

The Eschatological Significance of Christ's Second Coming

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A brief summary of Chapter 2 in the book entitled,
Biblical Eschatology (2nd ed., Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018)
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The specific time when “this age” will end and the “age to come” will be consummated in all its glory is the second coming of Christ. “The Scriptures explicitly tell us that the line of demarcation between these two ages is our Lord’s second advent.”¹ The “last day” is equivalent to “the end of the age.” In other words, “the last day of *this age* is the day of Christ’s second coming and it is the first day of *the age to come*.”²

The second coming is a definite event

Acts 3:19-21; Heb 9:28; Jas 5:8; 2 Pet 3:10; and Rev 22:20 all speak about the second coming of Christ as a definite event that will occur in the future and not simply as a spiritual event that is ongoing now or a definite event that occurred sometime in the past. Christ’s return will be personal (John 14:3; 1 Thess 4:16); physical (Acts 1:11); visible (Matt 24:26-27, 30); audible (1 Thess 4:16); triumphant and glorious (Matt 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27; Rev 19:11-16).

The Bible uses specific terms to describe Christ’s second coming

The “coming” (*parousia*; *erchomai*; *hupostrophō*; *hēkō*)

“This word [*parousia*] means ‘presence’ or ‘arrival’. It was used in the Greek world to describe the visit of a ruler to a city, with all the festive atmosphere which surrounded such a visit. Often a party of civic dignitaries, or even the

¹ Riddlebarger, *Amillennialism*, 85; see also Venema, *Promise*, 90-95 (“the return of Christ marks the close of the present age”); Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 27 (“these two ages are separated by the Second Coming of Christ and the resurrection from the dead”).

² Waldron, “Structural Considerations,” n.p.

whole population, would go out to meet the ruler as he approached the city. It was a day of festival.”³ Every time the word *parousia* is used in the NT with reference to Christ it is used in the singular with the definite article (i.e., “*the parousia*”). Thus, in the NT *parousia* essentially is a technical term for the eschatological coming of Christ in glory.⁴

The “revelation” (*apokalupsis*; *apokaluptō*) and the “appearance” (*epiphaneia*; *phaneroō*; *horaō*)

Travis discusses the essential equivalence of the “revelation” (*apokalupsis*) and the “appearing” (*epiphaneia*) of Jesus Christ: “Paul speaks of Christ’s coming as his ‘being revealed’ or ‘appearing’ (Greek *apokalupsis* [2 Thess 1:7]). This description, like the equivalent word for ‘appearing’ (*epiphaneia*) in [2 Thess 2:8], repeats a theme which we have already noticed in Jesus’s teaching. One of the purposes of Christ’s coming will be to reveal what is now hidden, to make clear-cut what is now open to doubt, to demonstrate the glory of Christ in contrast to the ‘incognito’ element in his first coming.”⁵

“The day of the Lord (or of Christ)”

Just as the OT prophets spoke of the “*day of the Lord*,” so does the NT. However, in the NT that phrase no longer refers to temporal judgments on Israel’s enemies. Instead, it refers to the great eschatological climax of this age: the day of condemnation of the ungodly, but salvation and vindication for those who are Christ’s. The “*day of the Lord*” is sometimes called the “*day of the Lord Jesus Christ*” or, more simply, “*the day*” or “*that day*.” In the NT, as John Murray tells us, “*that day*” is “a well-defined eschatological denotation to designate the day of the Lord, the last day (cf. Matt. 7:22; Luke 10:12; 21:34; 2 Thess. 1:10; 2 Tim. 1:12, 18; 4:8). So much is this the case, that the expression ‘the day’ has taken on a distinctly technical meaning (cf. Rom. 13:12; 1 Cor. 3:13; 1 Thess. 5:4; Heb. 10:23; 2 Pet. 1:19).”⁶ It is equated with “*the last day*.”

Christ’s second coming does not stand alone, but entails both resurrection and judgment

The second coming ushers in and entails a complex of events. From the standpoint of corporate eschatology, the *parousia* entails resurrection and judgment. The resurrection and judgment apply to human beings (both Christians and non-Christians) and to creation itself (i.e., the purging of evil from the universe and the renewal of creation by the institution of the “new heaven and new earth” [Rev 21:1]). Vos points out, “The two overtowering final events in the

³ Travis, *I Believe*, 84.

⁴ Oepke, “*parousia*,” 5:865-66.

⁵ Travis, *I Believe*, 86.

⁶ Murray, “Interadventual Period,” 394-95; see also Ewert, “1-2 Thessalonians,” 1082.

drama of eschatology are the Resurrection and the Judgment. . . . The Judgment is, of course, the inevitable summing up of a world-process that has fallen subject to the moral abnormality of sin; the Resurrection, after a parallel manner, serves for restoring what has become the prey of decadence and death.”⁷

Christ’s second coming brings with it the resurrection of the just and the unjust alike (including the transformation of believers who are living at the time of the *parousia* [the “rapture”])

** The following passages speak of Christ’s second coming as entailing the resurrection of the just and unjust alike: Matt 13:30, 40-41, 48-49; 25:31-32; Luke 17:22-37; John 5:25-29; Acts 24:14-15.*

** The following passages correlate the resurrection with the second coming, but only explicitly talk about the resurrection of believers, not the resurrection of unbelievers: Matt 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27; Luke 14:12-14; John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24; 1 Cor 15:20-26, 35-57; 1 Thess 4:13-17).*

The context of those passages that only speak of the resurrection of believers makes it clear why that is the case. In each of those passages in the gospels Jesus was giving assurance to believers based on the unity of believers with Christ (John 6:35-58), was giving assurance to believers and warning them to remain faithful (Matt 24:4-44; Mark 13:5-37), or was giving an incentive to believers that their acts of kindness to those who could not repay them in this world would be rewarded in the judgment that accompanies the resurrection (Luke 14:12-14).

Christ’s second coming brings with it the judgment of all people: rewards for the righteous and punishment for the unrighteous

** The following passages speak of the second coming of Christ as entailing the judgment of all people, believers and unbelievers alike: Matt 13:24-30, 36-51; 16:27; 24:42-51; 25:14-30, 31-46; Luke 12:35-48; 17:22-37; 19:12-27; 21:26-28; John 5:25-29; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Thess 1:6-10; 2 Tim 4:1; Jas 5:7-9; Rev 11:18; 19:11-21; 20:11-15; 22:12.*

** The following passages speak of the second coming of Christ as entailing the judgment (vindication) of believers: Luke 18:17-18; Rom 8:18; 1 Cor 1:7-8; 1 Thess 3:13; 5:23 (implicitly); 2 Tim 4:8; Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 1:7, 13; 4:13; 5:1, 4; 1 John 2:28 (implicitly).*

** The following passages speak of the second coming of Christ as entailing the judgment of unbelievers: 2 Thess 2:8; 2 Pet 3:3-12; Jude 14-15.*

⁷ Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 72.

The Bible teaches that there is one general resurrection, and one general judgment, of both believers and unbelievers

The day of judgment is always spoken of in the singular, e.g., “*day of judgment*” (Matt 10: 15; 11:22-24; 12:36); “*that day*” (Matt 7:22; Luke 10:12); “*the judgment*” (Luke 10:14; 11:31); “*a day in which he will judge the world*” (Acts 17:31); “*a day of wrath*” (Rom 2:5); “*a day of judgment*” (2 Pet 3:7); “*the day of judgment*” (1 John 4:17); “*the great day of their [God’s and the Lamb’s] wrath*” (Rev 6:17); “*the time for the dead to be judged*” (Rev 11:18); “*the great day of God*” (16:14). That day—which involves both resurrection and judgment—takes place on “the last day,” the “end of the age.”⁸

Both believers and unbelievers will participate in the one great judgment. The universality of the judgment is specified in the following passages: Acts 17:31 says, “*He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.*” Jesus says in Rev 22:12, “*I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to render to every man according to what he has done.*” Acts 10:42; 2 Tim 4:1; 1 Pet 4:5 all speak of Christ who will judge “*the living and the dead.*”⁹ The phrase is an expression of universality, “all” people. J. Ramsay Michaels observes that Peter’s “whole argument extending from [1 Pet] 3:13 to 4:5 is . . . God will vindicate those who suffer and hold their oppressors accountable at the day of judgment.”¹⁰

The presence of believers and unbelievers being present together is made clear in the following passages which speak of those who are vindicated and those who are condemned at the same judgment: In Matt 12:39-42 (Luke 11:29-32) Jesus says that the men of Nineveh “*will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented,*” and “*the Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon.*” “*Stand up*” is the future middle indicative of the verb *anistēmi*, from which the noun *anastasis* (resurrection) is derived. “*Rise up*” is the future passive indicative of the verb *egeirō* (lit., “will be raised up”), which is essentially synonymous with

⁸ Matt 13:30, 39-42, 48-50; John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48.

⁹ While the context appears to speak of the universality of the judgment—those alive when Christ comes and those who previously have died—some have found in the phrase “*the living and the dead*” a reference to “the elect, who live by grace, and the reprobate, who are spiritually dead.” Haydock, *Catholic*, Acts 10:42; “It is more correct to understand the *living* of those who enjoy spiritual life, and the *dead* of those who remain spiritually dead; which makes the distinction a more important one, and renders the phrase parallel to all those passages which treat of the judgment of the good and the bad.” Olshausen, *Commentary*, 4:497. Whichever way one construes these verses, the conclusion is the same: the righteous and the unrighteous are both present and judged at the same judgment.

¹⁰ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 235.

anistēmi.¹¹ Davies and Allison point out that “*at the judgment*” and “*this generation*” “both have eschatological content. In addition, the scene painted presupposes a universal judgement, for it involves the Ninevites and the Israel of Jesus’ time, as well as the queen of the South.”¹² In both examples, the redeemed and the unredeemed rise or are resurrected together (i.e., “*with this generation*”), at the time of the judgment, with the redeemed playing a part in the judgment of the unredeemed. In the passage “the judgment” is a noun and includes the definite article, which indicates that there is only one judgment (as opposed to an indefinite “will rise up *in judgment*”).¹³

Two other factors indicate that at the judgment believers and unbelievers are resurrected alike. First, while J. Webb Mealy acknowledges that Luke 20:34-36 and Matt 25:31-46 describe a general judgment of all humanity, he contends that only a “*partial, selective resurrection* for those judged ‘worthy’” (i.e., the believers) takes place; the unbelievers are being judged in their unresurrected state to determine whether they will be deemed “worthy” to achieve resurrection and take part in resurrection life in the age to come.¹⁴ However, the believers are standing before the judgment seat, the glorious throne of God (Matt 25:31; Rom 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:11-13), in their resurrected state and evidently have to be in their resurrected state to be there; unbelievers are together with the believers at the same place and time. It is therefore incredible to believe that the unbelievers will not of necessity also be in their resurrected state. Thus, in Matt 25:31-46 it is “sheep” and “goats” who stand before the throne, not “sheep” and “spirits of goats.”¹⁵ Mealy’s proposal would mean that the unbelievers are raised from Hades to the judgment throne in spirit form only to be thrown back into Hades for a thousand years.¹⁶ Nothing in the context of any passage concerning the

¹¹ “Both verbs can mean ‘will rise up’, but in the present context the passive form of the second invites the sense ‘will be raised up [by God].” Nolland, *Matthew*, 512; see also France, *Matthew*, 487n.2, 492n.17.

¹² Davies and Allison, *St. Matthew*, 2:358.

¹³ Holleman comments: “The idea here is that the unrighteous generation of Jesus’ time will be convicted by the righteous generations of former times, since the latter repented and believed while Jesus’ generation did not. In order to judge, the people of Nineveh will rise [*anastēsontai*], i.e., they will share in the eschatological resurrection. The relationship assumed here between resurrection and judgement is traditional: it is often said that people will be raised to be judged.” Holleman, *Resurrection and Parousia*, 81-82.

¹⁴ Mealy, “Revelation is One,” 137-39.

¹⁵ Mealy speaks of “the shades of the dead [who] stand before the throne to be judged as to whether they are worthy of a part in resurrection and the new age of Christ’s kingdom.” Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 180. Contrary to that, Heb 6:2 speaks of the foundational or elementary teachings of the faith, concluding its list with “*the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment*.” Thus, judgment is closely associated with resurrection. Although it is not absolutely clear that the resurrection referred to pertains only to the just or to the just and unjust alike, the immediate association of the phrase “*eternal judgment*” and the reference in vv. 4-6 of those who have fallen away indicates that the general resurrection and judgment of all people—the just and unjust alike—is being referred to. O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 215n.27; Allen, *Hebrews*, 343; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 205.

¹⁶ See Mealy, *The End*, 47-56 (he contends the unbelievers will be resurrected for their final judgment after spending the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 in Hades).

judgment suggests that unbelievers are in some sort of incorporeal state fundamentally different from the state of believers who are subjects of the same judgment or that unbelievers are the subjects of multiple judgments.

Second, human beings are body-soul unities. The Bible repeatedly says that we will be judged “according to our deeds.”¹⁷ Our bodies are integral components of who we are and are integral participants in our sins. Consequently, resurrection of the whole person, body and soul, believers as well as unbelievers, is both necessary and implied whenever the judgment is spoken about in the Bible. This is indicated in the images used of the judgment in a number of passages: Pss 9:8; 96:10; 98:9 say that God will judge *“the peoples,”* not just their spirits;¹⁸ Ps 73:20, in discussing the judgment of the wicked, says that God *“will despise their form”*; Jesus warned to *“fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”* (Matt 10:28); Rom 9:22-23 speaks of *“vessels of wrath prepared for destruction”* in the same way that it speaks of *“vessels of mercy . . . for glory”*; 2 Cor 5:10 specifies that *“we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”*; Phil 2:10-11 speaks of how *“every knee will bow”* and *“every tongue will confess”*; Jas 5:1-3 speaks of how the witness of the *“rust”* of people’s gold and silver *“will consume your flesh like fire”*; 2 Pet 3:7 speaks of *“the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”* All these images indicate that the whole person is subject to the judgment, just as the whole person committed deeds worthy of reward or condemnation. Unbelievers will indeed be resurrected along with the believers, but the former are resurrected to judgment and destruction whereas the latter are resurrected to life. All of the above passages uniformly contradict the idea of multiple partial or selective resurrections or judgments.

Christ’s second coming brings with it the destruction or cleansing of the present world and the restoration of creation

Acts 3:19-21; Rom 8:17-25; and 2 Pet 3:3-15 all speak of the destruction or cleansing of the present world and the restoration of creation. The destruction and renewal of the earth can be seen as a special aspect of the judgment and resurrection that Christ’s coming entails. Both the creation as a whole and we ourselves are described as “groaning” until we receive *“the redemption of our body”* (Rom 8:22-23; see also 2 Cor 5:1-4). The sin of human beings and the groaning of the earth are related; indeed, the “curse” of the earth is part of God’s judgment on mankind’s initial sin (Gen 3:14-19). That is reflected in Rev 11:17-18 and Rev 20:11-15 which depict the final judgment and refer to the earth as part of

¹⁷ E.g., Matt 16:27; 25:14-30; Luke 12:47-48; John 5:28-29; Rom 2:1-6; 12:19; 1 Cor 3:8, 11-15; 2 Cor 5:10; 11:15; Gal 6:7-8; Eph 6:8; Col 3:25; 2 Tim 4:14; Heb 10:26-27; 1 Pet 1:17; 2 Pet 2:20-22; Jude 14-15; Rev 2:23; 14:13; 20:11-13; 22:12.

¹⁸ “The psalms are referring to a future occasion that was naturally identified subsequently as the last judgment.” Marshall, “Acts,” 595.

that judgment. Thus, resurrection and judgment of people do not stand alone but are part of the restoration of all of creation.

The NT identifies Christ's second coming as being "the last day," "the end of the age," "the day of the Lord," the day of the resurrection, and the day of judgment

The events which will take place on "the last day" or "the end of the age" or "the day of the Lord"—the resurrection of both believers and unbelievers, judgment of both believers and unbelievers, and the renewal of the earth—all take place (or are initiated) when Christ comes again. The NT ties together all of those events, although some passages emphasize only some of them while other passages emphasize others of them. When we see the overlap of multiple passages, we clearly see that the second coming of Christ is equivalent to "the last day," "the end of the age," and "the day of the Lord," and it entails resurrection, judgment, and renewal of the earth. In other words, if A includes B; and B includes C; then A also includes C. Or, to put it another way, if in one place A is said to include B; and elsewhere A is said to include C; then we may conclude that A includes both B and C.

* *"The end of the age," the resurrection, and the judgment of believers and unbelievers alike are all correlated.* Matt 13:24-30, 36-43 (parable of the wheat and the tares) brings together in one passage resurrection (13:28-30, 39-41), "the end of the age" (13:39-40), and the judgment of believers and unbelievers alike (13:30, 40-43). Matt 13:47-50 (parable of the dragnet) similarly brings together in one passage "the end of the age" (13:49), resurrection (13:49), and the judgment of both believers and unbelievers (13:48-50).

* *"The end [of the age]" and "the day of the Lord" are correlated.* First Cor 1:8 and 2 Cor 1:13-14 connect "the end" with "the day of the Lord."

* *"The last day" and the resurrection are correlated.* John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24 all bring together "the last day" and "the resurrection."

* *"The last day" and the judgment are correlated.* John 12:48 brings together in one passage "the last day" and the judgment.

* *The second coming, "the day of the Lord," the resurrection, and the judgment are all correlated.* Second Thess 1:6-2:8 brings together in one passage the "revelation" (*apokalupsis*) (1:7), the "coming" (*erchomai*) (1:10), the *parousia* (2:1, 8), the resurrection and rapture (2:1), "the day of the Lord" (2:2), and the vindication of believers and judgment of unbelievers (1:6-10; 2:8).

* *The second coming, "the day of the Lord," and the judgment are all correlated.* Matt 24:36-51 brings together in one passage "that day" (24:36), the "coming"

(both *parousia* [24:37, 39] and *erchomai* [24:42-44, 46]), and the separation and judgment of both believers and unbelievers (24:37-41, 45-51). Rom 2:1-16 brings together in one passage the “revelation” (*apokalupsis*) (2:5), “*the day*” (2:5; 16), and the judgment of God on both believers and unbelievers (2:1-16). Second Tim 4:8 brings together in one passage “*that day*,” the “appearing” (*epiphaneia*), and the judgment (reward) of believers. Second Pet 3:3-12 brings together in one passage the “coming” (*parousia*) (3:4), the “*day of judgment*” (3:7), the “*day of the Lord*” (3:10), the judgment of unbelievers and the destruction of the earth (3:3-12).

* *The resurrection and the judgment are correlated.* Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29 bring together in one passage the resurrection and the judgment of both the good and the evil.

* *The second coming, “the day of the Lord,” and “that day” are all correlated.* Just as “*the day of the Lord*” will come “*like a thief*” (1 Thess 5:2, 4; 2 Pet 3:10), so Christ says, “*I will come like a thief*” (Rev 3:3; 16:15; see also Matt 24:42-44; Luke 12:39-40). “*That day*” is used for the second coming (Luke 17:30-31; 2 Thess 1:6-10). Similarly, “*the day of the Lord*” is used for the second coming (1 Cor 1:7-8; 2 Thess 2:1-2; 2 Pet 3:3-4, 9-10). See also Luke 17:24 [“*His day*”]; 2 Pet 3:12 (“*the day of God*”).

* *“The day of the Lord” and the judgment are correlated.* The same phrase, “*the day of the Lord*” (or “*of Christ*”), is used for the final day of judgment of believers (1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:13-14; Phil 1:6, 10; 2:14-16; 1 Thess 5:2-9); unbelievers (1 Cor 5:5); and unbelievers, believers (implicitly), and the earth itself (2 Pet 3:10, i.e., “*the earth and its works will be burned up*”).

* *“The day” and the judgment are correlated.* The same phrase, “*the day*,” speaks about the judgment of believers (Rom 13:32; 1 Cor 3:11-15); and speaks about or implies the joint judgment of believers and unbelievers (Rom 2:16; Heb 10:23-27).

* *“That day,” and the judgment are correlated.* The same phrase, “*that day*,” speaks about, or implies the vindication of, or rewards to, believers (2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8); the judgment of unbelievers (2 Thess 1:6-10); and speaks explicitly about the judgment of unbelievers, and implicitly of the vindication of believers (Matt 7:22-23).

* *“The day of judgment”* is used for the final day of judgment of believers (1 John 4:17); unbelievers (Matt 10:15; Matt 11:22, 24; Luke 10:14; 2 Pet 2:9; 3:7); the earth (2 Pet 3:7, 12); and angels (Jude 6).

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