. 5:1-4; 2 Pet. 3:9, 10).

The time of Jesus' coming is totally unknown. The fact is, the New Testament does not teach Jesus is coming soon, and neither does it teach His coming is yet in the distant future. It teaches over and over again that Christians are to be ready, waiting, eagerly desiring, and looking for His return. When Jesus does come (and He will) it will be on a day like any other. It will be suddenly, unexpectedly and without warning. One day "the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God" and time shall be no more (1 Thess. 4:16).

The Consequences of the Last Day

When He comes the universe will pass away. "And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them . . . And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for (the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea" (Rev. 20:11; 21:1). Quoting Psalm 102:25-27, the Hebrew writer wrote, "And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed" (Heb. 1:10-12). On that great and final day the Hadean world will cease (Rev. 20:13, 14).

Further, as is implicitly taught in this passage, the general bodily resurrection of all men—the righteous and the wicked—shall occur. Paul writes concerning the resurrection: "Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming** (1 Cor. 14:23). Two points are worthy of consideration here. First, the offering of the firstfruits was a guarantee that the remainder of the harvest that belonged to the Lord would be subsequently forthcoming. In like manner, the Lord's resurrection is an earnest or guarantee of our future resurrection. Second, the firstfruits were always of the same nature as that of the subsequent harvest-offering. Thus, we can deduce that our resurrection will be of the same nature as our Lord's. According to Luke 24:3, His was a bodily resurrection. The record says, "And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus." The simultaneous bodily resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked is most clearly established in John 5:28-29.

Finally, the last day will be the "day of judgment" (Rev. 20:11-15). The New Testament is abundantly clear (hat the great judgment is universal, consisting of "all men everywhere" (Acts 17:30, 31); "all nations" (ML 25:31-33): "The living and the dead" (2 Tim. 4:1; Acts 10:12; Rom. 14:9; 1 Peter 4:5); "all" (Jude 14-15); and "the dead small and great" (Rev. 20:12-15). "The angels that sinned" (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6) will be judged, also. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10; see also ML 16:27; Rom. 14:11, 12; 2:6). For those who are "weighed in the balance and found wanting" an eternity in a Devil's hell will ensue. For those washed in the blood of the Lamb and found faithful, an eternity of wonder, glory and bliss will begin as they are ushered into heaven itself (ML 25:46).

2 Peter 3:7-13

For the remainder of our lesson we shall consider 2 Peter 3:7-13, with particular emphasis upon four questions:

1. Is this passage a reference to the second coming of Christ, or does it refer, instead to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70?
2. What does this passage teach concerning the destruction of this earth and its renovation?
3. What is the meaning of the phrase "new heavens and a new earth?"
4. What are the implications of the last day as thus presented for the dispensationalist premillennial view?

Second Coming of Christ, or the Destruction of Jerusalem?

The basis for the notion that 2 Peter 3 is in reference to the destruction of Jerusalem is predicated upon several very tenuous arguments. The first is that 2 Peter dates from the mid 60s (65 or 66 A.D.). The second is that in verse three, Peter states that scoffers shall come in "the last days" denying the Lord's coming. The advocates of this view understand "the last days" as an exclusive reference to the final days of the Mosaic age. However, we believe that there are references using this term which apply to the Christian age. For instance:

1 Timothy 4: 1 "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;" (The development of Catholicism and various cultic religions is in view).

Hebrews 1:1-2 "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." (cf. 2:3, 4; the authority of Christ is in view).

2 Timothy 3:1ff "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come."

The third argument which purportedly establishes this view is that language like that in verses 7-13 is often used by the Old Testament prophets to represent the revolutions in the political state of empires or nations. For example, Isaiah 34:4, where the destruction of Idumea is foretold under the figures of "dissolving the host of heaven" and "of the falling down of all their hosts as the leaf falleth off from the vine;" or Ezekiel 32:7, where the destruction of Egypt is described by the figures of "covering the heaven and making the stars thereof dark" and "of covering the sun with a cloud"

and "of hindering the moon from giving her light" In Joel 2:10, the invasion of Judea by a foreign power is thus foretold: "The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble; the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining." In Joel 2:30, 31, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans is thus predicted: "I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth; blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and terrible day of the Lord come." Other examples are found in Amos 8:9, Haggai 2:6 and Matthew 24:9.

In answer to this it is noteworthy that none of these prophets have spoken as Peter has done of the entire destruction of the earth. They speak only of "the rolling of the heavens together as a scroll;" the obscuring of the light of the sun and the moon; "the shaking of the heavens and the earth" and "the falling down of the stars;" whereas Peter speaks of the utter destruction of the parts of the earth and its atmosphere by fire. This affords us reason for believing that the events foretold by the prophets are different in their nature than those foretold by the apostle; and that they are to be figuratively understood, but he is to be understood literally. Even the phraseology of the prophets compared with that of Peter supports our view. The prophets predict events which exhibit impossibilities if interpreted literally, such as "the rolling of the heavens together as a scroll" or "the turning of the moon to blood." Note, "its passing away with a great noise" and the "burning of the earth and the works thereon" together with "burning" and "melting" of the "elements" or the planet earth, are all things possible and therefore may be literally understood.

Note also these arguments in answer to the view that Peter speaks of Jerusalem's destruction in A.D. 70:

1. 2 Peter 3:6-7—The destruction of the world in Noah's day was universal, and in like manner the destruction of the earth when the Lord comes again will also be universal. Note carefully that Peter states that in Noah's day "the world" perished, but at the second coming of Christ it will be "the earth" that will be destroyed. Further if the "water" of verse six is literal, so must be the "fire" of verse seven.

2. 2 Peter 3:ft—This seems to me a totally inappropriate figure under which to represent God's faithfulness to His promise despite the passing of time if the destruction of Jerusalem is in view.

3. 2 Peter 3:9-11—Presumably in consonant with the destruction of Jerusalem view, the counsel to repent would be in order for them then as

Christians to be able to read Matthew 24, and thus escape the city. But, what difference would holiness and godliness effect? Holiness and godliness would have no bearing on their escape from Jerusalem and Matthew 24:3-35 was given in order for the Christians to be able to escape the city. But if "the last day," the day of judgment, is in view, and verse seven says it is, then obviously the importance of Christians being found in holiness and righteousness is evident

4. 2 Peter 3:7. 10—This "day" is to be one of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. Matthew 13:49-50, and 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10 teach that this will occur at the end of the world. In verse ten Peter used the same sudden unexpected arrival of the thief in the night to represent the Lord's coming that Jesus used in Matthew 24:42-43. The passage in Matthew 24 is clearly in reference to "the last day," the day of judgment.

5. 2 Peter 3:12—Why would Jewish Christians look forward to and urge on the coming destruction of their city, friends, and acquaintances if it was to be succeeded by no greater blessing than life after A.D. 70? But Christians awaiting a final abode in heaven could certainly look forward to the Lord coming to rescue them and take them home.

6. 2 Peter 3:13—If this is all about A.D. 70, then pray tell what was the new heaven and the new earth they were looking for? What was the "promise" the new heaven and new earth fulfilled? There were no changes dramatic enough after Jerusalem's destruction to warrant such a figure.

7. 2 Peter 3:13—Furthermore things were no more righteous on earth in A.D. 75 than they were in 69. No condition prevailed after Jerusalem's destruction warranting the appellation "wherein dwelleth righteousness." The church still was suffering a bitter persecution by the Romans and continued to do so for nearly two-and-a-half centuries.

8. 2 Peter 3:14—As we pointed out in verse eleven, if this is about Jerusalem's destruction, which the Christians escaped, what difference does being "without spot and blameless" make? But if this is the second coming it is of critical importance.

9. 2 Peter 3:17—The warning against being away in error is far more appropriate if it is the second coming under consideration.

10. 2 Peter 3:4.9.13—Notice "the Promise of his coming": "the promise" about which God is not slack in fulfilling; and "the promise" which prompts Christians to look for "new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness." This promise is found in John 14:3: "And if I go and prepare

a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." Matthew 16:27 styles it: "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works."

Will The Earth Be Renovated?

It is sufficient to note that the new heavens and new earth will follow the total destruction of this earth in blazing fire. This being the clear import of Peter's language in verses 7, 10, 12, the earth that will then be is not this one. It is this earth which embodies the hopes and expectations of future kingdom advocates. The notion that this earth will be renovated is totally inconsistent with Peter's teaching.

What Are The New Heavens and New Earth?

Isaiah first uses this phrase in 65:17 and in 66:22. Edward Young says the word "create"

points to the production of something fundamentally new. What is to be announced is so revolutionary that it is the result of God's creative activity. That almighty power which was displayed at the original creation is again to be displayed in a new work of creation [the church—AWB]. With the advent of the Messiah the blessing to be revealed will in every sense be so great it can be described only as a creation of a new heaven and a new earth. The reference, however, is not to be restricted to the first advent but includes the entire reign of Christ, including the second advent and the eternal state. Christ renews the world, and Hebrews speaks of it as the world to come (2:5). In passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15, Paul shows how the new creation applies to believers; and Peter sets forth the hope of believers to receive this new heaven and earth (2 Pet. 3:13). In the concept of the prophet, time and eternity; the age of the New Testament and the eternal home are not sharply distinguished; and believers are already in the heavenlies (Eph. 1:3).

In the New Testament there are two words translated "new." One is prospective and indicates that which is young as opposed to old; the other is retrospective and points to that which is fresh in contrast to that which is worn out. It is the second of these which is used here. The heavens and the earth which the apostle describes in this passage will be new and fresh

and not old and worn, as are the heavens and the earth which now exist
Guy N. Woods suggests these points:

1. The present heavens and earth serve as a figure of the heavens and earth to follow.
2. The words "heavens and earth" are not intended to embrace all of God's material universe, but only that portion where His people dwell.
3. In the antitype, this limitation must be understood, and the words "new heaven and earth" must then be regarded as a designation of where His people dwell, and not a detailed description of the future abode.
4. Heaven is the final abode of the people of God.
5. Therefore, the phrase "new heaven and new earth" must be understood as a designation for the Christian's eternal home—Heaven.

Implications For the Dispensationalist Premillennial Theory

We have already established that the last day is a literal day—the day of judgment for all men. Both the righteous and the wicked will be resurrected from the dead and judged according to their works on the same literal day—Ac last one (Jn. 5:28-29, ct. al.). In 2 Peter 3, the day of judgment is one of perdition for the ungodly, but for the righteous it is the long sought day ushering in the believer's "new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness." It is also the literal day on which the earth will be burned up.

Contrary to all of this, and for that matter, all of God's Word, is the dispensationalist's view of the last day as enduring for at least 1007 years. He pictures the first part of the second coming as the resurrection of the righteous and their rapture for seven years, during which time the great tribulation will occur on earth. After which the second part of the second coming will begin when Jesus comes to earth to reign one thousand years on David's throne in Jerusalem. Then comes the little season when Satan is loosed. And finally, the third part of the second coming when the wicked will be resurrected and judged. All of this makes a mockery of Hebrews 9: 28, "So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation." The whole system of dispensationalist premillennialism is in blatant opposition to God's Word and especially is this so in eschatological considerations.

Conclusion

When the Apostle John speaks of "the last day" in his narrative of the life of Christ he means the final day of time. That day will begin like any other, but ere it ends it will witness the coming of the Lord Jesus. His arrival will be sudden and unexpected. On that day the dead will be raised. All men and angels will be judged according to their deeds. The righteous will be taken home to heaven and the wicked will be banished to Gehenna. Time will be no more. The watchword for the people of God is: "Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh" (ML 24:44). 709
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End Notes

- ¹ R. H. Lightfoot, *St John's Gospel*, p. 168
- ² William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of John*; Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Mich., Vol. 2, p. 154
- ³ Edward Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, Vol. HI; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. 1979, p. 154.
- ⁴ Guy N. Woods, *Peter, John, Jude*; Gospel Advocate Co., Nashville, Tenn., 1962, pp. 188-189