



"The Binding of Satan" by Lucas Cranach

The Seventh Vision

The Final Victory of Christ and His Church

Revelation 20:1 - 22:5

The First Scene-The Binding of Satan

Revelation 20:1-3

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain, He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations

any more until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

Verse 1

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in His hand a great chain.

“And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven...” - The new scene opens with the typical phrase *“And I saw”* (Greek - *“kai eidon”*). Throughout the Book of Revelation, this phrase has indicated the simple transition from one visionary scene to the next - not the historical sequence of the events within the visions. In this instance the phrase introduces the descent of an angel from heaven. Elsewhere in Revelation whenever this phrase occurs in conjunction with an angelic appearance it interrupts the historical progression of events either to introduce another series of events which are taking place at the same time or to revert back to a time prior to the preceding segment (cf. Revelation 7:2; 10:1; 18:1). This characteristic pattern also appears in this transition. The first scene, in Revelation 20:1-6, describes events



“The Binding of Satan” - Tinted Luther Bible Woodcut

which are actually prior in time to Armageddon, depicted in the preceding verses (Revelation 19:11-21). The second half of chapter 20 (vs. 7-15), returns to Armageddon and thus temporally parallels Revelation 19:11-21.

The figure that appears is simply described as *“an angel coming down out of heaven.”* The angel has in His hands *“the key to the Abyss”* and *“a great chain.”* Twice before in the visions of St. John our Lord has appeared as a mighty angel, the Messenger of God (cf. Revelation 10:1; 18:1). As previously noted, this language is consistent with the Old Testament depiction of Jesus as the *“Angel of the Lord.”* In this



“The Binding of Satan” by Hans Burgkmair

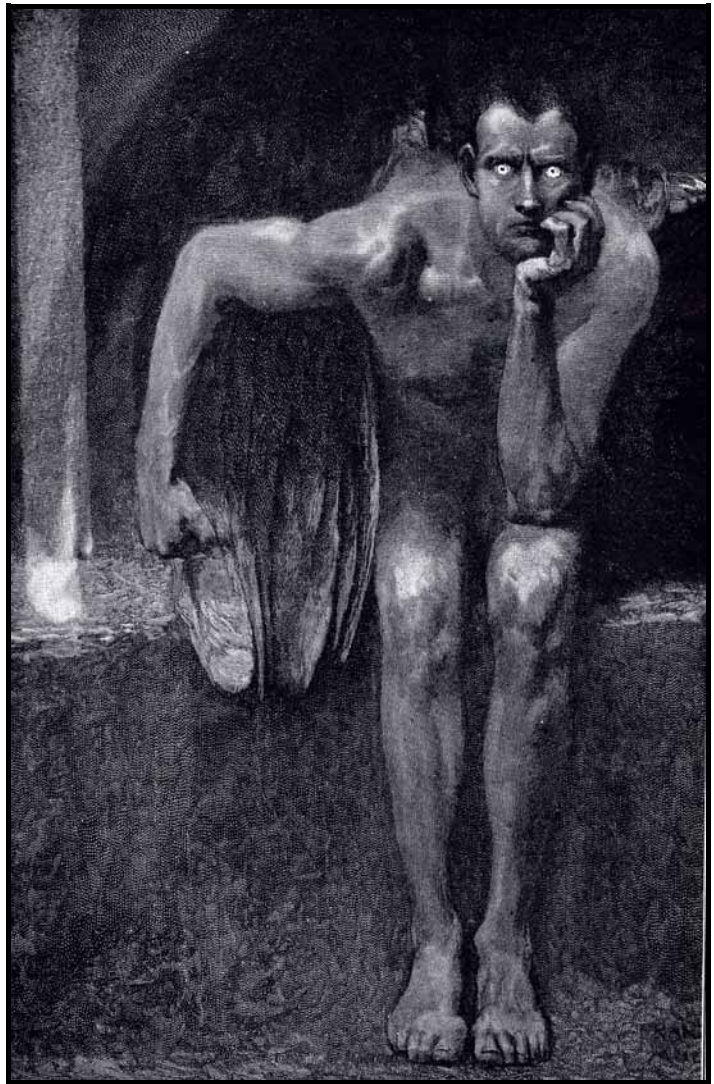
passage, the angel holds the key to the bottomless pit of hell. The allusion is to Christ’s comment in the opening vision of the Lord among the golden lampstands. There the risen Jesus had declared His victorious power over death and the devil with the assertion: *“And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”* (Revelation 1:18). Now, using the same language, the complete victory of Christ over Satan is presented in the imagery of the binding of the ancient serpent. When Jewish scribes accused Jesus of casting out demons with the power of Beelzebub, our Lord retorted that His ability to cast out demons reflected the fact that His power was greater than the devil’s. In terminology that may well have influenced the symbolism of this scene, Jesus said: *“In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.”* (Mark 3:27).

The key in Revelation, and throughout Scripture, represents power and authority: the power to open and close, the authority to command and control (cf. Revelation 1:18;



"The Binding of Satan" by Albrecht Dürer

3:7-9; 9:1; Isaiah 22:22). The same symbolism is used in reference to the “*Office of the Keys*,” that is the authority/responsibility which Christ has entrusted to His church on earth to open or close the gates of heaven by forgiving or retaining sins (Matthew 16:19). In this scene, the Angel of the Lord bears “*the key to the Abyss.*” The Greek word “*abyssus*” literally refers to a bottomless pit (“*a*” = no; “*byssus*” = bottom). The term occurs nine times in the New Testament. Seven of those occurrences are in the book of Revelation. The “*Abyss*” is a fearsome image of the torment of hell - an endless plunge into the dark and limitless depths of a black pit beyond the ability of human imagination (cf. Notes p.189). The Legion of demons who possess the Gaderene demoniac are desperately afraid that Jesus will command them to return to the darkness of the Abyss (cf. Luke 8: 31). In Revelation 9, “*the key to the shaft of the abyss*” was given to the King of the demon hordes, “*the Angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek Apollyon.*” (Revelation 9:1,11). The power and authority represented by that key enabled the devil to unleash his demonic riders upon the earth. The language shifts slightly in this passage, for the key borne by the Angel of the Lord is “*the key to the Abyss*” in contrast to “*the key to the shaft of the Abyss.*” In both instances, the key represents power and authority. The devil has no power of his own. Whatever power he may have has been given him by God as a part of His sovereign purpose for His universe. The power that the devil has been granted can only be utilized within the constraints which God places upon him. He must always remain “*Gottes Teufel.*” (Luther) The angel also bears “*a great chain.*” This is no ordinary manacle that



“*Satan Bound*” by Franz Stuck

might possibly be shattered by the berserk power of demonic rage like that of **“Legion”** who broke apart the chains of the Gaderene demoniac, (cf. Mark 5:3-4) but a massive restraint (Greek - *“megale”*) representing the irresistible power of God.



“The Binding of the Ancient Serpent” by William Blake

Verse 2

He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

“He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan...” - The enemy does yield not willingly or gracefully. His opposition to God’s power remains desperately bitter despite its utter futility. He must be taken by force. The identity of the foe is conclusively established with a series of four designations (cf. Revelation 12:9). He is **“the dragon,”** (Greek - *“drakonta”*). This is the title most frequently

applied to Satan in Revelation. The image of the devil as a huge reptilian monster is drawn from the Old Testament's "*Leviathon*" (Cf. Notes p. 248). The huge red dragon is introduced in the vision of the lady and the dragon (Revelation 12:3). The dragon raised up the beasts from sea and land and empowered them to serve him (Revelation 13). The dragon is "***the ancient serpent,***" a clear allusion to the temptation in the Garden of Eden and mankind's fall into sin (cf. Genesis 3). Finally, he is "***the devil*** (Greek - "*diabolus*" - "*the Slanderer*"), ***or Satan*** (Greek - "*satanas*" - from the Hebrew - "*the Adversary*").

"And bound him for a thousand years." - The symbol of Satan's binding must be understood in its Biblical context. As previously noted (cf. Notes, p. 485) the image of a strong man bound by One stronger yet than he is based on the words of Christ in Mark 3:27 (cf. also Matthew 12:29; Luke 11:14-26). To be bound (Greek - "*edesen*") suggests restraint and restriction of activity. The same verb is used in these Gospel texts and Revelation 20:2.

In Christ's original illustration, the binding of the strong man enabled the stronger man to deprive him of his possessions. In order to liberate the demon-possessed from their bondage, it was first necessary for Jesus to bind their Satanic master, that is, to restrain him and restrict his power. Christ's ability to do so demonstrated the superiority of His strength to Satan's. Mark's account of the exorcism of the Gadarene demoniac uses the same language with the specific reference to the possessed man's ability to break out of the chains with which he had been bound which parallels Revelation 20's reference to the great chain by which the dragon is bound: "***No one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his legs.***" (Mark 5:3-4) "***Legion,***" the



***"The Binding of Satan" - Luther Bible
Woodcut***



“The Binding of the Ancient Serpent - 10th Century Spanish Apocalypse”

mighty demon whom no chain could bind cowered in fear before ***“Jesus, Son of the Most High God”*** and was cast out into a herd of swine (Mark 5:6-13). The prominence of exorcism in the earthly ministry of Jesus was indicative of the limitation of Satan’s power - the binding of Satan - which was already underway at that time for the promised Christ had come into the world.

Our Lord uses other language to make the same point about the impact of His life, death, and resurrection on the kingdom and power of the devil. As the seventy-two disciples return with triumphant reports of their gospel proclamation, Jesus responds: ***“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.”*** (Luke 10:18-19). As the time of the cross approaches, Jesus affirms: ***“Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”*** (John 12:31-32) It is clear that the binding of Satan is not a future event designed to pave the way for an earthly millennium at the end of time. The binding

of Satan is a present reality which began 2,000 years ago with the successful accomplishment of the plan of salvation by Jesus Christ. It does not represent the elimination or absolute immobilization of the devil but rather the reduction of his efforts to the level of futility and the restriction of his ability to oppose and prevent the proclamation of the Gospel. The imagery is that of a vicious beast collared and chained. While he is still deadly, his power to maim and kill is now limited to the length of his chain. He cannot break the chain that binds him. Only those who are so careless as to stray within his reach will become his prey. Although the ancient foe fights on in bitter desperation, he has already been defeated. His power has been broken. Martin Luther declares the invincible confidence of the Christian in his magnificent *“Mighty Fortress”* - *“This world’s Prince may still, scowl fierce as he will. He can harm us none. He’s judged, the deed is done. One little word can fell him.”* This is the case both in the Gospel texts cited which used the Greek verb *“deo”* and here in Revelation 20. Dr. Brighton summarizes the significance of the binding symbol in its Scriptural context:

“According to the four gospels, then, the devil was bound, conquered, judged, and cast out as a result of Jesus’ saving ministry, culminating in His death on the cross and His resurrection. Therefore, the binding of Satan, the dragon, took place at



“The Binding of Satan” - Luther Bible Engraving

Jesus' victory, accomplished by His ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension (cf. also Revelation 12:5,7-10) - at the beginning of the "thousand years." (Brighton, p. 549)



"The Binding of Satan" - Luther Bible Engraving

The material in this vision closely parallels that of Revelation 12:7-11. Both texts symbolically depict the impact of Christ's successful completion of God's plan of salvation upon the devil and his kingdom. In Revelation 12, the symbolism is that of a great war in heaven between Satan and his demons over against the archangel Michael and the hosts of heaven. The devil is defeated, cast out of heaven, and hurled down to the earth. Here, in Revelation 20, the same point is represented by the binding of Satan and his confinement within the Abyss. The message is the same in both instances. Our enemy has been defeated. By His perfect life and innocent death in our place Christ has removed the basis for Satan's accusation against us and broken his power over us. The devil and his legions are defeated but not destroyed. Their power has been broken, but it has not yet been eliminated. They will stubbornly continue to oppose Christ and His Gospel, throughout the New Testament

era, but they will not prevail. (Cf. Notes, p. 329-344)

This understanding of the text not only conforms to the use of this language elsewhere in Scripture, it is also fully consistent with the design and purpose of Revelation itself. The Book of Revelation was inspired by God to comfort and sustain His people in the midst of earthly trial and tribulation - from the contemporaries of St. John at the end of the first century to those who will still be alive on earth when the Lord returns in triumph at the end of time. The reduction of Satan's binding to the status of a facilitating event for an earthly millennium at some point in the future contradicts that purpose.

"Revelation 20 is not concerned with describing a single episode just prior to the last judgment, but rather with encouraging the beleaguered people of God in the setting of a description of the whole New Testament era from the incarnation to the parousia." (Stephenson, p. 93)

R.C.H. Lenski offers this forceful conclusion:

*"So we see where **the Scriptures** have the 1,000 years begin. I will let the Scriptures tell me although 10,000 chiliasts insist that **they** must tell me! They may keep their **novum** which means "new thing," "novelty." So the 1,000 years are the complete New Testament era. John was in it; you and I are in it now. The two beasts and the whore are working now. This text is not concerned about the dim future so that chiliasts may embroider it at will. As it had value for John, so it has for us." (Lenski, p. 576)*

*"**And bound him for a thousand years.**" - With this goal in mind, the numerological symbol of "**a thousand**" becomes a most effective means of expressing the totality of the*



"The Ancient Serpent" by Hugo van der Goes



*"And Cast Him Into the Pit"
Luther Bible Woodcut*

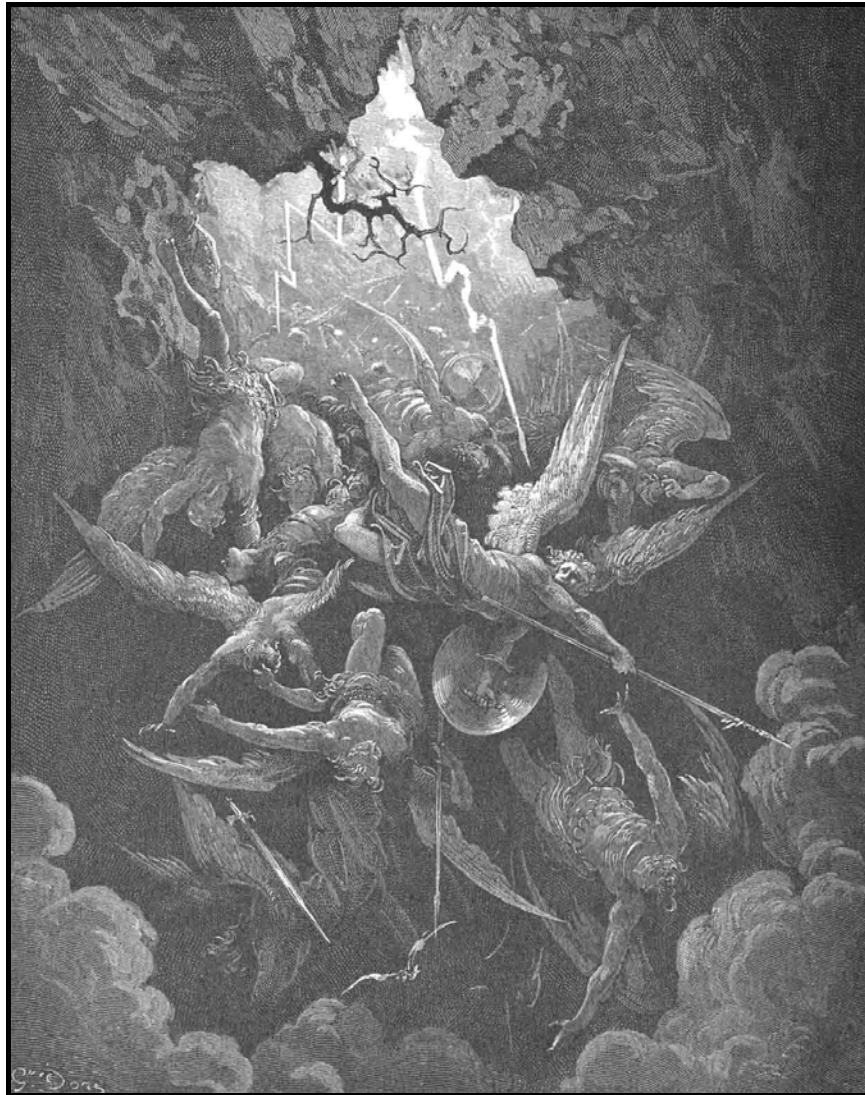
New Testament era. One thousand is the cube of the ordinal number ten ($10 \times 10 \times 10$) - *"ten raised to the third degree, that of highest completeness."* (Lenski, p. 572). It signifies a lengthy period of time which is in itself a complete unit. In this instance that time period is the interval between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ. The thousand years only occur in two other texts in the Bible. In both instances it is not a *"specific period of earthly history, exactly one thousand years long"* (Brighton, p. 551) but a general reference to a lengthy period of time (Psalm 90:4 - *"For a thousand years in Your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night."*; 2 Peter 3:8 - *"But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day."* A similar reference, although not in terms of years, can be found in Psalm 50:10 in which God declares - *"For every animal of the forest is mine*

and the cattle on a thousand hills." The numeral one thousand, in this instance, is obviously not literal. It signifies completeness - all the cattle on earth belong to God (cf. also Isaiah 7:23). To understand this numeral as a literal designation for a specific period of time is inconsistent with its immediate context in Revelation 20 and the pattern of numerological symbolism which prevails throughout the book of Revelation. G.K. Beale lists five Biblical and historical reasons why the 1,000 years of Revelation 20 cannot be understood a literal chronological number:

"(1) the consistently figurative use of numbers elsewhere in the book, (2) the figurative nature of much of the immediate context ("chain," "abyss," "dragon,"

“serpent,” “locked,” “sealed,” “beast”), (3) the predominantly figurative tone of the entire book (so 1:1), (4) the figurative use of “1,000” in the OT, and (5) the use in Jewish and early Christian writings of “1,000” years as a figure for the eternal blessing of the redeemed.” (Beale, p. 995)

“He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.” - The image of Satan’s restriction and confinement is reiterated as the Angel of the Lord hurls the bound figure of the Dragon down into the Abyss and locks and seals its lid over him. The New Testament uses similar imagery in regard to the punishment of the fallen angels elsewhere. In Jude 6 we are told that the angels who followed Satan in his rebellion



“He Threw Him Into the Abyss” by Gustav Dore



"The Defeat of Satan"
by Maestro di Castelsardo -1498

against God are bound with eternal chains in a place of unending darkness: *"And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home-these He has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day."* Peter uses the example of God's stern punishment of the fallen angels to warn sinners not to trifle with the judgment of God: *"For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them into the deepest pit of hell, putting them into chains of darkness to be held for judgment."* (2 Peter 2:4) All of this language is clearly metaphoric, describing realities beyond our comprehension. Chains and locks cannot literally bind spirits. Even darkness and light are physical realities which do not directly apply to the invisible creatures whom God has fashioned.

The angel's dual action - *"locked and sealed it over him"* - stresses

the definitive nature of the action and the devil's inability to resist or undo it. Seals were used to provide special security when the prevention of access or exit was of particular importance (i.e. the sealing of the lions den in which Daniel was confined (Daniel 6:17), and the sealing of the entrance to the tomb of Jesus (Matthew 27:66). Official documents were also sealed to ensure that only the appropriate individual with sufficient authority would open them (cf. Revelation 5:1). It was common practice in the Roman world for the cell doors in prisons to be officially sealed so that no one but the judge who had pronounced the sentence could open the cell door.

Thus the imposition of a seal on the lid of the abyss signifies that only God may break the seal which He has imposed and remove the restraint which He has placed upon the activities of the devil.

Like the binding itself, the devil's confinement within the Abyss signifies his defeat and the limitation of his ability to oppose and suppress the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the world. This is clearly indicated by the purpose clause which follows - *"to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore."* The Greek noun *"ethne"* usually refers only to non-Jewish nations, namely the Gentiles. Siegbert Becker suggests that the phrase ought to be translated to reflect that emphasis - *"to keep him from deceiving the Gentiles anymore."* In the aftermath of Christ's perfect life, substitutionary death, and triumphant resurrection the almost universal dominion which Satan enjoyed over the gentile nations of the world is ended. The Gospel will now be proclaimed with great power across the globe. The significance of this shift



"The Devil Cast Into the Pit" - Luther Bible Woodcut by Hans Brosamer



“Satan Bound for 1,000 Years” - Luther Bible Woodcut by Bockesperger-Amman

can be more clearly perceived in the broader context of salvation history:

“After the fall, the serpent and his agents do on a worldwide scale what the devil began to do in the garden. In the OT age Satan was able to delude the majority of Israel so that they were not able to fulfill their commission to be a salvific light to the nations. As a result, the good news of God’s kingdom was not heralded to the pagan nations, and the nations remained in spiritual darkness. Also, because of Israel’s sin, Israel remained in subjection to Satanic oppression from foreign nations attempting to exterminate Israel. This attempted extermination was climaxed by Satan’s attempted attack on Christ, who summed up the community of the true Israel in Himself...All who subsequently identify with Jesus as the true Israel begin to fulfill the commission to be a light to the nations, so that Satan’s veil of deception over the nations is lifted. This means that the devil will not be able to stop the spread of the preaching of the gospel or its expanding reception (= the church) during the age preceding Christ’s return. So Christ commands His followers to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). The gospel will “be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations and then the end will come” (Matt.24:14).” (Beale, pp.

“After that, he must be set free for a short time.” - At the end of the New Testament era, when God’s purpose for the evangelization of the gentiles has been accomplished, the restraint that has been imposed upon Satan will be removed to enable him to marshal his forces for one final foredoomed assault upon Christ and His people. But even this last desperate outburst of opposition to the Gospel takes places within the purpose and providence of Almighty God. This is clearly indicated by the verb ***“must”*** (Greek - *“dei”*) which consistently refers to that which is necessary according to the will of God for the accomplishment of the plan of salvation. The devil does not break out of prison by his own power. He is briefly released by his jailor to present himself and his followers for judgment. This is Satan’s *“little season”* of which our Lord had warned in Matthew 24:

“For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now - never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect, those days will be shortened. At that time, if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘There He is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonder to deceive even the elect - if that were possible.”
(Matthew 24:21-25)

The Bible consistently teaches that the world will grow ever more evil and corrupt throughout the New Testament era. False teachers and the errant doctrines they cleverly propose will endlessly proliferate. Mankind will become increasingly resistant to the Gospel of salvation and large segments of the visible church will succumb to apostasy. As the moment of Christ’s return finally approaches this pattern will sharply intensify for the restraining hand of God will have been removed from our ancient enemy. From a human perspective it will be impossible to determine whether Satan’s little season has begun. Devout Christians in every generation have been convinced that human culture in their day had descended to the deepest depth of corruption and degradation and that the end was therefore nigh. Nonetheless, time has continued, and humanity has discovered ever new ways to deny and defy God, His righteousness and His mercy. The text stresses the brevity of Satan’s release - ***“for a short time”*** (Greek - *“mikron chronon”*). This is not a new historical period but the culmination of the New Testament era which sets the stage for the judgment and the ultimate downfall of the dragon and his kingdom.



"The Elders Before the Throne of God" by Albrecht Dürer

The Thousand Year Reign

Revelation 20:4-6

"I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have a part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. " - The customary *"kai eidon"* ("And I saw") signals

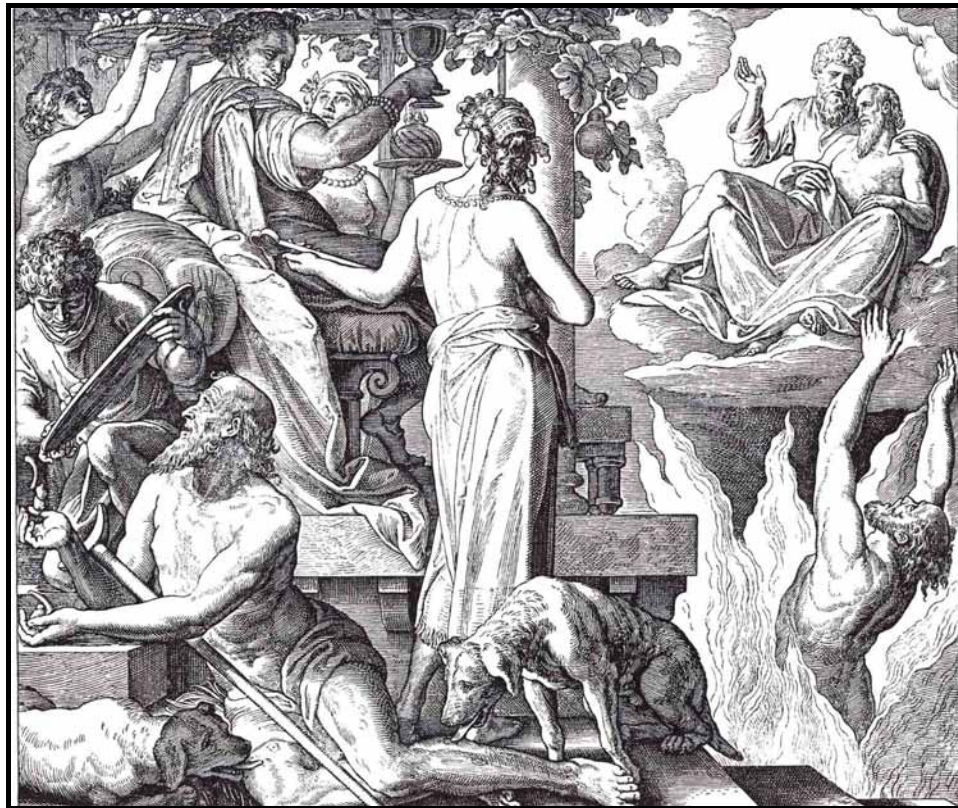
the shift to the next scene in the vision. The close parallel between the visions of Revelation 12 and the scenes now before us in Revelation 20 has already been noted (cf. Notes, p. 489). In Revelation 12, the scene which depicts the defeat and the downfall of Satan (Revelation 12:7-9) is followed by the triumphant response of saints and angels in heaven. (Revelation 12:10-12). That is also the case here. Having seen the result of Christ's victory on earth in the curtailment of Satan's ability to deceive the nations "***until the thousand years were ended***" (vs.3), our attention is directed to heaven where the triumphant reign of saints and martyrs has already begun and will continue throughout the New Testament era "***until the thousand years were ended***" (vs.5) as the result of the victory of Christ and the binding of Satan. Accordingly, both scenes describe the same time period - "***the thousand years***" - on earth and in heaven.

The Revelator observes "***thrones,***" the seat of authority and power. In this context, the thrones represent both the seat of judgment, "*the tribunal seats for the assessors of the divine Judge,*" (Thomas, p. 413), and the royal throne of a king from which he



"Michael - Prince of the Host of Heaven" by Ricci

rules and reigns. The number of thrones is not specified, nor are their occupants personally identified. Those who are seated upon the thrones are ***“those who have been given authority to judge.”*** The image is drawn from Daniel chapter 7 where the prophet foretells the day of judgment in this way: ***“Thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took His seat...The court was seated and the books were opened...the Ancient of Days came and judgment was given to the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.”*** (Daniel 7:9-10,22). Jesus had promised His disciples: ***“I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”*** (Matthew 19:28; cf. also Luke 22:30). As Paul admonished the Corinthians to avoid the pagan courts and settle disputes among themselves he wrote: ***“Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?”*** (1 Corinthians 6:2). Thus those seated upon the thrones are the people of God. The Scriptural evidence supporting a role for God’s people in judgment is well attested. This scene, with its royal/judgment thrones was also anticipated earlier in Revelation as the twenty-four elders who represent



“The Rich Man and Poor Lazarus” by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld



*“The Soul of Lazarus Carried to Heaven by the Angels”
by Rudolf Schäfer*

the people of God are depicted seated upon thrones around the throne of God with golden crowns upon their heads (Revelation 4:4). The text notes that this judgment authority is not inherent, it is bestowed by God. The people of God are ***“those who had been given authority to judge.”*** The authority rests with God alone who graciously permits His faithful people to participate in the final judgement of humanity.

“And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus...” -. John sees ***“the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus.”*** The heavenly setting of this scene is emphatically confirmed by John’s reference to ***“the souls of those.”*** John does not see physical

bodies. He sees the disembodied souls of those who have died in Christ. One might object that a soul cannot be seen. While that is literally true, it does not apply to the supernatural visions of St. John, in which God, angels, and a great many other invisible realities visibly appeared. Despite the limitations of our finite minds, the Scriptural text clearly asserts that John saw these souls (cf. The Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus - Luke 16:19-31). The direct object of the verb “*saw*” is the Greek accusative noun “*psychas*.” Those who misuse this passage in support of an earthly

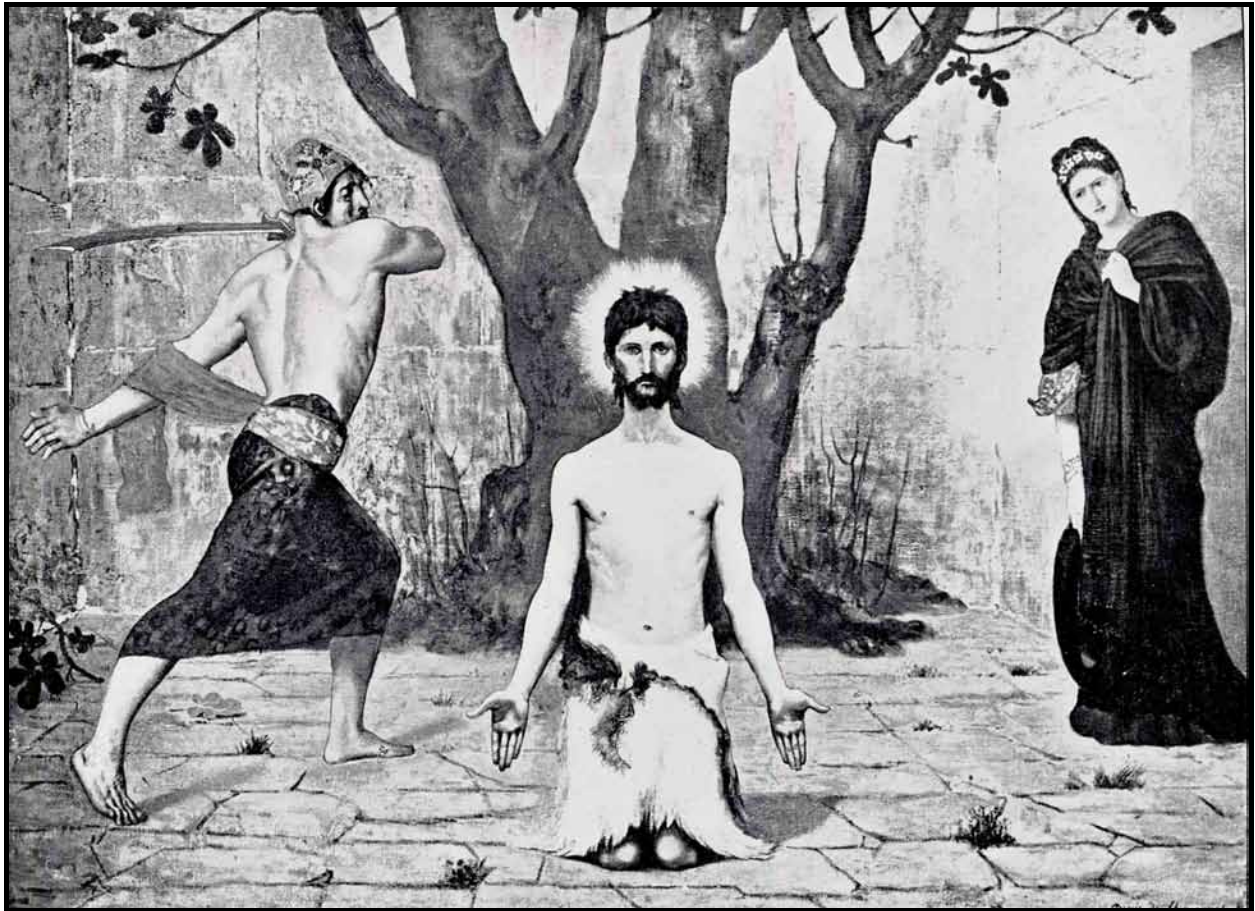


“To The Eternal Home” by Wilhelm von Kaulbach

millennium are forced to argue that this is not a reference to the disembodied souls of believers who have died on earth but now live in heaven. Instead, they argue, this is a figurative reference to the whole person, body and soul together. It is true that the word “*psyche*” is sometimes used in that sense in Scripture - as in Romans 13:1, for example. However that cannot be the case here. John does not say “*I saw souls who had been beheaded*” which would obviously be understood as a reference to the whole person. He says “*I saw the souls of those,*” clearly distinguishing between the soul and the whole person. This particular wording can only refer to disembodied souls of those who have died. The Bible teaches that at the moment of

physical death the soul of the believer is in heaven with the Lord (cf. Gen. 25:7-8; Psalm 23:4; Matthew 10:28; 22:31-32; Luke 16:22; Luke 23:43; John 11:25-27; John 14:1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Philippians 1:20-26; Revelation 6:9-11; 14:13). It is to such believers, now at home with Christ in heaven, to whom John directs our attention.

The identification of the throne judges as the people of God is reinforced as the description continues. The Greek verb “*pepelekizo*” (“*beheaded*”) is derived from the noun “*pelekys*” which means “*axe*.” The grisly verb literally means “*to chop off one’s head with an axe*.” This is the only time in which the word occurs in the Bible. If one is to interpret this phrase literalistically it would refer only to those who have been beheaded with an axe. That is clearly not the intent of the text. In Revelation 6:9 “*the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and the testimony they maintained*” represented all of God’s faithful people who now live and reign with God in heaven, eagerly awaiting the Day of Judgment. So also here in Revelation 20:4, “*the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus*” serve as the epitome of all those who have offered the good confession in life and have suffered for it, that is, every faithful Christian believer who has fought the good fight of faith and has finished his course on earth. The souls of these redeemed witnesses now enjoy the blessedness of the “*dead who die in the Lord*.” (Revelation 14:13) The Greek word “*marturia*” was used broadly in



“The Beheading of St. John the Baptist” by Puvis de Chavannes

Biblical times to refer to any form of witness without the specific, more modern, connotation of being killed because of that witness. Brighton summarizes:

“A martyr of Jesus, then, is a Christian who witnesses to the truth of Jesus and the Word of God. And for this he will suffer various forms of persecution. Whether he dies a martyr’s death or not, he is still a martyr of Jesus. The Biblical usage of “martyr” and “martyrdom” supports an interpretation of beheading here in 20:4 as the epitome of the persecutions that all Christians experience. For Christian witnesses (martyrs) back up their testimony with their lives, and, if necessary, by the way they meet their death.” (Brighton, p. 559)

Hence, ***“the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God”*** represent the souls of all of the faithful departed who now live and reign with Christ in heaven.



“Poor Lazarus In Life” - 19th Century Engraving

The nature of the martyrs’ testimony ***“for Jesus and because of the word of God”*** is defined using the beast imagery of Revelation 13: ***“They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands.”*** (Cf. Revelation 13:1-15).

“They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.”

- There are two verbs in this phrase - ***“came to life”*** (Greek - *“ezesan”*) and ***“reigned”*** (Greek - *“ebasileusan”*). Both are in the Greek aorist tense which denotes past action. The NIV incorrectly translates the first verb in the phrase as what grammarians call an ingressive aorist-***“They came to***

life.” The ingressive aorist places particular emphasis upon the moment in which the action began. The second verb is simply translated as an ordinary, constantive aorist, **“they...reigned.”** This translation of the two verbs is not only inconsistent, it is substantively inappropriate in the context of the sentence. The ingressive aorist translation - **“they came to life”** suggests that the subject had been alive, then died, and has now come to life again. That cannot be the case here, because the subject of the verb in this sentence is **“souls.”** A soul does not die. At the instant of physical death the soul is either in heaven with the Lord or in hell to await the official condemnation of Judgment Day. In this context, both of the verbs should be translated as simple constantive aorists - **“they lived and reigned”**. The comforting assurance of the text is that all those who die in the Lord, throughout the New Testament era - **“a thousand years”** - are alive at this very moment, living and reigning with Christ in heaven. *“The whole purpose of this vision is to reveal the royal exaltation and power of every faithful believer, when at his death his soul enters into heaven.”* (Little, p.205) This great scene depicts the fulfillment of Christ’s promise: **“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.”** (John 11:25) Martin Franzmann expresses the delightful irony of the scene from the perspective of the persecuted church which was John’s original audience:

“During those thousand years the church has before it the key signature of “dying and behold we live” (2 Cor.6:9). Those faithful ones who have been judged and condemned in human courts, “beheaded for their testimony to Jesus” - they are in reality not judged and condemned men but the judges; they are enthroned as judges over all the hostile powers which have apparently triumphed over them. In the court of God the verdict of the world is reversed; there the Spirit pleads their cause and “convinces the world concerning...judgment because the ruler of this world (Satan) is judged” (John 16:8-11)...Those who have lost their lives for Christ’s sake find their life (Matthew 10:39); they come to life and reign with Christ.” (Franzmann, p. 131)

“(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection.” - A parenthetical remark is added concerning the state of the souls of the unbelieving dead - **“the rest of the dead”** - during the 1,000 years, that is, the interim between the first and second comings of the Lord Jesus Christ.



“The Death of the Just and the Unjust” by Heinrich Vogtherr -1540

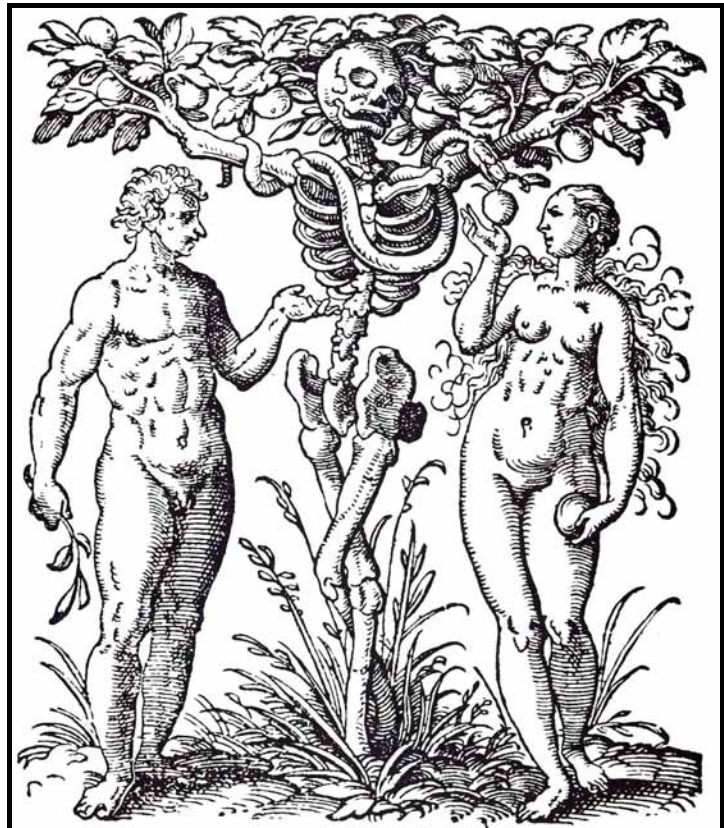
A magnificent woodcut entitled “*The Death of the Just and the Unjust*” by Reformation era artist Heinrich Vogtherr presents the transformation of death’s significance for those who die in a faith relationship with the Savior Jesus Christ. Holbein conveys the stark contrast between the meaning of death for the believer and the unbeliever by presenting a Christian and a non-Christian at opposite ends of the same death bed. The Christian is surrounded by the three cardinal virtues of “Faith” (“Glaub”), “Hope (“Hoffnung”), and “Love (“Liebe”). Above him, one angel prepares to place the victor’s crown of blessing (“Glücksagung”) upon his head while another gestures toward the home in heaven which awaits him. In the background, the sheep of the Good Shepherd’s flock graze securely on the green pastures which He has provided. This man, justified by grace through faith in Jesus, meets death serenely, his Bible at his bedside, and his hands folded in prayer over his heart. The tortured figure on the other end of the deathbed presents the opposite in every way. His female companion, “the World” (“die Welt”) flees from him in terror. The sweet pleasures that she offered him in life are of no value now. The skeletal figure of death (“Todt”) leers triumphantly over him, his skull and crossbones banner of victory in one hand.. In the other is an empty hourglass with the despairing message that for this man time has run out. The beastly figure of the devil rises up from

the flames of hell to snatch him down to damnation. Around the devil and the fires of perdition are two grim texts. The first identifies Hell: *"Such is the place of one who knows not God."* (Job 18:21) The second text labels the horned figure rising up from the fire: *"Be sober, be vigilant, for your adversary, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."* (1 Peter 5:8) The emaciated figure on the bed twists in torment as he desperately seeks to evade his fate. In the background, the goats, which have been separated from the sheep, look on helplessly and battle with one another. Holbein's images present a powerfully effective message of Law and Gospel.

+ + +

The crucial word for an accurate understanding of this phrase is the verb *"zao"* (*"to live"*). Once again, the NIV unnecessarily translates this verb as an ingressive aorist - *"did not come to life."* The simple constantive aorist - *"did not live"* is more appropriate in this context.

In the New Testament generally, and in the writings of St. John particularly, the verb *"to live"* (Greek - *"zao"*) and the corresponding noun *"life"* (*"zoe"*) tend to take on a unique, intensified meaning. They do not merely refer to physical existence, as is often the case elsewhere but become in the writings of St. John the characteristic terms which describe the true, abundant, everlasting life which can only be experienced in relationship to God by faith in Jesus Christ. This usage is distinctive and consistent. Thus, in the prologue to his Gospel, John declares the impact of Jesus' coming in this way: ***"In Him was life, and that life was the light of men."*** (John 1:4). To the recalcitrant religious leaders of Israel, Jesus asserts: ***"I tell you the truth, he who believes has***



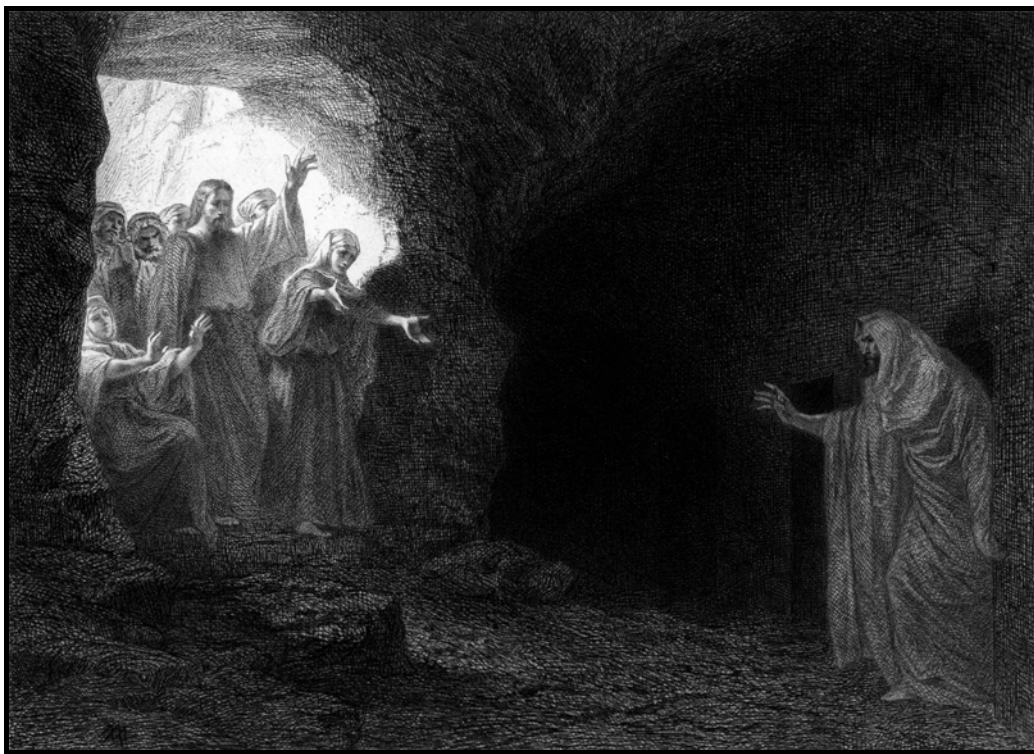
"Medieval Woodcut Depicting The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as the Skeletal Figure of Death"



Medieval Woodcut of Death Riding Forth from the Jaws of Hell as a Conqueror

everlasting life. I am the bread of life.” (John 6:47) Our Lord defines the bestowal of that abundant life as the very reason for His coming: **“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”** (John 10:10). In His high priestly prayer, Jesus’ words to the Father define the true meaning of life - **“Now this is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”** (John 17:3) Real life, according to the Bible, is much more than mere physical existence. In fact, the great majority of those who are physically alive are not truly alive at all. They are dead in their transgressions and sins (cf. Ephesians 2:1); cut off from the life-giving mercy and grace of God in Christ. Unlike the believers who live and reign with Christ in heaven throughout the New Testament era, **“the rest of the dead”** - that is, all those who die apart from a saving relationship with God through faith in Christ - do not live during this time period. To be sure, their existence does not cease. But the existence experienced by the unbelieving dead is not life in any Biblical sense of the term, and Scripture never uses “*zoe*” to describe their status. At the moment of physical death the souls of those who die outside of the faith are in hell, awaiting the resurrection of their bodies and the coming of the judgment with desperate fear.

The use of the Greek preposition “*achri*” (English - “*until*”) is somewhat misleading in this phrase. The English word “*until*” suggests a change in condition at the end of the specified period. In this case the implication would be that the unbelieving dead did come to life after the end of the 1,000 years. The Greek text, however, does not carry that connotation. In both Greek and Hebrew “*not until*” clauses often imply nothing whatever about what happened after the limit of the “*until*” was reached. “*An until clause or phrase does not of itself tell us what happened when the designated point was reached. That always depends on the context.*” (Becker, p. 310). 2 Samuel 6:23 is a clear example of this linguistic pattern: “***And Micah the daughter of Saul had no children until the day of her death.***” Obviously the intent of the phrase is to indicate that Micah remained childless for the rest of her life, not to imply that she began to have children after her death. In this instance, the phrase - “***The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended***” - simply contrasts the state of the unbelieving dead with that of believers during the thousand years, the interval between the first and second comings of Christ. The souls of believers will live and reign with Christ in heaven throughout the New Testament era. The souls of unbelievers will not.



“Lazarus Come Forth!” - 19th Century Bible Illustration

“This is the first resurrection.” - Having commented on the state of the unbelieving dead, John returns to the main theme of this scene - the glorious reign of the saints in heaven during the New Testament era. He describes the triumphant life of the saints and martyrs in heaven as ***“the first resurrection.”*** The phrase is particularly apt. Scorned and rejected by the world, they were condemned and killed for their faith. But dying they live (2 Corinthians 6:9)! Although their bodies, awaiting the trumpet call and the archangel’s voice, rest in the grave - their souls are alive at this moment. And not merely alive, but savoring the richness of abundant eternal life in the presence of God! *“Accordingly, the resurrection of which John here speaks is a resurrection pertaining to souls. The term is not used here in a literal, but in a*



“The Resurrection of Lazarus” by William Hilton

symbolic sense, signifying a quickening and raising up.” (Little, p. 206) Millennialists, who imagine two bodily resurrections, one at the beginning of the millennium for believers and another at the end of the millennium for unbelievers, insist that the word ***“resurrection”*** can only be understood in a physical or bodily sense. This insistence is contrary to the usage of the New Testament. Jesus uses the terminology of resurrection from the dead in both a spiritual and a physical sense in John 5. In fact He uses the power of His Word to accomplish the physical

resurrection of the dead as proof of the power of His Word to accomplish the resurrection of those who are dead in unbelief and sin to new life in Him:

“I tell you the truth, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and now has come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live...Do not be amazed at this for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear His voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” (John 5:24-29)

Note also that the wording of John 5 allows for only one physical resurrection which will include both believers and unbelievers. Paul uses remarkably similar language in Ephesians 2:5-6 to describe that which God has done for His people in Christ: ***“God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.”*** St. Augustine cites a plethora of parallel passages where the concept of resurrection is applied in a spiritual context:

“There are some who suppose that resurrection can be predicated only of the body, and therefore they contend that this first resurrection of the Apocalypse is a bodily resurrection...But what do they say to the apostle who speaks of a resurrection of souls? For certainly in was in the inner and not the outer man that those had risen to whom he says: “If ye have risen with Christ, mind the things which are above.” (Colossians 3:1). The same sense he elsewhere conveyed in other words, saying: “That as Christ has risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we may also walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4). So, too, “Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.” (Ephesians 5:14)” (Augustine, *The City of God*, XX,10)



Saint Augustine



*“The First Resurrection, the Downfall of Satan, and the Rise of Gog and Magog” -
Luther Bible Woodcut*

“Blessed and holy are those who have a part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.” - This is the fifth of Revelation’s seven beatitudes. It differs from its counterparts in that it asserts not only blessedness (Greek - “*makarios*”) but holiness (Greek - “*hagios*”) for all ***“those who have a part in the first resurrection.”*** This is consistent with the view that the ***“first resurrection”*** refers to the transition of the souls of believers from physical death to eternal life with Christ in heaven. Lenski summarizes:

“This is what the first resurrection means: the dying person’s soul is transferred to, literally ‘has part in the rising up, the first one.’ ‘Blessed’ is he indeed! This verdict accords him the highest happiness. ‘Holy’ is significantly added; the last race of sin and of the flesh has been swept out of the soul at the moment of death. By its anastasis, its rising up, the soul passes into heaven to its royal throne in a pure and stainless state. The body will follow in due time when the 1,000 years are ended, and

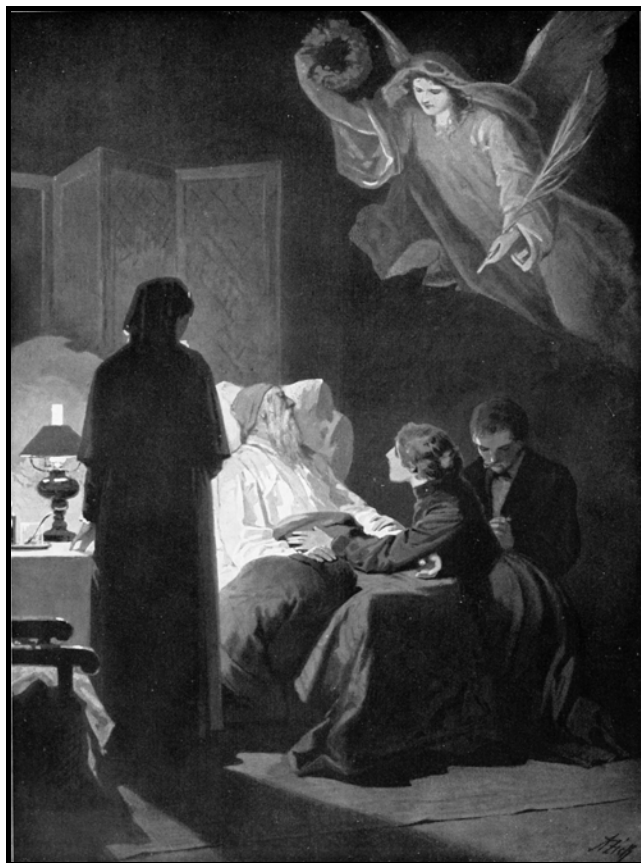
the Lord calls it from the dust for its anastasis, its rising up to the same heavenly exaltation.” (Lenski, p. 589)

“The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.” - The text goes on to define the blessedness of those who participate in the first resurrection. The blessedness of those who have experienced the ***“first resurrection”*** consists first of all in their immunity from the ***“second death.”*** The numerical contrast is striking by design. Believers, those who have participated in the ***“first resurrection”*** rise twice, first spiritually and then physically; but only die once, when they pass through physical death. The opposite is true for unbelievers, those who have not experienced the ***“first resurrection.”*** They will die twice, first physically and then eternally, but they will only rise once, in the resurrection of all flesh on the Last Day. The ***“second death”*** is permanent separation from God in the eternal torment of hell, represented in the vision by ***“the lake of fire and sulfur.”*** (Revelation 20:14) The ***“second death”*** holds no threat for those who have been justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. They stand before God righteous and holy, cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. Damnation cannot touch them. Its fatal power over them was destroyed once and for



“The Heavenly Jerusalem” by Peter Cornelius

all at the cross. The words recall Paul's declaration in Romans 6:9 - ***"For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, He cannot die again: death no longer has mastery over Him."*** While the damned suffer the non-life of eternal existence in hell, the redeemed are blessed to enjoy eternity as ***"priests of God and of Christ"*** who will ***"reign with Him for a thousand years."*** (Cf. 1 Peter 2:9) In Revelation 1:6, John had celebrated that which Christ has accomplished for His people with these words: ***"To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father - to Him be glory and power forever and ever."*** The twenty-four elders who represent God's people before the divine throne sang the praises of the Lamb because: ***"You were slain and with Your blood You purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God."*** (Revelation 5:10). The reign and the priesthood which Christ purchased for His people with His own precious blood is now being exercised by victorious saints and martyrs in heaven. *"The destiny purchased by Christ for all Christians will be*



"The Crown of Life" by Alexander Zick

realized by those who partake in the first resurrection; for them, priestly service in the glory of its ideal perfection is an accomplished fact." (Swete, p. 264). It was the role and privilege of the priest to stand in the sacred presence of God on behalf of the people. Now in heaven's perfection of holiness God's royal priests stand in His glorious presence continuously bringing their sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise before the throne and interceding on behalf of the church still on earth. The Lutheran Confessions acknowledge this ministry of heavenly intercession while sternly rejecting the unbiblical practice of praying to or for the dead: *"Besides, we also grant that the angels pray for us...Although concerning the saints we concede that, just as, when alive, they pray for the Church universal in general, so in heaven they pray for the Church in general."* (Apol. XXI, 8)



“Satan Bound for 1,000 Years” by Peter Paul Rubens

Excursus: The Millennium

The doctrine of the “*Millennium*” has proven to be one of the most controversial and divisive topics in Christian theology. Dr. Brighton does not exaggerate in the least when he contends:

“No other portion of Revelation has caused more confusion and consternation than the first six verses of chapter 20, which describe what has come to be known as the millennium. One could receive the impression from the amount of interest caused by these verses that they are the most important and influential in the entire book.”
(Brighton, p. 533)

This distorted emphasis is most unfortunate in that it detracts from the real message

of encouragement and hope which God offers His people in this remarkable book of prophecy.

The term “*millennium*” is derived from the Latin words “*mille*” (one thousand) and “*annus*” (year). The two words are combined to form the compound “*millennium*” which refers to a period of one thousand years. Historically, millennialism is also known as “*chiliasm*” from “*chilia*,” the Greek word for one thousand.

The four basic categories of millennial opinion in Christian history are: (1) dispensational premillennialism; (2) historic premillennialism; (3) postmillennialism; and, (4) amillennialism. Numerous variations exist within each of the four categories. Each of these basic viewpoints utilizes a prefix which signals their perspective on the millennium and the timing of Christ’s return in relation to it. Thus, premillennialists believe that Christ will return before the 1,000 years (Latin - “*pre*” = before). Postmillennialists believe that Christ will return after the 1,000 years (Latin “*post*” = after). Those who do not believe that the Bible teaches a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth are known as amillennialists utilizing the Greek negative prefix “*a*”. The four millennial views may be summarized as follows:



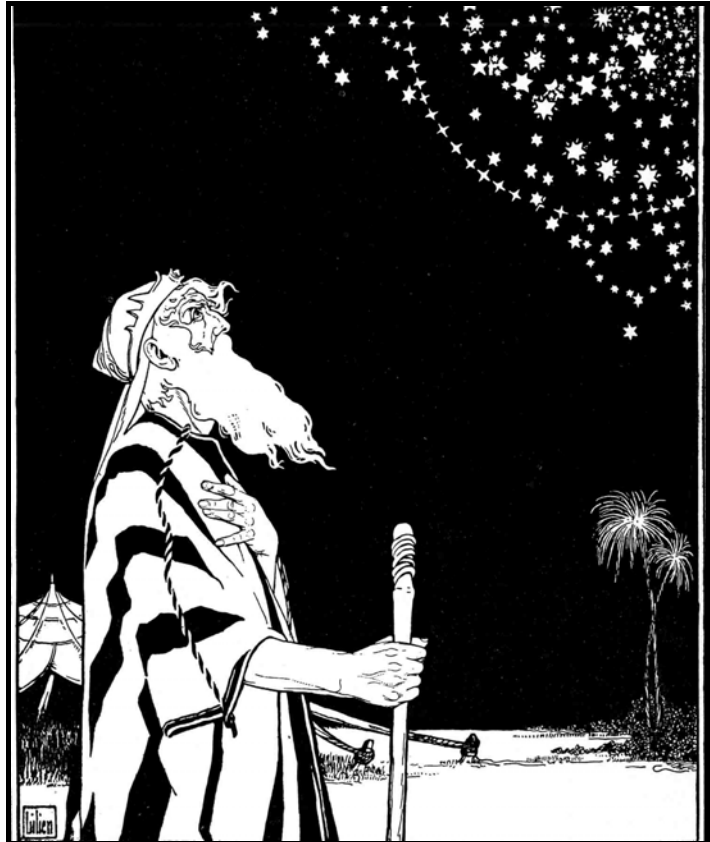
John Nelson Darby
Founder of Dispensational Premillennialism

1. Dispensational Premillennialism

Dispensational premillennialism enjoys widespread popularity among conservative Protestants and fundamentalists today. It is certainly the best known millennial alternative, extensively promoted by television preachers and evangelists and best selling authors and novelists. Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* and its sequels, along with Tim LaHaye’s best selling novels in the *Left Behind* series (now both books and movies), have sold hundreds of millions of copies and popularized this view throughout American culture.

Dispensational premillennialism originated

early in the 19th century in a splinter group from the Church of England known as the Plymouth Brethren. Its chief advocate was John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). The view was introduced in America and promoted by C.I. Scofield through his widely used Scofield Reference Bible. Darby, and those who follow him, argue that God's dealings with humanity are divided into seven distinct "*dispensations*." Scofield defined a dispensation as "*a period of time in which man is tested in regard to his obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.*" Charles Ryrie offers this more detailed definition:



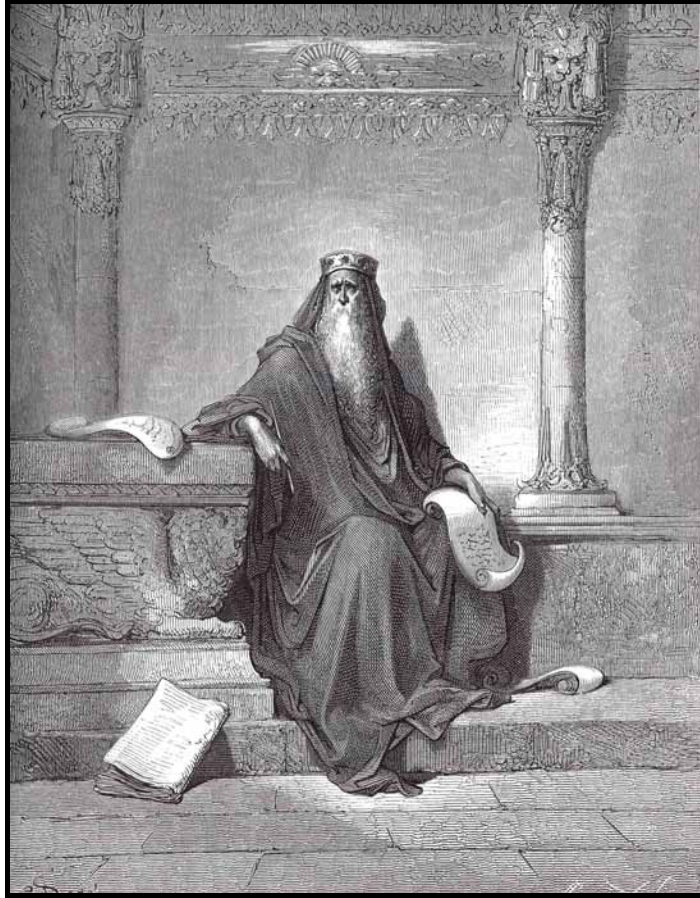
"The Call of Abraham" by E.M. Lillien

"A dispensation is God's distinctive method of governing mankind or a group of men during a period of human history, marked by a crucial event, test, failure, and judgment. From the divine standpoint, it is a stewardship, a rule of life or a responsibility for managing God's affairs in His house. From the historical standpoint, it is a stage in the progress of revelation." (Charles Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today, p. 32)

Dispensationalists list seven such periods in the history of God's dealings with humanity: 1. Innocence (Creation -Fall); 2. Conscience (Fall - Flood); 3. Civil Government (Flood - Babel); 4. Promise (Abraham - Sinai); 5. Mosaic Law (Sinai - Pentecost); 6. Grace (Pentecost - Second Coming); 7. Millennium (Second Coming - Final Revolt).

The doctrinal keystone of dispensational premillennialism is an absolute distinction between ethnic Israel and the Christian Church. Without it, the entire system collapses. Dispensationalist Lewis Sperry Chafer writes:

"Throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes; one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; while the



*“King Solomon Upon His Throne”
by Gustave Dore*

other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives, which is Christianity.” (Chafer, Dispensationalism, p. 107)

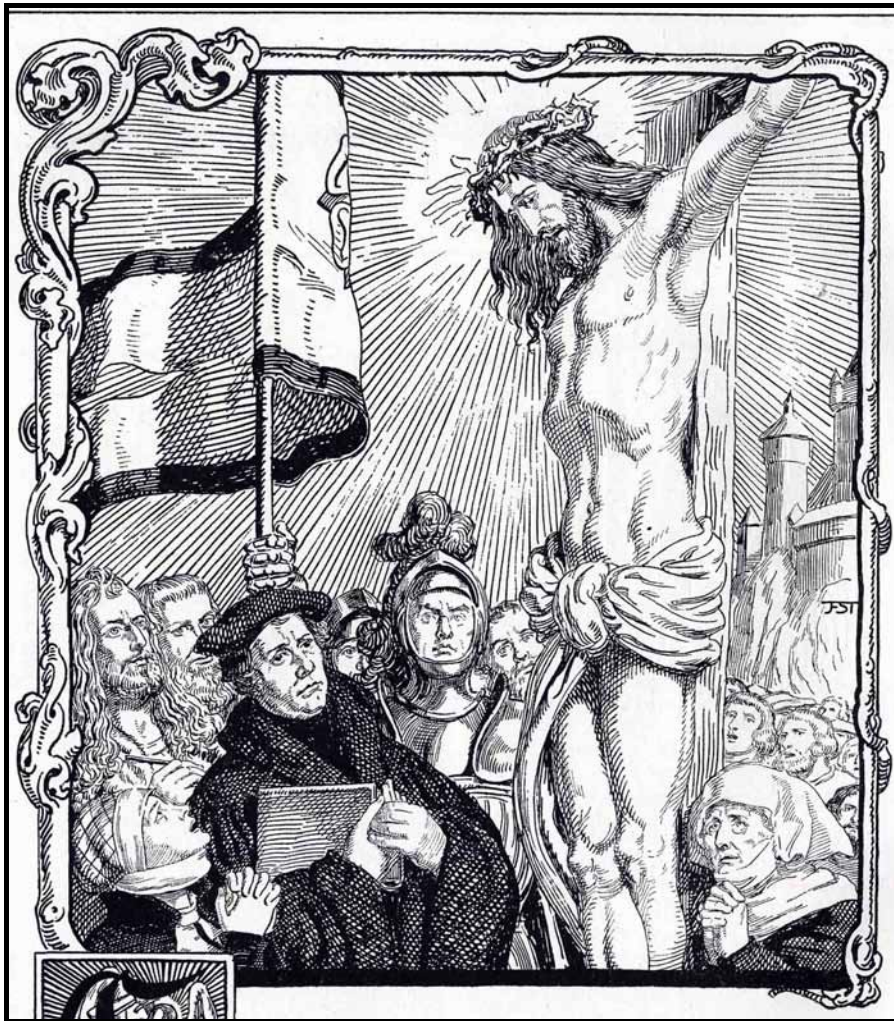
Dispensationalists believe that God promised ethnic Israel a glorious earthly kingdom, a restoration of the Kingdom of David and Solomon, ruled by the Messiah. They further believe that when the Jews of Christ’s time rejected His offer of that kingdom it was postponed until some point in the future. In the meantime, often referred to as a “*parenthesis*,” the Gentile church was formed. That parenthesis has now endured for 2,000 years! At the end of the church age, the Lord will secretly return to carry out “*the Rapture*.” The purpose of the Rapture is to remove the Gentile church from earth and

thereby enable God’s promised purpose for Israel to resume. The Rapture marks the beginning of a seven year “*Tribulation Period*” during which the Antichrist will arise and God’s plan for the salvation of ethnic Israel will be accomplished. The Tribulation Period will conclude with a literal battle of Armageddon, at which time Christ will visibly return to begin His 1,000 year reign in Jerusalem over the earthly kingdom promised to Israel.

19th Century Presbyterian scholar Phillip Mauro said it well when he characterized premillennial dispensationalism as “*a humanly contrived system that has been imposed on the Bible and not a scheme of doctrine derived from the Bible.*” (Engelder, Popular Symbolics, p. 335) Lutheran theologian C.H. Little concurs while emphasizing the historic link between millennialism and the heretical fringes of the church:

“This doctrine has been the rallying point of heretics and fanatics from the earliest period the church down to the present day. It is the characteristic doctrine of the Ebionites and the Montanists of the early church; of the mystics of the Middle Ages; of the Anabaptists of the Reformation era; and of such modern sects as the Adventists. The Russellites and others in our own day... We conclude that the doctrine of the millennium finds no support from Revelation 20 and is also without any Scriptural support. In many respects it stands in actual contradiction to the clear statements of Scripture.” (Engelder, Popular Symbolics, p. 494)

Dr. John Stephenson offers an incisive critique of dispensational premillennialism in his recent volume on “*Eschatology*” in the *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics* series. Dr. Stephenson laments the fact that “*North American Protestantism stands in large part under the spell of Gospel-destroying dispensationalist error.*” (Stephenson, p. 83) He warns that:

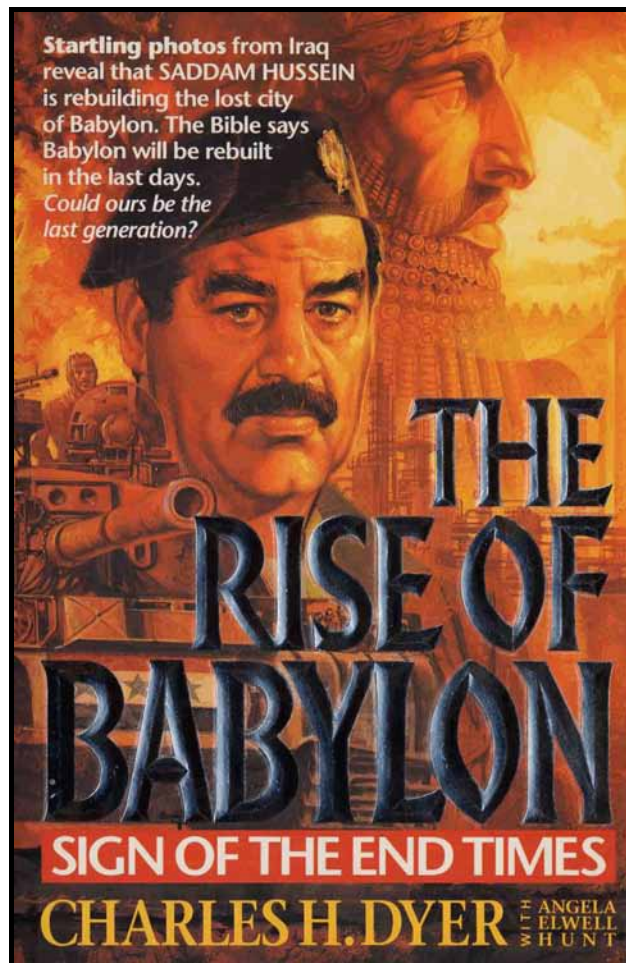


“Luther’s Theology of the Cross” by Franz Stassen

“the ‘dispensationalism’ promoted by Scofield displaces Christ as the center of Scripture and deflects Christian hope from the humble awaiting of His coming in glory to a macabre reckoning on the occurrence of a series of intermediate lurid events whose dating becomes the object of feverish speculation.” (Stephenson, p. 15)

Dr. Stephenson further observes that dispensationalism’s confusion extends far beyond the millennium itself to involve virtually every aspect of Bible teaching on the last things:

“Not only does dispensationalism concoct a fictitious sign of our Lord’s coming through its fantasies concerning God’s purposes with respect to ethnic Jews; it also breeds errors under the headings of the parousia, the general resurrection of the dead, the last judgement, and even heaven itself.” (Stephenson, p. 83)



***“The Rise of Babylon” - 1991
Dispensationalist Best Seller Linking
Saddam’s Iraq to the End Times***

He argues that Scripture clearly teaches that God’s people in Christ, both Jew and Gentile, are the New Israel and that once this Biblical truth is recognized dispensationalism collapses: *“With this demonstration that the church is Israel, the whole dispensationalist house of cards tumbles to the ground.”* (Stephenson, p. 87) The manner in which dispensationalists interpret Scripture is backwards, Dr. Stephenson insists:

“At the root of the lurid dispensationalist delight in fantasy - which loves to use figurative apocalyptic sections of the Bible as fodder for something akin to science fiction - lies a breathtaking hermeneutical perversity. Lutherans have followed the Reformer by interpreting obscure passages of Scripture in light of clear texts; dispensationalists do the very opposite, beclouding clear texts by interpreting them in light of eccentric and unprovable expositions of obscure passages.” (Stephenson p. 87)

He comes to the heart of the matter in his

perceptive conclusion that: “A golden age for Christendom to be granted within this worldly time and space is a dream without Scriptural warrant imagined by those in full flight from the theology of the cross.” (Stephenson, p.94). Martin Franzmann offers a similar assessment, concluding that “the millennial hope,” “the desire to have and enjoy a visible victory before the final victory of the Crucified” in fact constitutes “a subtle and unconscious form of objection to the Crucified...who in His wisdom and power keeps the church hidden under the cross, and He has promised to be with His church, under the cross, “to the close of the age.” (Franzmann, p. 133)



“King Solomon in All His Glory” by E. M. Lilien

The Missouri Synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations summarized Lutheran concerns about dispensation premillennialism in eleven points:

“1. Dispensational premillennialism teaches that the Messiah and His kingdom promised in the Old Testament are essentially political in nature. In this respect, it

takes a position which resembles the Messianic expectation of first-century Judaism (cf. AC XVII). Christ's atoning work on the cross is not central in God's plan according to this view. Rather, He is wrongly perceived as coming to set up a this-worldly kingdom, and when rejected, as postponing it.

2. The view regards the Messianic age as only a future reality. It tends to exchange the "now" for a "not yet," thereby depriving people of the comforting promises of the Gospel in the present. In truth, Christ inaugurated the kingdom of heaven at His first advent, a kingdom which is now ours by faith even while it is yet hidden under the cross until its consummation at Christ's second advent.

3. Dispensational premillennialism tends to regard the glory of God as the center of theology, rather than the mercy of God revealed, and yet hidden, in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross for the sins of the world. The visible manifestations of God's power at the end of history and obedience to the will of God become the primary foci, instead of the grace of God revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ (1 Cor.2:2) - which by faith the Christian regards and accepts as God's definitive triumph over sin and every evil (in Lutheran theology, the "theology of the cross" as opposed to a "theology of glory").

4. Dispensational premillennialism underestimates, and even ignores the significance of Biblical typology. All prophecy points to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment. He is the antitype of the Old Testament types. When the reality to which the Old Testament points does come, one cannot revert back to the "shadows," such as the Old Testament temple (Col. 2:16-17; Hebrews 10:1).

5. The compartmentalization of Scripture into distinct dispensations seriously overlooks the Law/Gospel unity of the Old and New Testaments. For example, it makes a radical distinction between the Mosaic "law" period and the church age of "grace." The relationship between the Old and New Testaments is that of promise and fulfillment, not one of distinct dispensations.

6. Ultimately, the eschatology of dispensationalism offers a dangerously false hope. The views of pre-tribulation or mid-tribulation rapture offer the Christian the false hope of exemption from the intensified persecution toward the end. Moreover, they offer a second chance of conversion for those who are left after the rapture. The focus of Scripture's hope is not on an earthly kingdom lasting 1,000 years but eternity with Christ.

7. The dispensationalist view of a radical break between Israel and the church contradicts the Scriptural teaching that the cross of Christ has eliminated forever the distinction between Jew and Gentile (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-12; Rom. 2:25-29).

8. *The dispensational hermeneutic of consistent literalism is contrary to the Scripturally derived principles of interpretation.*

9. *Dispensationalism's multiple resurrections and judgments are contrary to the clear Scriptural teaching on eschatology.*

10. *The assurance and hope of salvation tend to be grounded on an interpretation of the signs of the times rather than on the sure Word of promise imparted in the means of grace.*

11. *The sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, both of which are important for a Biblical understanding of eschatology, have little place in dispensationalist teaching."* (CTCR, "Eschatology" pp.42-43)

2. Historic Premillennialism

Historic premillennialism also teaches that Christ will return prior to a literal 1,000 year reign on earth. However, the theological peculiarities of dispensationalism are absent in this view. Historic premillennialists believe that Christ will return at the end of the tribulation and that the dead in Christ will rise to meet Him in the air and return with Him to earth. Christ will then slay the Antichrist, bind Satan, and inaugurate His millennial kingdom. At some point in this process, a general conversion of the Jews will also occur. Christ and His redeemed, both Jew and Gentile will reign over the unbelieving nations still on earth. Sin and death will still exist, but overall evil will be restrained. The 1,000 years will be a time of unprecedented social, political, and economic justice and great prosperity.

At the end of the 1,000 years Satan will be loosed and the nations will rise in one final assault against God's people. Satan and his followers will be destroyed and the



*"Tertullian of Carthage"
19th Century Engraving*

resurrection of the unbelieving dead will take place. At that point, the final judgment will mark the beginning of eternity. This view was advocated by some fathers of the early church, most notably Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus. By the third century the orthodox church, largely under the leadership of St. Augustine, had rejected premillennialism as contrary to Scripture. Reflecting this view, the Roman Catholic Church today continues to identify premillennialism in both its historic and dispensational variations as heresy.



“St. Jerome (l.) and St. Augustine (r.)”

3. Postmillennialism

Postmillennialism teaches that Christ will return in judgment after a prolonged period of triumphant Christianity. Postmillennialists do not believe that Christ will reign on earth during this period nor that it will necessarily be exactly 1,000 years in length. The millennium will arrive gradually under the increasing influence of Christianity. Evil will be reduced and overcome as human progress moves ever forward, constantly improving social, economic, and cultural conditions. Peace and prosperity will abound until the entire world progresses to a point where Christian beliefs and values will become the norm for all nations. Developments in education and science will minimize and ultimately eliminate disease, suffering, poverty and war. At the end of this golden age of prosperity and peace, Christ will return and the

resurrection and judgment will mark the commencement of eternity. The optimistic view of postmillennialism dominated much of mainline Protestantism at the turn of the 20th century. Human progress seemed unstoppable. A social gospel which sought the elimination of poverty and war had very nearly replaced the Biblical gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Scripture's assertion of original sin and human depravity were spurned as antiquated and irrelevant to modern man. Things were better than they had ever been and it seemed that there were no limits to what modern enlightened man could accomplish. Then came two world wars, the rise and domination of totalitarian dictatorships over much of the world, and the nuclear standoff of the cold war. In the aftermath of these grim realities postmillennialism has virtually disappeared in the contemporary church. Its optimism now seems hopelessly unrealistic.



“The Christian’s Life in Humble Submission to the Lordship of Jesus” by Franz Stassen

4. Amillennialism

Amillennialism rejects the doctrine of a literal 1,000 year earthly reign of Christ. In the amillennialist view, the 1,000 years of Revelation 20 are a numerological symbol (10 x 10 x 10) for the entire New Testament era, the interval between Christ’s first and second comings.

Amillennialism is the doctrine of historic Christendom. It was affirmed both by Roman Catholicism and the leaders of the Reformation. Martin Luther rejected the “*false notion*” of an earthly millennium as a basic misunderstanding of the nature of the church and salvation. God does not promise His church a life of ease and glory here on earth. Instead the faithful Christian can expect only hardship and tribulation, for the devil will relentlessly attack the Gospel



***“The Means of Grace in the Lutheran Church”
Reformation Era Woodcut***

“with tongue and sword until the end of the world.” “Wherever the Gospel is, one must expect all sorts of plagues, for the devil will assault that Gospel with all of his hordes and his lies.” Luther lumps together the Jews of Christ’s time, the heretics of the early church, the Turks, and the Anabaptists of his own day, as those who have been beguiled by an illusion of worldly ease and glory. (St,L. VII, pp.1289-1290). The Reformer’s insight penetrates directly to the heart of the matter, as is so often the case. Herein lies millennialism’s basic danger. Millennial dreams direct the hope and expectation of humanity away from the spiritual treasure of the forgiveness of sins toward that which is much more attractive to our sinful human natures, the

worldly pleasures of an earthly kingdom.

“When chiliasm actually enters the heart, it diverts the Christian heart and mind from the hidden spiritual glory of the Christian life, which consists in the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and of future heavenly heritage, and puts in place of it the expectation of external and earthly grandeur.” (Pieper, III, p. 592)

This malignant pattern can be clearly observed in the crass assertions of dispensationalism. The alleged “*secret rapture*,” after which no believer will be left behind, purports to grant Christians an exemption from the very trials which our Lord urged them to patiently endure, just as He endured the cross for us.

“The fantasy of the earthly church’s being raptured into Christ’s immediate presence while great tribulation rages below has not a little to do with the refusal of the flesh of dispensationalists to accept the fact that Christian existence in the world is a life lived under the cross. Christians are called to suffer in and with and for the world, not to lord it over the world in some airtight provisional heaven whence they may behold the final great tribulation in the manner of popcorn munching couch potatoes watching a horror movie.”(Stephenson, p. 90)

The cross is reduced to the status of an afterthought in the complex fantasies of dispensational premillennialism. Christ, the rejected King, dies there only because Israel would not have Him. The good news of forgiveness in His blood is relegated to a distinctly secondary position in the entirety of God’s plan of salvation. Dr. Scofield calls the primary form of the Gospel “*the Gospel of the Kingdom*.” The kingdom he has in mind is the earthly realm which God has prepared for ethnic Israel:

“The Gospel of the Kingdom. This is the good news that God proposes to set up on the earth, in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7:16) a kingdom, political, spiritual, Israelitish, universal, over which God’s Son, David heir, shall be King, which shall be, for 1,000 years, the manifestation of the righteousness of God in human affairs.” (Scofield, p. 1343)

Such delusions are at best a distraction from the precious gospel of salvation. At worst, they threaten to become a replacement for it.



*"The First Resurrection, the Downfall of Satan, and the Muster of Gog and Magog
Luther Bible Woodcut - 1685*

The Defeat of Satan Revelation 20:7-10

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth - Gog and Magog - to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breath of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city He loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

"When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will

go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth - Gog and Magog - to gather them for battle.”

“When the thousand years are over...” - The culmination and climax of the ancient conflict between God and Satan - depicted in the imagery of Armageddon, the final battle - has already appeared repeatedly in the visions of St. John. As the sixth angel poured out his bowl of wrath, hellish demons gathered the kings of the earth for battle *“at the place which in Hebrew is called Armageddon.”* (cf. Revelation 16:12-16). The war of the earth’s kings against the Lamb is next mentioned in conjunction with the judgment of Harlot Babylon with the assurance that the outcome of this battle is absolutely certain (cf. Revelation 17:14-18). The details of the battle are brutally presented once more in the vision of the Lord’s Champion, He who is *“Faithful and True,”* along with the downfall of the beast and the false prophet amid the catastrophic destruction of all those who followed them (cf. Revelation 19:11-21). Now, for the fourth and final time, the horror of Armageddon is introduced to signal the ultimate judgment of the devil and his kingdom.

As the *“thousand years”* draw to their conclusion and the glorious return of Christ is imminent, the great chain of God’s restraint upon Satan (Revelation 20:2) will be



“The Assault of Gog and Magog Upon the Beloved City” by Hans Lufft



*“The Attack of Gog and Magog Upon the Beloved City”
Tinted Luther Bible Woodcut*

removed and the dragon will be released from his prison. He will burst upon the world with raging fury, like a ravenous beast set free from the chains which had held it back, for he will know that judgment is at hand - ***“He is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short.”*** (Revelation 12:12) This is the ***“little season”*** of which John had warned earlier in the chapter (cf. Notes pp. 493-494). It will be a time of unprecedented devastation and calamity for the great red dragon will have been unleashed. The peril of these times is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s dire warning of chaos in the aftermath of the assassination of Julius Caesar: *“Caesar’s spirit, ranging for revenge, with Ate (the Greek goddess of Destruction) by his side, come hot from hell, shall in these confines with a monarch’s voice cry “Havoc!” and let slip the dogs of war.”* (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, III,i,270). The removal of God’s restraint upon Satan takes place within the providential purposes of God - ***“He must be set free.”*** (Revelation 20:3) This point is also emphasized by the passive verb ***“will be released.”*** The devil does not break loose by his own power. He is set free by the same Almighty Sovereign who originally placed him under restraint.

Nonetheless, in His mercy, God has determined that this final period of Satan's unbridled activity will be strictly curtailed:

“Those will be days of distress unequalled since the beginning, when God created the world until now - and never to be equaled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom He has chosen, He has shortened them.”
(Mark 13:19-20)

“And will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth...” - The focus of the devil's effort - his bitter opposition to Christ, His Gospel, and His Church - remains unchanged. *“A thousand years have wrought no change in Satan's*

methods; no sooner has he been set free than he is at his old work of deceiving the world and turning it against the Church; his limitations removed, the deception of the nations begins again.” (Swete, p. 267) The military metaphor of Armageddon should not be allowed to obscure the fact that while the devils' little season (like the entire New Testament era) will be characterized by ***“wars and rumors of war”*** (Matthew 24:6) and upheaval throughout every part of human culture and the world of nature itself (Matthew 24:7-8), the primary target of the devil's assault will remain the Gospel and the Church of Christ. Lutheran commentator, Siegbert Becker has perceptively noted that the meaning behind the symbols of the great chain and the locking and sealing of the abyss, that is, the means of the devil's binding and confinement, are the power of the

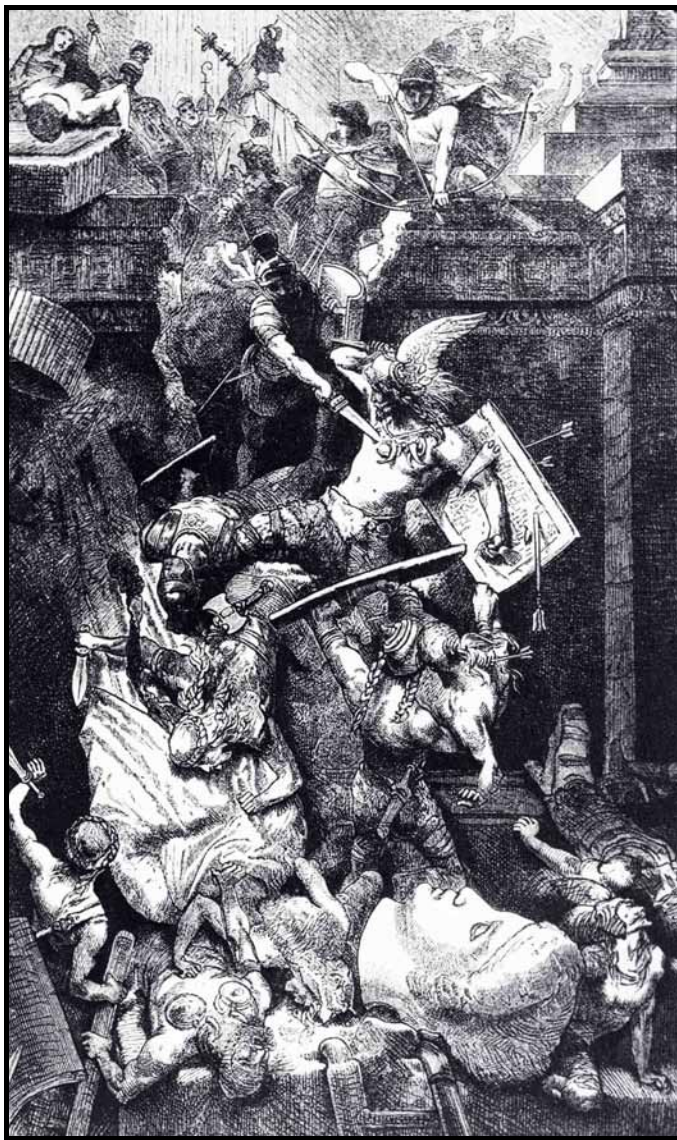


“The Attack of the Huns”

Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and its proclamation throughout the world.

“Where the message of the gospel is no longer to be heard or where it is so obscured by false teaching that the light of salvation shines very dimly, the devil is free to continue to deceive men and to lead them astray to the eternal destruction of their souls. The devil is loosed whenever large segments of the visible church become apostate and non-evangelical cults and sects proliferate.” (Becker, pp.301-302)

The text repeatedly stresses the worldwide character of Satan’s final deception. The phrase **“the four corners of the earth,”** which locates the nations to be deceived,

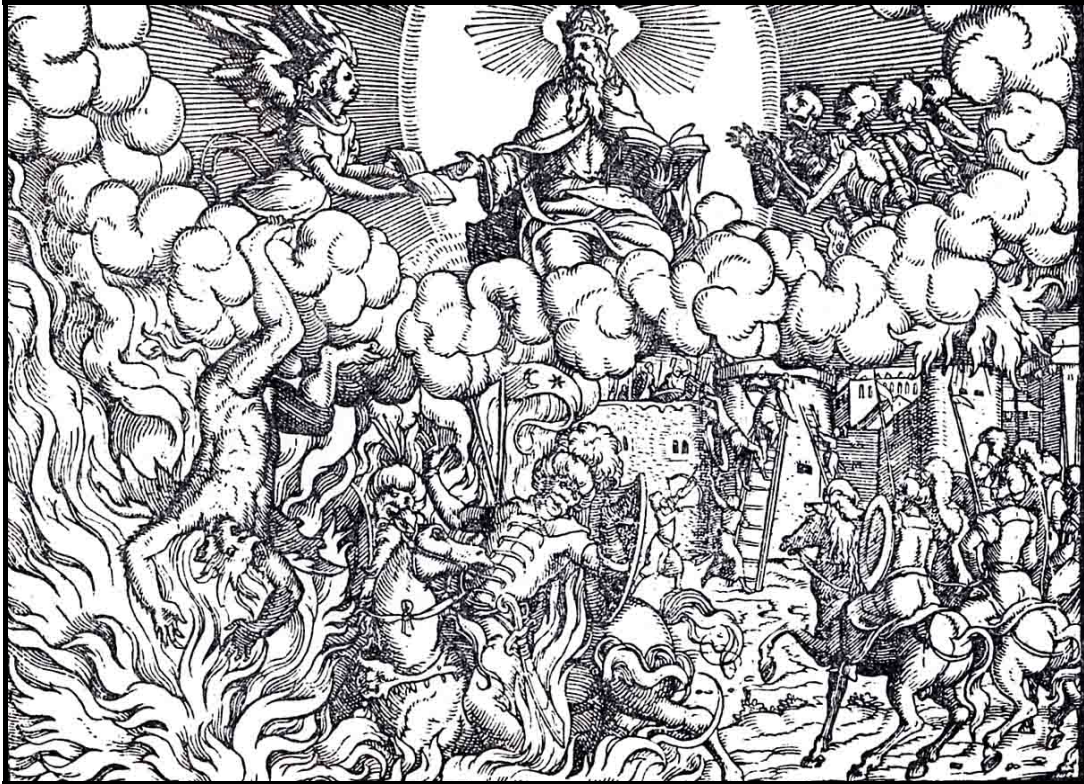


“The Vandals Sack Rome”

is a Semitic idiom referring to the whole world. The scope of the devil’s deception will be reinforced in subsequent phrases as we are told that the number of the host is **“like the sand on the seashore,”** and that **“they marched across the breadth of the earth.”** The concept of totality is further emphasized by the use of the prophetic terminology of **“Gog and Magog.”** The titles are drawn from the Ezekiel 38 and 39 where they serve to designate the arch enemies of the people of God who assault the Israel of God and are utterly destroyed. David Aune outlines the Biblical usage these infamous names:

“In the OT and early Jewish tradition, Gog and Magog are understood in a bewildering variety of ways. In Ezekiel, Gog is the name of the prince of Meshech and Tubal (Ezekiel 38:2-3;;39:1-16), whose land was called Magog; the names Meshech and Tubal are also found associated with Gog in the table of nations in Genesis 10:2. Elsewhere in the Old

Testament, Gog is a personal name (1 Chr. 5:4), while Magog refers to the eponymous ancestor of a people (Gen. 10:2; 1 Chr. 1:5). In Jub. 8:25 Gog is used in a strictly geographic sense. In Rev. 20:8 Gog and Magog serve as symbols for the hostile nations who will make war on God and His people. In Sib.Or. 3:319 are names for the Ethiopians or Nubians who accompanied Antiochus IV when he captured the temple in Jerusalem. In Josephus Ant. 1,123 Magog is regarded as a name for the Scythians. In other early Jewish literature, Gog and Magog are leaders of the Gentile nations who will attack Israel in the end times.” (Aune, p. 1094)



*“Gog and Magog as the Ottoman Turks Besieging Vienna”
Luther Bible Woodcut, Bocksperger-Amman 1564*

This proliferation of references and applications suggests that by the latter part of the Old Testament era the ancient ominous names Gog and Magog had come to represent all the enemies of God and their destructive rage against the people of God. This is certainly the sense in which they are used in Ezekiel 38 and 39 and here in Revelation 20. This interpretation is strengthened by John’s equation of **“Gog and Magog”** with **“the nations in the four corners of the earth.”** The specific historical identification of Gog and Magog in this text is not only impossible; it is superfluous. Dr. Edwin Yamuchi is correct when he notes: *“The identification of any future fulfillment of the*



“The Huns in Battle” - 19th Century Engraving

apocalyptic reference to Gog and Magog in Revelation 20:7-9 would require the inspiration of a prophet rather than the insights of an archaeologist or historian.” (Yamuchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier*, p. 22) Those who offer precise identifications of Gog and Magog with modern nations or contemporary world leaders are not dealing in Biblical scholarship but indulging in sensationalism and fantasy. It is more prudent to follow the counsel of wise Augustine who concludes that Gog and Magog signify all the enemies of the Church of Christ:

“For these nations, which he names Gog and Magog are not to be understood as some barbarous nations in some part of the world...or some other foreign nations not under the Roman government...For John marks that they are spread over the whole earth...The words and they went up on the breadth of the earth and encompassed the camp of the saints and the beloved city do not mean that they have come, or shall come, to one place, as if the camp of the saints and the beloved city should be in some one place; for this camp is nothing else than the Church of Christ extending over the whole world. And consequently, wherever the Church shall be...there shall also be the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and there it shall be encompassed by the savage persecution of all its enemies.” (Augustine, *The City of God*, XX,11)

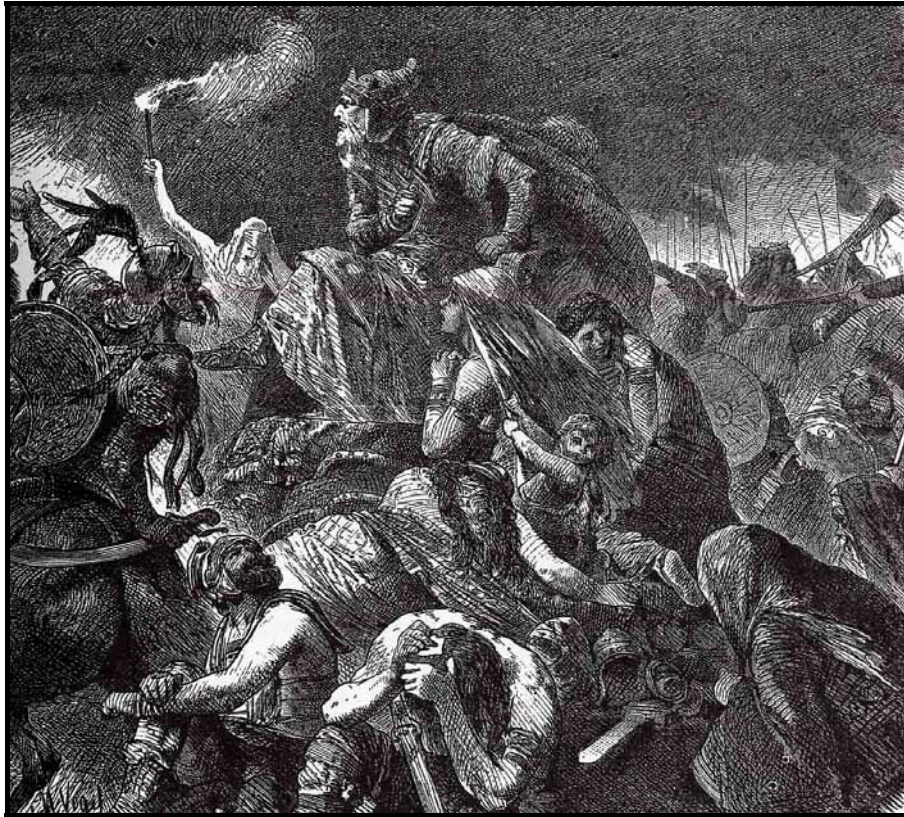
“In number they are like the sand on the seashore.” - The sand of the sea is commonly used in Scripture as a simile for countless numbers, enormous armies, or unimaginable abundance (cf. Genesis 41:49; Joshua 11:4; Judges 7:12; 1 Samuel 13:5; Job 29:18; Psalm 139:18; Jeremiah 15:8; Habbakuk 1:9). The simile occurs most prominently in Genesis 22:17 where God promises Abraham; ***“I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.”*** In this passage it serves to emphasize the global nature of Satan’s final assault and the almost universal support that he will be able to muster for his last frantic effort to defeat God and destroy His holy people. Throughout history the devil has had the numbers. He has consistently enjoyed the support of the vast majority of humankind. The faithful of God have always been a tiny remnant. That will continue to be the case right up to the bitter end.



“I Will Make Your Descendants as Numerous as the Stars in the Sky and as the Sand on the Seashore” by Julius Schnorr Carolsfeld

“They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city He loves. But fire came down from heaven and destroyed them.”

“They marched across the breadth of the earth...” - The phrase stresses the unimaginable magnitude of this vast host. Its point is size, not distance. The Greek text literally says *“They came up across the entire expanse of the earth.”* As this army advances upon the saints it overflows across the entire horizon - *“hordes and hordes as far as one could see and farther still, and these encircling the saints with no avenue of retreat anywhere...enemies encircling the horizon and only the fortified*



“Attila Commanding the Huns” - 19th Century Engraving

camp, namely the lone city for the saints. Is there no hope?” (Lenski, p. 597) Like an irresistible river this horde sweeps around the encampment of the saints, completely surrounding them. There is no escape. The imagery parallels Ezekiel’s description of the advance of Gog as a great storm that covers the land:

“You and all your troops and the many nations with you will go up, advancing like a storm; you will be like a cloud covering the land...You will come from your place in the far north, you and many nations with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army. You will advance against My people Israel like a cloud that



“God’s Judgement Upon Gog” by Asher Brown Durand

covers the land.” (Ezekiel 38:9,15-16)

The Church is designated as *“the camp of God’s people, the city that He loves.”* *“The camp of God’s people”* recalls the wilderness wandering of Israel, a reminder the saints have always been a pilgrim people, strangers and foreigners in this world on a journey toward the land of promise. In Deuteronomy 23:14 Moses reminded the children of Israel: *“Because the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you, your camp must be holy.”* *“The city He loves”* is not a second location. The phrase defines and explains its predecessor. The Greek preposition *“kai”* which links the two phrases is epexegetical. The designation of the Church as *“the city He loves”* is based on the

Scripture's common reference to Jerusalem and Mt. Zion as representative of the people of God (cf. Psalm 87:2; Hebrews 12:22; Galatians 4:24-26; Revelation 21:2). ***"He loves"*** is the Greek perfect participle *"egapemenen."* It portrays the enduring and unfailing love of God for His people.

"But fire came down from heaven and destroyed them." The daunting appearance of the battlefield notwithstanding, the outcome of this conflict was never in doubt. The language of the text is almost curt in its description of the total defeat of Satan and his followers - nine words (both in Greek and English) - for the ultimate outcome of the ancient conflict!. Ezekiel had also used the imagery of judgment by fire to depict the destruction of Gog:

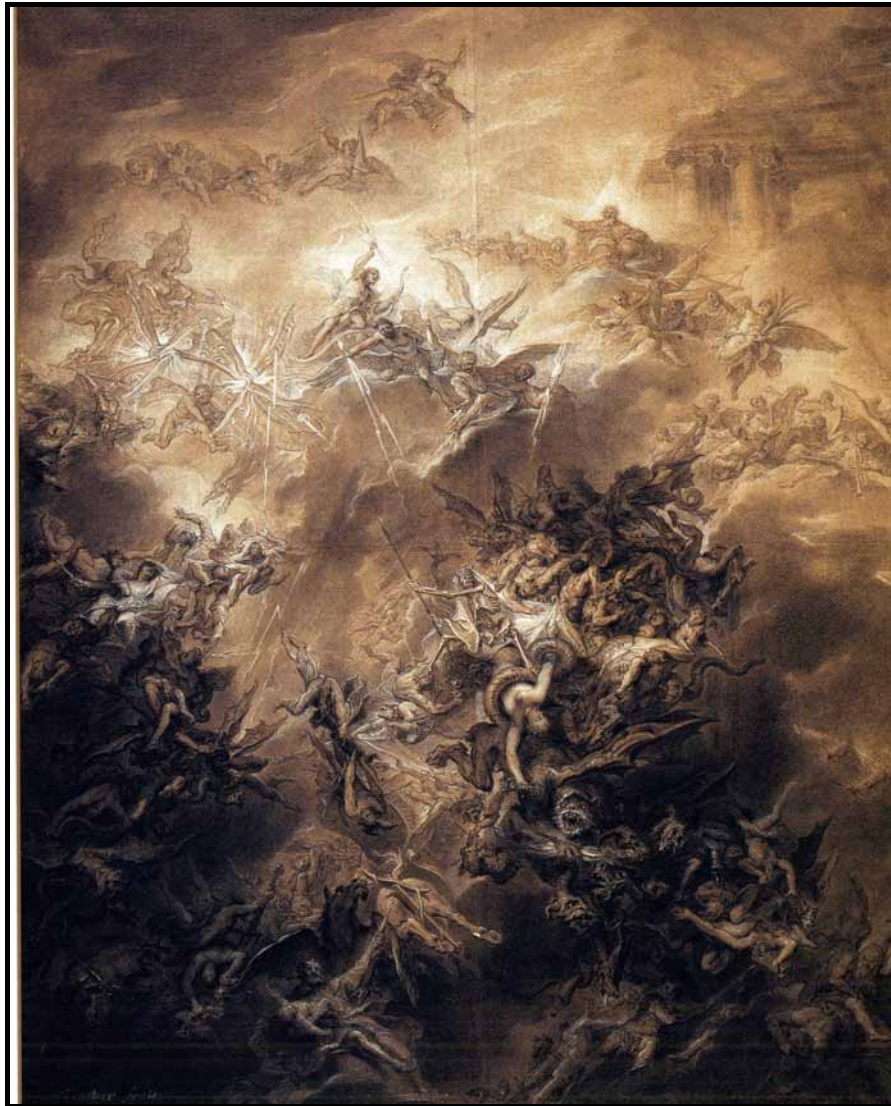


"The Gates of Hell" by Auguste Rodin

"I will execute judgment upon him with plague and bloodshed; I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones, and burning sulfur on him and on his troops and on the many nations with him...I will send fire on Magog and on those who live in safety in the coast lands, and they will know that I am the Lord." (Ezekiel 38:22; 39:6)

"And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

- The proud spirit whose stubborn defiance of the Creator led to the downfall of legions of angels and the temptation and condemnation of countless numbers of Adam's descendants now finally meets his own eternal fate. His opposition

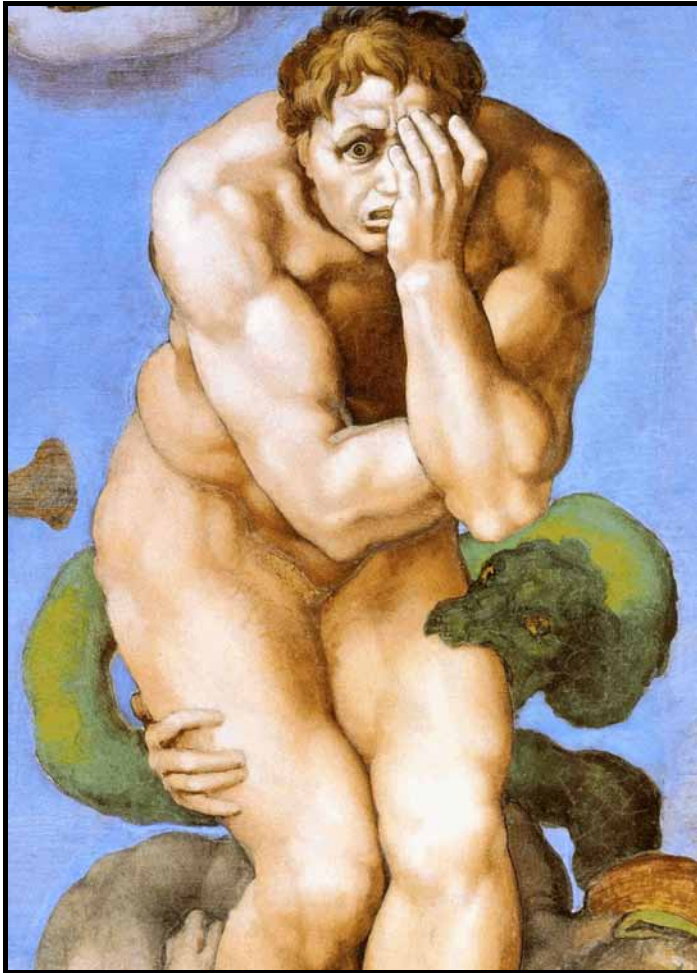


“The Downfall of Satan and His Angels” by Jean-Marc Nattier

had spanned the centuries but now, in the face of God’s decisive judgment, the career of mankind’s ancient enemy ends (to borrow the poet’s description of the world’s demise) *“not with a bang but a whimper.”* The power and malice of the devil had lurked behind all of the machinations of his hellish agents *“the beast and the false prophet.”* Now their Master joins them in being consigned to an eternity of torment within *“the lake of burning sulfur.”* The concept of eternal torment in hell staggers the human imagination. Nonetheless, Franz Pieper is completely correct in his assertion:

“Holy Scripture teaches the truth of an eternal damnation so clearly and emphatically that one cannot deny it without at the same time denying the authority of Scripture. Scripture parallels the eternal salvation of the believers and the eternal

damnation of the unbelievers. Whoever, therefore, denies the one must, to be consistent, deny the other.” (Pieper, III, p. 544)

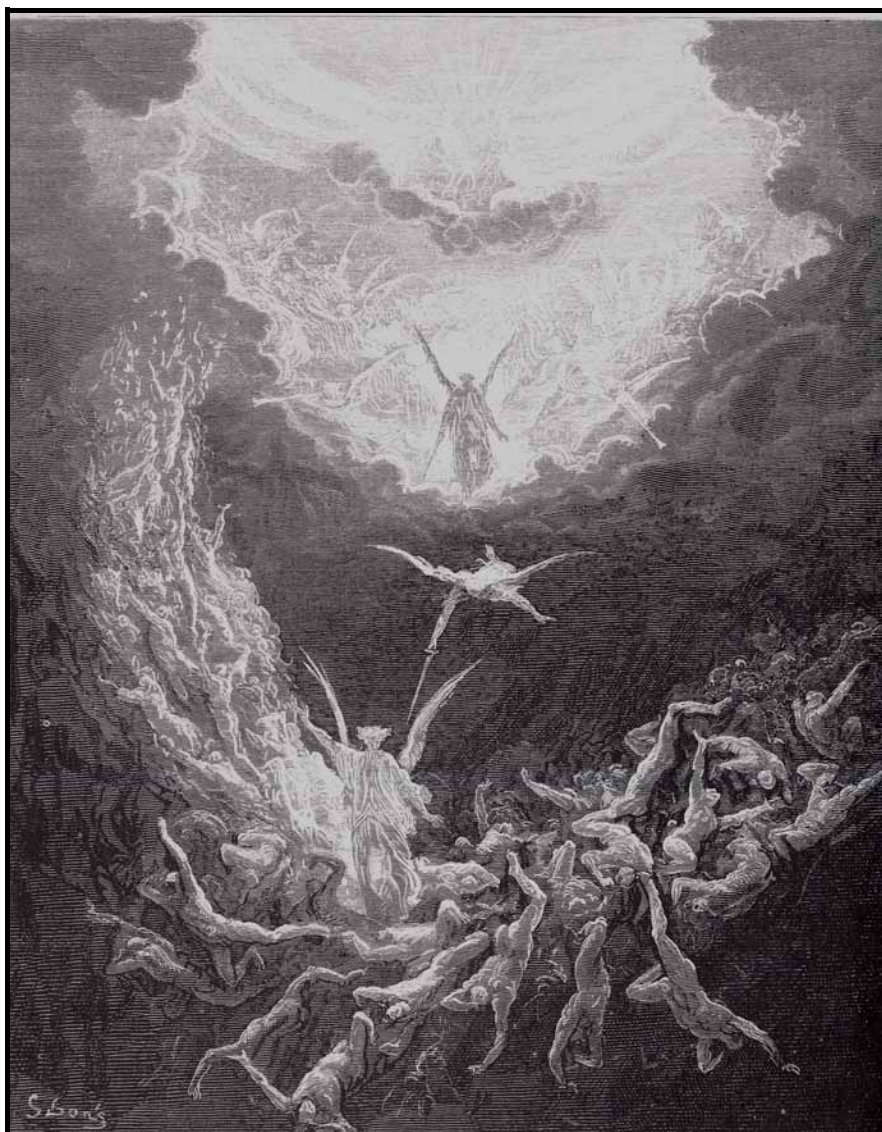


“The Despair of the Damned” - Detail from “The Last Judgement” by Michelangelo

The Lutheran Church, along with all of historic Christendom, affirms this Biblical truth. The Lutheran Confessions declare: *“Rejected, therefore, are the Anabaptists who teach that the devil and condemned men will not suffer eternal pain and torment.”* (Apol.. XVII, 66). The text indicates that the unholy trinity will endure torment **“forever and ever”** (Greek - *“en tous aionas ton aionon”* literally - *“to the ages of the ages”*). This is the Biblical phrase for eternity (cf. Romans 16:27; Galatians 1:5; Philippians 4:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 13:21; 1 Peter 4:11; 5:11). The concept of eternity is of the essence of hell’s torment. Michelangelo brilliantly depicts this truth in his *“The Last Judgement”* in the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel. One of the damned, being drawn down into hell by a cluster of demons, cradles his horror-struck

face in hand as he begins to comprehend the awful reality of damnation, an eternity of separation from God. The figure is the absolute personification of despair. Dante had it exactly right when he engraved these words upon the portal of the infernal realm:

“I am the way into the city of woe. I am the way to a forsaken people. I am the way to eternal sorrow. Sacred justice moved my architect. I was raised here by divine omnipotence, primordial and ultimate intelligence. Only those elements time cannot wear were made before me, and beyond time I stand. Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”



"The Last Judgement" by Gustave Dore

The Final Judgment - Revelation 20:11-15

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from His presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.

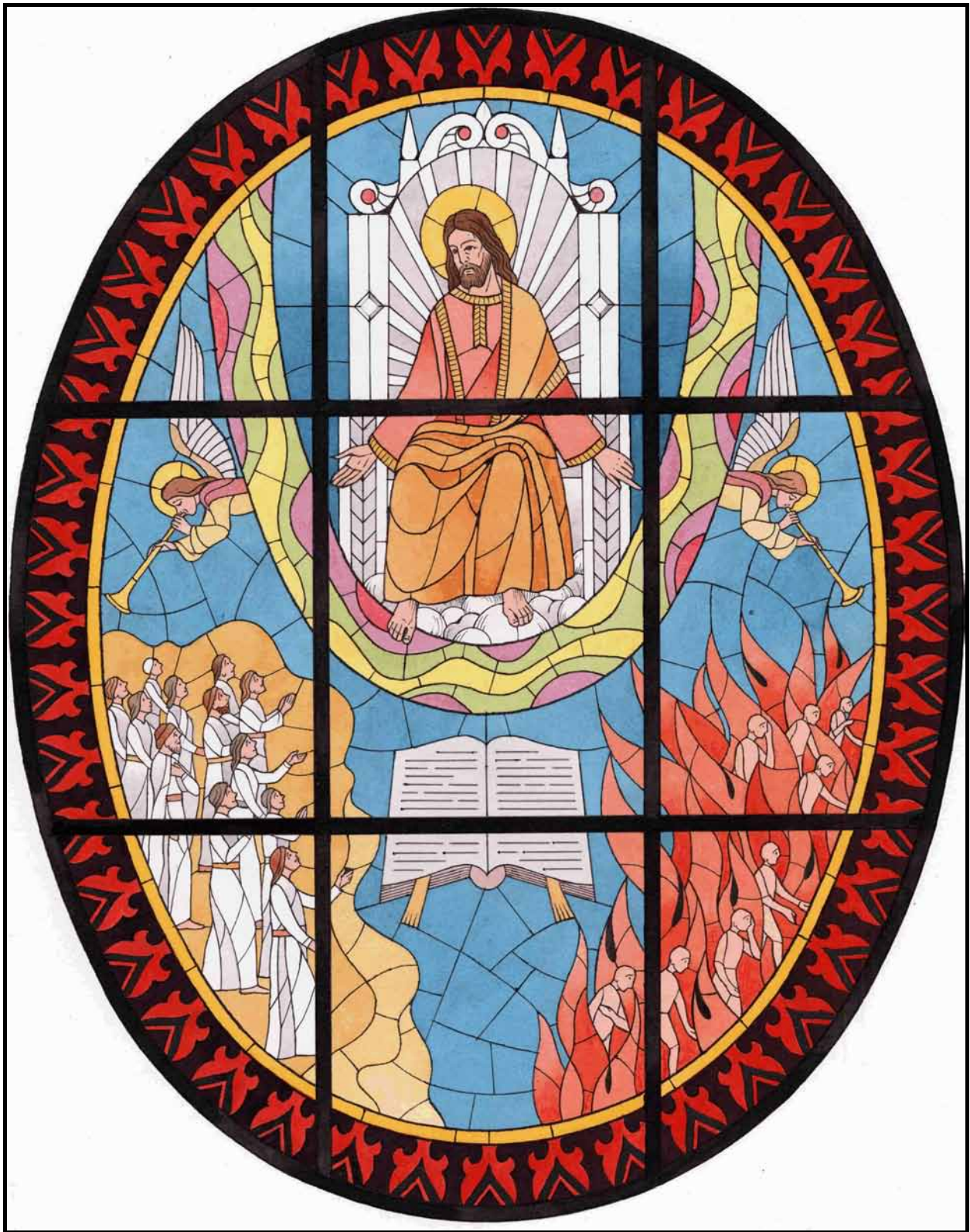
“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from His presence, and there was no place for them.” - The shift to a new scene is the vision is signaled by the customary phrase ***“Then I saw”*** (Greek - *“kai eidon”*). The devil and his kingdom have been destroyed. All who would oppose the Lord and His reign have been silenced. The end of the present order has come. The revelator sees the King of Kings seated upon His royal throne, the seat of authority, power, and judgment. Jesus had foretold the coming of this great day: ***“When the***



“The Last Judgement” - German Woodcut, 1510

Son of Man comes in His glory and all His angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in heavenly glory.” (Matthew 25:11; cf. also Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:22-23; Acts 17:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:1; Revelation 3:21). This is the sixth and final depiction of the Last Judgment in the Book of Revelation (cf. Revelation 6:12-17; 11:15-19; 14:14-20; 16:17-21; 19:17-21). The throne and its occupant are the dominant feature of the scene. Both the size (***“great”*** - Greek - *“megas”*) and the color (***“white”*** - Greek - *“leukos”*) of the throne are noted. The size of this royal seat of judgment is appropriate for the magnitude of the great event in which it is used and the divine dignity of the Judge who is seated upon it. The white color of the judge’s throne signifies the holiness and righteousness of his judgment. The Psalmist rejoices

that: ***“The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice. Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Fire goes before him and consumes His foes on every side. His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles.”*** (Psalm 97:1-2)



"The Last Judgement" - Our Savior Lutheran Church



“The Destruction of the Hosts of Pharaoh at the Red Sea” by P. J. De Loutherbourg

“Earth and sky fled from His presence, and there was no place for them.” - As in Psalm 97, so also here, the decisive finality of this judgment is illustrated by its impact not only upon humanity but upon all of creation. The imagery of cosmic conflagration, as the old order passes away to make way for the new heaven and earth (cf. Revelation 21:1ff.), is consistent in Biblical texts which speak of the last judgment (cf. Revelation 6:12-14; 16:17-21; Psalm 102:26; Isaiah 51:6; Mark 13:31; 2 Peter 3:10-13). All that exists within the universe of time and space was fashioned by God as a part of the perfect environment for man, the unique creature fashioned in the image and after the likeness of God. Therefore, all of creation was tainted and

twisted by man’s sinful disobedience of the Creator God (cf. Genesis 3:17-19; Romans 8:19-22). The creation which has been subjected to decay because of man’s sin does not dare to stand in the presence of God. To speak of *“earth and sky”* fleeing from the presence of the holy and righteous God is personification, describing inanimate objects as if they were human persons. The language here is reminiscent of Psalm 114’s description of Israel’s exodus from Egypt and entry into the Promised Land.

“The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. Why was it, O sea, that you fled, O Jordan, that you turned back, you mountains that you skipped like rams, you hills, like lambs? Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turned the rock



"The Last Judgement" by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel in Rome

into a pool, the hard rock into springs of water.” (Psalm 114:3-8)

The phrase ***“and there was no place for them”*** indicates the impossibility of evading God’s judgment or concealing one’s self from his presence. We might paraphrase the text to say - *“There was no place for them to hide.”*



“Dies Domini” (“The Day of the Lord”) by Edward Burne-Jones

“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.” - Every human being who has ever lived from the creation of Adam to the end of time shall stand before the Lord on this great day. The language of the text is comprehensive - ***“the dead, great and small.”*** The Biblical assertion of the universal nature of the last judgment is consistent and emphatic. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth: ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is***

due him for the many things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5:10). Those who were quick to judge their Christian brothers in Rome were admonished: *“For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: “As surely as I live, says the Lord, Every knee will bow before Me; every tongue will confess to God.” So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.”* (Romans 14:11-12). The “*Little Apocalypse*” of Matthew’s Gospel describes the coming of the judgment in the same comprehensive language: *“All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people, one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left.”* (Matthew 25:32-33). As Jesus reproved Jewish religious leaders who doubted the power of His word he pointed toward the last day when His word would call forth all the dead from their tombs: *“Do not be amazed at this for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear His voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”* (John 5:28-29)

“And books were opened. Another book was opened which is the book of life.” - The imagery comes from Daniel 7:10 and the vision of the Ancient of Days: *“Thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took His seat...The court was seated and the books were opened.”* (Daniel 7:9-10). In the Jewish apocryphal writings of the inter-testamental period and the early New Testament era the opening of books of evidence before the court of God commonly came to represent the action of God’s judgment. This is the judicial language of the human



“Christ the Almighty Judge With the Book of Eternal Life and Death” by Peter Cornelius

courtroom. The image of man's every action and transgression, recorded with unfailing accuracy in heaven, came to represent divine omniscience and human accountability. The following selection of citations illustrate this pattern:

“For behold, the days are coming and the books will be opened in which are written the sins of all those who have sinned...” (2 Baruch 24:1)

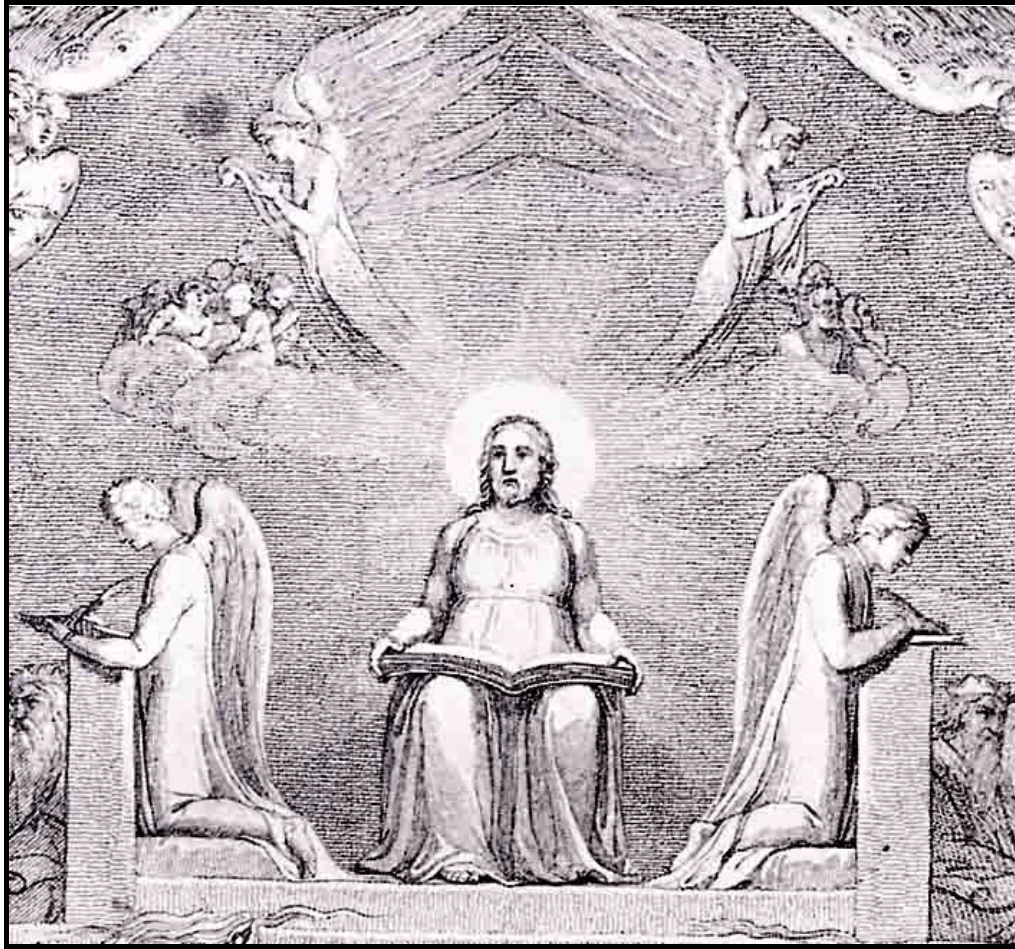
“Enoch, look at the tablets of heaven; read what is written upon them and understand each element of them one by one. So I looked at the tablets of heaven, read all the writing on them, and came to understand everything. I read that book and all the deeds of humanity and all the children of the flesh upon earth for all the generations of the world. At that very moment, I blessed the great Lord, the King of Glory forever. For He has created all things on earth. I praised the Lord because of His patience and I wept on account of the children of all the people upon the earth.” (1 Enoch 81:1-4)

“You shall not have to hide on the day of the great judgment and you shall not be found as the sinners; but the eternal judgment shall be far away from you...Now, you sinners, even if you say, “All our sins shall not be investigated or written down, nevertheless, all your sins are being written down every day.” (1 Enoch 104: 5-7)

“Behold the days are coming and it shall be that when I draw near to visit the inhabitants of the earth, and when I require from the doers of iniquity the penalty of their iniquity, and when the humiliation of Zion is complete, and when the seal is placed upon the age which is about to pass away; then I will show these signs; the books shall be opened before the firmament, and all shall see it together.” (4 Ezra 6:18-20)

“Whenever the great law court sits in the height of heaven of Arabot only the great princes who are called YHWH by the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, are permitted to speak...Every day at the hour when the book is opened, in which every deed in the world is recorded, as it is written “A court was held and the books were opened.”...When the Holy One, blessed be He, opens the book half of which is fire and half flame, the angels of destruction go out from His presence moment by moment to execute judgment against the wicked with the unsheathed sword of God...” (3 Enoch 30:1-2; 32:1)

The opened books signify God's infallible and absolute knowledge of all things. The books are comprehensive and complete. They comprise the evidentiary documentation upon which the impending judgement is to be based. The judgement



“Christ the Judge with the Book of Life” - Detail from “The Last Judgement” by William Blake

of God is not arbitrary. The divine Judge is intimately and completely familiar with every detail of the life of every person who stands before His judgment seat. No sin shall escape the scrutiny of the Holy One and none shall evade His justice.

John makes effective use of this imagery but with a most significant adjustment. In addition to the courtroom records of human wrongdoing, John introduces yet another book, ***“the book of life.”*** The Book of Life is mentioned seven times in Revelation (cf. Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12,15; 21:27; 22:19). It contains the names of those whom God has chosen from before the foundation of the world as His elect (cf. Ephesians 1:3-6). The Book of Life in Revelation is the visual symbol of the Biblical doctrine of predestination - the believer’s assurance that his salvation is secure because it rests solely upon God gracious plan and purpose accomplished in Christ. St. Paul uses the same language in Philippians 4:3 - ***“Help these women who have***

contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.” Old Testament allusions to the same concept can be found in Exodus (32:32), Psalms (69:28), Daniel (11:1), and Malachi (3:16).



“Christ the Judge” - Woodcut by Heinrich Vogtherr

Those who stand condemned before the judgment seat of God are sentenced on the basis of their sins, fully recorded in the books. Those who are acquitted, declared to be not guilty and granted eternal salvation are sentenced not on the basis of their sins but because their names are recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life. Damnation is by works. Salvation is by grace. Yet the text specifically states: ***“The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.”*** The point is repeated again in verse 13 - ***“each person was judged according to what he had done.”*** How then, can the salvation of the redeemed be accomplished solely by grace? To some

extent, the answer lies in the nature of the final judgment, which is not a determination of one's eternal fate, but a public pronouncement of sentence designed to demonstrate the perfect justice of God. The classic Lutheran theologian, Adolf Hoenecke offers this clarification:

“We must distinguish between the personal judgment which occurs for each individual man in the rigors of death, and the universal judgment on the Last Day. The former is hidden, the latter is public. We must distinguish between judgment itself and the revelation of the judgment. The Last Judgment is not arranged so that men may at that juncture be judged for the first time, but rather (John 3:18) the judgment that took place at death will be revealed on the Last Day (Matthew 25:32). Moreover, the justice of the judgment will be publicly made known; hence, the universal public judgment.” (Hoenecke IV, p.239)

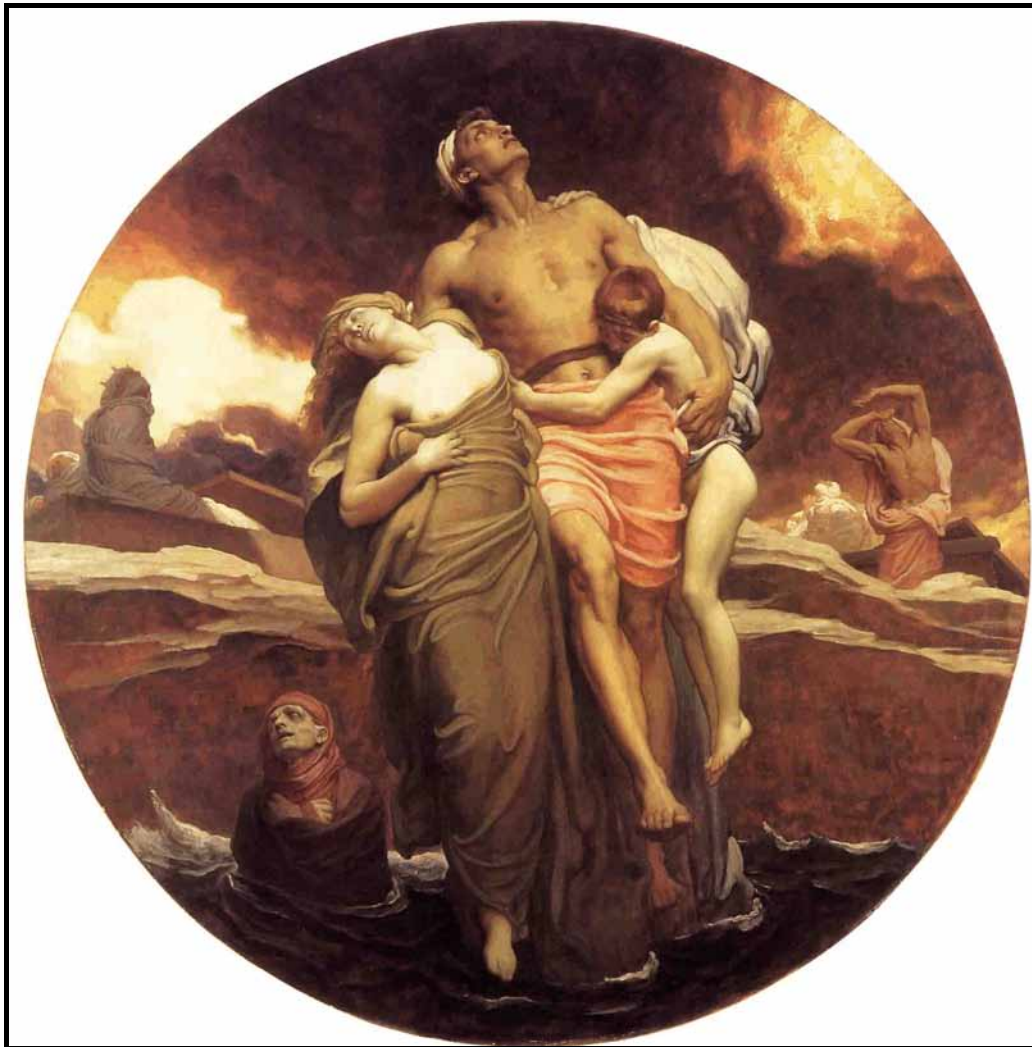


“The Last Judgement” -13th Century French Illumination

With that purpose in mind, works are cited, both positively and negatively on Judgment Day as the objective evidence of the presence or absence of a faith relationship with God in Christ. They are, so to speak, the documentation of that faith which, in itself cannot be seen. Furthermore, as Siegbert Becker explains, every believer has perfectly fulfilled the law of God in the person of Christ who is our Substitute:

“The answer is found in many passages of Scripture. One of the clearest of these is Christ’s statement that He had not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). The law demands that a person, in order to be saved, must keep all the commandments. Jesus did not come to set aside this requirement. He kept the commandments as our Substitute and by faith we make His obedience our own, so that we can say that in Him we have fulfilled all of the requirements of the law. In God’s book all of the Savior’s righteousness is credited to our account. If God would ask us on the day of judgment if we have done everything the law requires, we can say, “Yes, through Him who knew no sin, but was made to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). Through the

forgiveness of sins, all the wrong deeds that might have been recorded in the books have been erased and blotted out (Isaiah 43:25). While God says He will remember the sins of Babylon (Revelation 18:5), He also promises to forget the sins of His people (Jeremiah 31:34; Isaiah 43:25). The only works of the believers that will be remembered are the good deeds that they have done in faith (Matthew 25:35f.; Revelation 14:13) and which are acceptable to God through the forgiveness we have in Christ (1 Peter 2:5). In that sense also believers will be judged according to their works. (Becker, p.322)

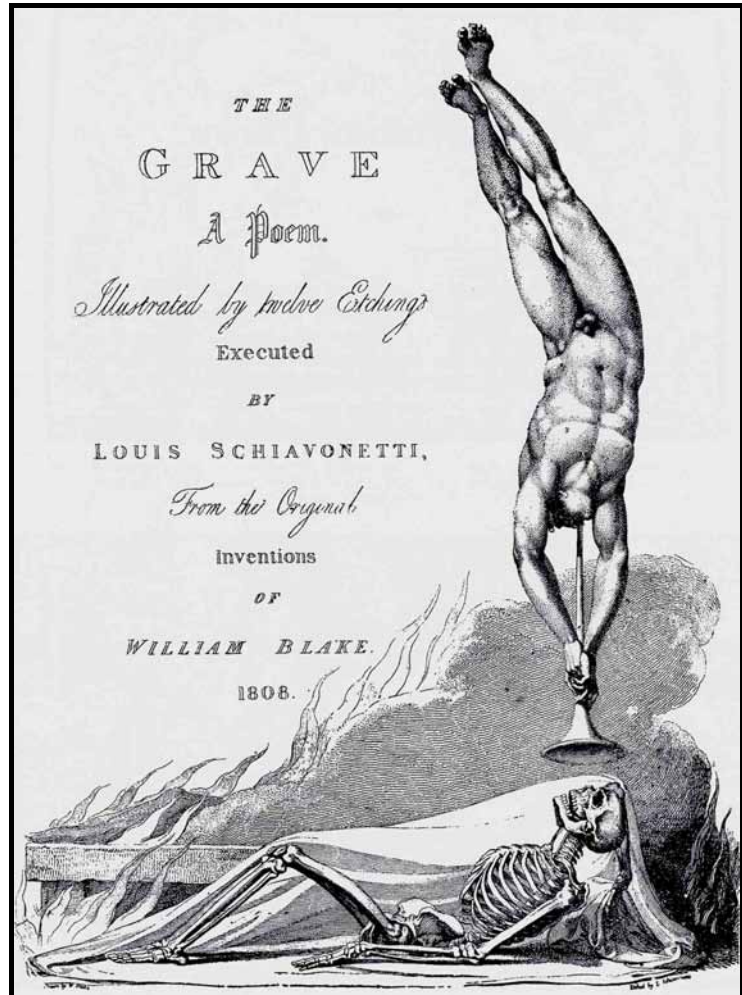


“The Sea Gave Up its Dead” by Frederic Leighton

“The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.”

The events in the visions of St. John are often thematic rather than sequential. That approach is not uncharacteristic of apocalyptic literature. This vivid description of

the resurrection of all flesh follows the description of the Final Judgment, obviously not the actual sequence of events in which the resurrection must precede the judgment. The threefold repetition of ***“the sea..and death and Hades”*** giving up the dead that were in them serves to emphasize the universal nature of the resurrection. Every naturally born descendant of Adam who ever lived, no matter when or where he lived and died, will rise on the last day. At the same time, the repetition also serves to stress the physical nature of this resurrection. The bodies of all men will rise irrespective of their condition, status, or location. The physical bodies of all men will rise - those that were buried and those that were not; - those whose bodies remain intact and those whose bodies have long been reduced to

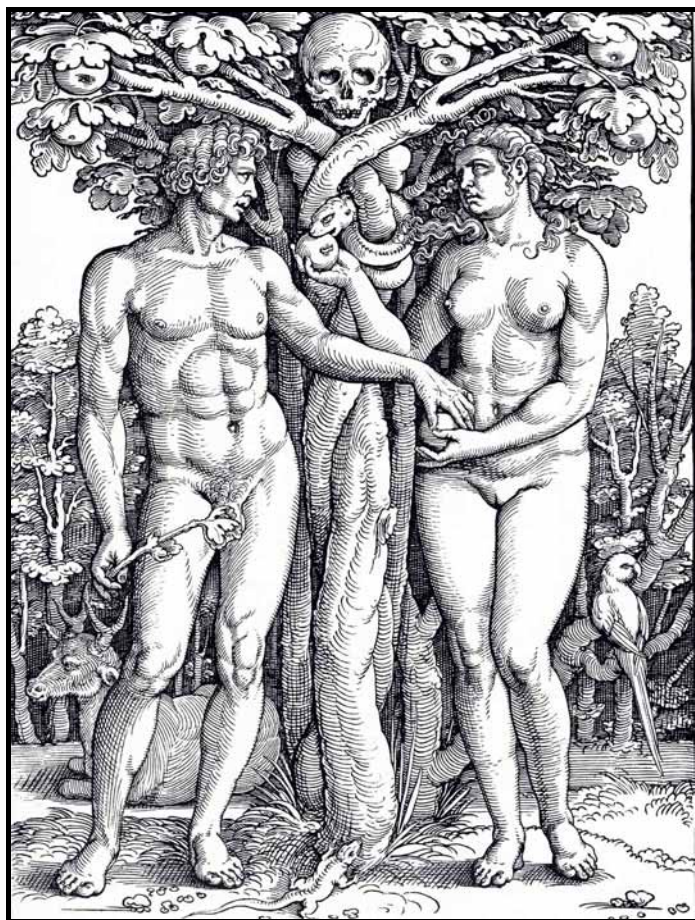


“The Trumpet Shall Sound” - 19th Century Engraving

dust and ashes. That same insistence on the literal reality of the resurrection of the body can be seen in the triple repetition of the patriarch Job: ***“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. After my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. I myself will see Him with my own eyes - I, and not another.”*** (Job 19:25-27)

John proclaims that the cold grasp of ***“death”*** (Greek-*thanatos*) will be loosed on that day. The transliterated Greek word ***“Hades”*** refers not merely to Hell, as is often the case, but more generally to the grave, the place of the dead. The prophet Daniel had foretold: ***“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”*** (Daniel 12:2) Ezekiel had been taken by God to the vast valley of the dry bones and had seen the dead come to life as the breath of God’s Spirit was breathed upon them (Ezekiel 37). This vision

of restoration for Israel was but a glimpse of the great resurrection that is to come on the last day.

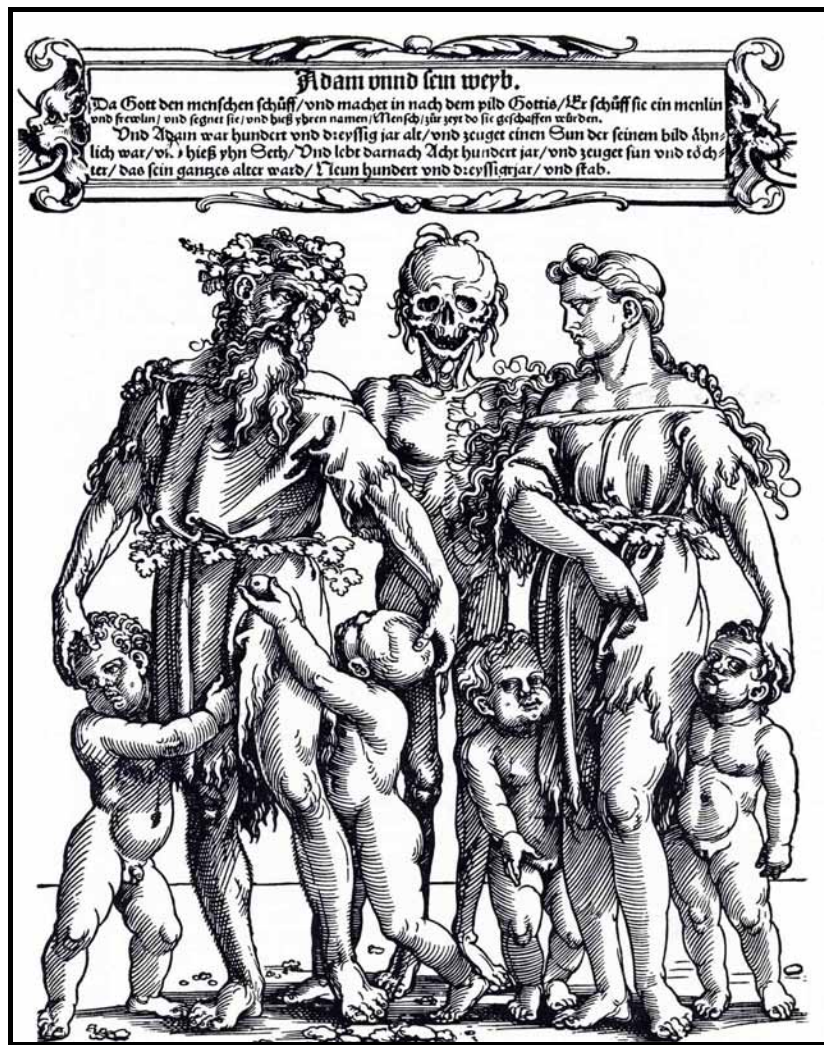


"The Wages of Sin Is Death"
Woodcut by Hans Sebald Beham - 1535

"Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." -

The end of the dark reign of sin has finally come and physical death and the grave must also meet their doom. Since the dark day of Adam's fall, physical death had reigned triumphant over all his descendants. In the beginning, God had warned the first man - *"But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."* (Genesis 2:17) But now the victorious return of the risen Christ ends the reign of death. Those who *"all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death"* (Hebrews 2:15) have been set free. God's promise through

Isaiah has been fulfilled: *"On this mountain He will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations. He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces."* (Isaiah 25:7-8). As St. Paul had taught: *"For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."* (1 Corinthians 15: 25-26) Let the triumph song ring out: *"Death has been swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"* (1 Corinthians 15: 54-57) The English poet John Donne



“Death Embraces Fallen Adam and His Family”

Woodcut by Hans Sebald Beham - 1530

expressed that victory well indeed in his classic poem *“Death Be Not Proud.”*

“Death be not proud, though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not soe, for those whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow, die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me...One short sleep past, wee wake eternally, and death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.”

Physical death and the grave are personified in the vision *“as two voracious and insatiable monsters who have swallowed all past generations but now are forced to disgorge their prey.”* (Swete, p. 273). Like Satan, the beast, and the false prophet, they are cast into the burning lake of fire, the place of God’s judgment.

“The lake of fire is the second death.” - The identification of the ***“lake of fire”*** as the second death is repeated in Revelation 21:8. The ***“second death”*** is eternal death, the unending torment of hell. Death is separation. Physical death is the separation of the body and the soul. Eternal death is the permanent separation of the damned from the Creator God. *“As a second, higher life exists for the righteous, a second and deeper death awaits the wicked.”* (Thomas, p. 434) The second death is the just and inescapable punishment of a just and holy God upon sin. Only those whose names are written in the ***“book of life”*** shall escape the torment of the second death.



“The Downfall of the Damned” by Peter Paul Rubens