

A Brief Presentation of a Biblical Eschatology

by Ron Kangas

The purpose of this article is to offer a concise statement of our views concerning eschatology, and it has been written primarily to honor the request of those who have asked for such a statement. We are keenly aware of the fact that godly persons may hold divergent views of the end times; therefore, we write with respect toward those who think and teach differently from us regarding eschatology, and we do not wish to debate these points in this article. Our intention here is to present, not to argue. Therefore, in this brief presentation of what we understand to be a genuine biblical eschatology, we will summarize, in a basic and elementary way, the results of many years of study of the various matters related to the end of the age and the coming of the Lord. We ask that this presentation be considered on its own terms for what it is—a testimony of what the Scriptures teach about the last things. Since the divine revelation of the sign of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 1:1; 21:2, 9-11) is central to a truly biblical eschatology, we will both begin and end this presentation with a word on the New Jerusalem.

God's Unique Goal—the New Jerusalem

The Bible begins with God and ends with the New Jerusalem. According to the book of Revelation what appears in the new heaven and new earth after all negative things have been cast into the lake of fire is the New Jerusalem—the consummation of God's work for His economy throughout the ages. We testify, therefore, that the New Jerusalem is God's unique goal in His economy, the sole aim of the divine dispensing for the divine expression.

In reaction to our claim that the New Jerusalem is God's unique goal, one particularly vociferous critic has written, "Try reading those passages and ALL others that refer to heaven in the Scriptures, and then come back and try to make that statement." As a matter of fact, we have been reading all these passages for many years, long before *A & C* was born, and have recently done so again, and now we are coming back to make the statement, more absolutely than ever, that the New Jerusalem as an organic entity, a corporate person constituted with God in union with His regenerated and transformed elect, is the unique

goal of God in His economy and the ultimate fulfillment of His eternal purpose (Eph. 3:9-11; 2 Tim. 1:9; Rom. 8:28). The same critic mentioned above wrote to us with the assurance that if we study what the Bible reveals about heaven, we will "have to admit that 'New Jerusalem' and 'heaven' are two ways of expressing the same thing—an eternity of blessing, communion, peace, security, and service to the triune God in the place of His absolute and visible lordship." Our study, however, has brought us to the opposite conclusion: The New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:10), is not a synonym of heaven. Heaven is a place; the New Jerusalem is a person, a corporate person constituted of the union, mingling, and incorporation of the processed and consummated Triune God with His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite people. This view of the New Jerusalem as God's unique goal—and the goal of the apostles in their life, teaching, and ministry—is the center, the focal point, of our teaching concerning biblical eschatology.

The Dispensations within the Old Creation

This glorious city, this marvelous eternal, corporate expression of the Triune God, is the consummation of all the works of God's new creation in all the dispensations within the old creation. The difference between the old creation and the new creation is that the old creation does not have the divine life and nature but the new creation does (2 Cor. 5:17; John 1:13; 3:15; 2 Pet. 1:4). The new creation has God within it as its life, nature, constitution, appearance, and expression. In other words, the new creation is new because God has been wrought into it (Gal. 4:19; Eph. 3:16-17). Hence, the New Jerusalem is new because it is full of God.

God's goal is to produce the new creation out of the old creation (Gal. 6:15) by working within the four dispensations, or ages, of the old creation: the age before the law, from Adam to Moses (Rom. 5:14); the age of the law, from Moses to Christ (John 1:17); the age of grace, from Christ's first coming until "the times of the restoration of all things" at Christ's second coming (Acts 3:20-21); and

the age of the kingdom, or the age of righteousness, from the second coming of Christ to the end of the millennium (Rev. 11:15; 20:4, 6). The dispensation before the law is the dispensation of the patriarchs, from the creation of humankind until the giving of the law through Moses. During this dispensation God called a new race, the Abrahamic race, out of the fallen, created race, the Adamic race, and gave to this new race the promise of grace, leading them to hope in the Christ who would come to be a blessing to all the nations. During the dispensation of the law, from Moses until Christ, God used the law to preserve His chosen people by keeping them in custody until Christ, the good Shepherd, would come to bring them out of the fold of the law and lead them into Himself as the green pasture. In this way God gained another group of people during the age of the law. During the dispensation of grace, God gains all those who believe in Christ to be the third, and major, part of His new creation. In the age of the kingdom, the just men perfected in the Old Testament age and the overcoming believers in Christ in the New Testament age will receive the reward of participating in Christ's kingdom and joy. However, the immature believers will not receive this reward; instead, God, in His righteousness, will use the dispensation of the kingdom to perfect them through discipline. In addition, after the termination of the dispensation of grace, God will cause the repentant Israelites to become constituents of the new creation by perfecting them during the millennial kingdom for the eternal New Jerusalem. As a result of God's work in these four dispensations, all of which take place within the old creation, God will gain all the constituents of the New Jerusalem as His new creation. Once this work has been accomplished, the age of the kingdom, the dispensation of righteousness, will come to an end, and the eternal age will begin with the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth. With this basic dispensational structure in mind, we may proceed to consider, in outline form, a number of details involved in a biblical eschatology.

The Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks

The seventy weeks in Daniel 9:24-27 are apportioned into seven weeks, sixty-two weeks, and one week. (In Daniel a week represents seven years.) The first seven weeks—forty-nine years—were for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and were fulfilled (v. 25). The next sixty-two weeks—four hundred thirty-four years—extended to the cutting off, the crucifixion, of the Messiah, Christ (v. 26a). From the rebuilding of Jerusalem to the year that Christ was cut off by being crucified was exactly four hundred thirty-four years. We are now living in the interval after these sixty-two weeks and before the seventieth week. This interval, the duration of which is not revealed, is the age of grace and the age of the church. It is also an age of mystery, for everything God is doing in this age is mysterious (Col. 2:2; Eph. 3:4; 5:32; Rev. 10:7).

The history of the church, during the interval between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks, is unveiled prophetically in the Lord's epistles to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. The first three stages of the church signified by Ephesus (the church at the close of the initial stage), Smyrna (the church under persecution), and Pergamos (the church married to the world) have been completed. However, the stages of the church signified by Thyatira (the church in apostasy), Sardis (the church in reformation), Philadelphia (the church in recovery), and Laodicea (the church in degradation) will remain until the end of this age, that is, until the second half of the seventieth week (see "The Eschatology of the Church according to the Divine Revelation of the Scriptures"). The last week of the seventy weeks in Daniel 9 will be the last seven years of this present age, the age of the church. After these coming seven years, the kingdom of the heavens will be manifested on earth for a thousand years, the age of the millennial kingdom.

Events Related to the Second Half of the Seventieth Week

At the beginning of the seven years of the last week of the seventy weeks, Antichrist will make a firm covenant with Israel. However, in the middle of this seven-year period he will break the covenant (Dan. 9:27), and the great tribulation of three and a half years will begin (Matt. 24:21). Therefore, the last week will be cut into halves by Antichrist's breaking of the seven-year covenant he will have made with Israel related to the restoration of worship in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem.

Shortly before the beginning of the great tribulation (which coincides with the second half of the last week), the rapture of the overcoming believers to the heavens, including the rapture of the dead overcomers—the man-child (Rev. 12:1-11)—and the rapture of the living overcomers—the firstfruits (14:1-5), will take place. The remainder of the believers (the majority) will be raptured at the very end of the great tribulation. The rapture of the overcoming believers, especially of the man-child, will precipitate war in heaven, and the devil will be cast down to earth to form an evil trinity with Antichrist and the false prophet. After all the believers have been raptured, they will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to be judged not concerning eternal salvation (a matter which is settled once for all and which is eternally secure from the time we believe and are regenerated) but concerning reward or punishment during the age of the kingdom. Those who are approved by the Lord Jesus and receive a reward will enter into the Lord's joy and reign with Him in the millennial kingdom; those who are disapproved will not simply lose the reward but will also experience some kind of dispensational punishment in "the outer darkness" (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). The overcoming believers, as Christ's bridal army, will then return with Christ for the ultimate war, the war at Armageddon, which will witness

the destruction of Antichrist and his armies. The repentant Jews will be saved and become the priests during the dispensation of the kingdom, whereas Christ's overcoming believers will be His co-kings, shining as the sun as they reign with Christ in the kingdom of their Father (Matt. 13:43).

The Millennial Kingdom

Over whom will these co-kings reign? They will reign over the nations who, as the sheep in Matthew 25, will inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. Those who will be the citizens in the millennium will be the people who, during the great tribulation, obey the everlasting gospel to fear God and to worship Him (Rev. 14:6-7) and care for the Lord's suffering brothers, the suffering Jews and the believers in Christ. The decision related to the identity of these future millennial citizens will be rendered by Christ as the Judge of the living (2 Tim. 4:1) after He sets up His throne in Jerusalem (Matt. 25:31).

One widespread erroneous teaching is that all the believers in Christ will reign as kings with Him during the thousand years of the dispensation of the kingdom. The idea here is that since God's eternal salvation is by grace, reigning with Christ in the kingdom must also be purely a matter of grace, not of reward according to righteousness. A careful and unbiased study of the Word discloses, however, that only the overcoming believers will be rewarded with the privilege of reigning with Christ during the kingdom age. The defeated and immature believers, those who did not overcome and grow to maturity during the age of grace, will suffer some kind of dispensational punishment during the age of the millennium in order to be perfected and qualified to participate in the New Jerusalem in eternity.

The dispensation of the kingdom will be an age of restoration. Satan will be bound and cast into the abyss, and there will be a thousand years of peace and blessing. However, at the end of the millennium, Satan will be released from his prison and will deceive many of the nations and gather them together for war against "the camp of the saints and the beloved city" (Rev. 20:8-9). This final rebellion of Satan will be a test to the peoples who will be the citizens, the nations, who have been living under the ruling of the Lord's co-kings during the age of the millennial kingdom. Those who follow Satan to rebel will be cast with him into the lake of fire, whereas those who remain obedient to God will be transferred into eternity and become the nations walking in the light of the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth. Finally, all the dead unbelievers will appear before the great white throne to be judged and then cast into the lake of fire. Then the New Jerusalem will come down out of heaven from God, and the eternal age will begin in the new heaven and new earth.

The New Heaven and New Earth

After every negative thing, including death and Hades, has been cast into the lake of fire, the new heaven and new earth will appear (Rev. 21:1; Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13). For the sake of His desired corporate expression through His glorification, God created the heavens and the earth. When He completes His work of producing the New Jerusalem as the new creation out from within the old creation, the old heaven and old earth will pass away through fire and be renewed into the new heaven and new earth (2 Pet. 3:10-13). This new heaven and new earth will not be something other than the old heaven and old earth. Rather, the old heaven and old earth will be renewed to become the new heaven and new earth as a new universe, the realm of God's ruling in His kingdom in eternity. Hence, this new universe will be the realm of God, with the New Jerusalem as its center, to administrate His government for eternity.

We must be clear, however, that the new heaven and new earth will not be the new creation. Although the new universe will involve restoration, unlike the New Jerusalem as God's new creation, it will not have God wrought into it through regeneration and transformation. Nevertheless, it will be a universe "in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13). Everything will be fully under God's righteous government; nothing will be wrong or unjust, and nothing will be unrighteous. Because righteousness will dwell in the new universe, for eternity there will not be the need of any further judgment. According to Hebrews 1:8, Psalm 145:13, and Daniel 4:3 the new heaven and new earth, as the new realm for God's eternal, righteous administration, will exist for eternity.

Although Revelation 21:1 speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, the emphasis in the last two chapters of Revelation is not on heaven but on the earth. This indicates that God is concerned about the earth and wants to come down to the earth. In a sense, God will forsake the heavens and devote His full attention to the earth, which, after Revelation 20, will be suitable for Him. At the start of the millennium, the earth will not yet be ready for God's glorious visitation. The word in Revelation 20:7-8 about Satan deceiving the nations on earth reveals that even at the end of the millennium there will be evil on the earth. For this reason, the earth will not be pleasing to God; therefore, He will not yet come down from heaven to earth. God will come down to the earth only after the old earth has been purged and purified by fire to become a new earth fit to have God's beloved New Jerusalem, His dwelling place, as the center.

The City of Water and the Lake of Fire

On the new earth there will be the lake of fire—the final destination of the devil, his angels, and every negative person

and thing. For eternity the lake of fire will stand in sharp contrast to the city of water (Rev. 22:1-2), the New Jerusalem. If we consider 22:15 and 21:8, we will see that the lake of fire will be outside the New Jerusalem. Whereas the New Jerusalem exhibits God's glory and God's holiness, the lake of fire testifies of God's righteousness. As the result of God's righteous judgment, the devil, all other rebellious creatures, and all negative things will be swept into the lake of fire and remain there as a testimony of God's perfect and unlimited righteousness. This display of God's righteousness will be the vital factor, we believe, in causing God's righteousness to dwell in the new universe.

The Sons of God and the Restored People

It is commonly supposed that in eternity there will be only two categories of human beings—the saved ones in God's eternal abode, the realm of enjoyment, and the lost ones in the lake of fire, the realm of torment. The book of Revelation, however, shows us that there will be a third category—the restored people on the new earth (21:3-4, 24, 26). This matter requires careful attention.

Revelation 21:24 says, "The nations will walk by its [the New Jerusalem's] light; and the kings of the earth bring their glory into it [the New Jerusalem]." Verse 26 goes on to say that "they [the restored people on the new earth] will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it [the New Jerusalem]." These are the peoples mentioned in verses 3-4: "They will be His peoples, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes." According to traditional teaching, the people here are the believers in Christ as the inhabitants of heaven, from whose eyes God will wipe away all tears. This view is erroneous. God's redeemed and regenerated people constitute the New Jerusalem as the bride and the tabernacle mentioned in verses 2 and 3, but "His peoples" are of a different category; they are the restored nations who are not a part of the New Jerusalem. If we see this, we will realize that in eternity there will actually be three categories of people: the regenerated ones in the New Jerusalem, the rebellious ones in the lake of fire, and the restored ones on the new earth surrounding the New Jerusalem.

At the end of the present age, a great part of the inhabitants of the earth will be killed (Rev. 9:12-21; 11:13-18). Those who remain will be judged by Christ at the throne of His glory after He comes back to earth (Matt. 25:31-46). Whereas the "goats" will perish in the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels, the "sheep" will inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world and will enter into eternal life in the millennial kingdom, the dispensation of righteousness, to be the citizens under the overcoming believers, who will be the kings, and the saved remnant of Israel,

who will be the priests. Unlike the believers in Christ, these "sheep" will not be regenerated but instead will be restored to the original state of humankind as created by God. At the very end of the age of the millennial kingdom, a part of these restored nations, deceived by the devil, will rebel against the Lord, failing this final dispensational test, and will be consumed by fire (Rev. 20:7-9). The rest, who do not follow Satan in his last act of rebellion and defiance, will be transferred into the new earth to become the nations in the new universe. For eternity these restored peoples will live around the New Jerusalem and walk in its light, and they will be preserved by the healing of the leaves of the tree of life to exist in the created and restored human life forever.

This brings us to a crucial point—the distinction between the sons of God in the New Jerusalem and the restored peoples on the new earth outside the New Jerusalem. We must be clear that the nations on the new earth in eternity will be restored, but they will not be regenerated. This means that although these peoples will exist forever in the realm of eternal life, they will not have eternal life in them; that is, they will not be born of God to have the life and nature of God. Thus, unlike the constituents of the New Jerusalem, the restored nations on the new earth will not have God's life and nature. On the contrary, they will be restored to the original state of man in God's creation, and they will enjoy the blessing of this restoration. Regarding this, Witness Lee speaks clearly:

The nations on the new earth will enjoy the shining of the light of life from the Triune God in the New Jerusalem. They will enter into eternal life and they will be under the shining of eternal life, but they will not have eternal life in them. As the nations enjoy the shining of eternal life, they will bring their glory and honor to the shining New Jerusalem. Whereas the nations will enjoy the shining of eternal life, all the negative, rebellious ones will suffer eternal torment in the lake of fire. (*Conclusion* 2634)

Some believers, including theologians and Bible teachers, conceive of the believers' eternal state merely as a restoration of man's original created state. In their estimation the believers' eternal salvation results not in the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose but merely in an undoing of the fall and a return to an unfallen state of existence. Such will be the eternal existence of the restored nations on the new earth, but it will not be the eternal state of the sons of God, the believers in Christ, in the New Jerusalem. It is a serious mistake, therefore, to confound the restored people on the new earth with the sons of God as the constituents of the New Jerusalem and to regard God's salvation as issuing merely in a return to the unfallen condition of God's original creation. Whereas the restored people, the nations, will live forever in an unfallen condition, the sons of God will be the New Jerusalem.

It is of utmost importance that we have a clear understanding concerning the difference between the restored nations as the peoples of God and the New Jerusalem composed of the regenerated sons of God. As parts of the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth, the believers in Christ will not be the people, the nations, but the sons of God (Rev. 21:7; Rom. 8:14-16; Gal. 3:26; 4:6-7). Whereas the restored nations will not have eternal life in them, we, the sons of God, will have eternal life in us, not only in our regenerated spirit but also in our entire transformed and glorified tripartite being. The sons of God in Revelation 21:7, the components of the New Jerusalem, are those who have been born of God through regeneration (John 1:12-13; 1 Pet. 1:3-4, 23; James 1:18). They are built together through transformation (1 Cor. 3:9-12; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-5; 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23-24). They will be glorified in full to be the corporate expression of the processed and consummated Triune God (Rom. 8:29-30; Heb. 2:10; Rev. 21:11).

A genuine biblical eschatology recognizes that in the new heaven and new earth, there will be both the sons of God and the restored nations. Whereas the sons of God will be regenerated, transformed, and glorified, the nation's will simply be restored to the condition of God's original creation according to God's ordained principles. This means that forever there will be distinction between the sons of God and the restored people. It is an error to teach that we, the regenerated believers in Christ, will resemble the latter when God has ordained that, in His economy, we become the former. Our destiny in God's economy is not to be the restored people on the new earth but to be the God-constituted people in the New Jerusalem. To deepen our understanding of this crucial contrast, let us quote Witness Lee again:

Those who are regenerated, transformed, and glorified will be the components of the New Jerusalem. Today the believers as the members of the Body of Christ are the components of the church, which is both the house of God and the wife of Christ. These components—the regenerated, transformed, and glorified sons of God to be both the house of God and the wife of Christ (Rev. 21:3, 9)—in eternity will eat the tree of life and drink the water of life (Rev. 22:14, 17). The people, the restored nations, however, will not have this enjoyment. To them there will be no more death, sorrow, crying, pain, or curse (21:4; 22:3a). They will be sustained eternally by the leaves of the tree of life (22:2). The sons of God will enjoy the fruit, but the people will enjoy the leaves. The people, therefore, will live on the new earth outside the New Jerusalem and enjoy the common blessings in the new heaven and new earth, whereas the sons of God will dwell in the New Jerusalem, participate in all its enjoyment, serve God and the Lamb (22:3), and reign for eternity (22:5). (2623)

Becoming the New Jerusalem as the Consummation of God's Economy

When believers speak of heaven as their eternal dwelling place, they usually speak of going to heaven or of entering into heaven. We should not apply this concept to the New Jerusalem as the consummation of God's eternal economy. The New Jerusalem is not something "out there" to which we are going; rather, it is something that, in Christ, we are becoming. To be accurate, we will not enter into the New Jerusalem—we will become the New Jerusalem. How will this take place? We will become the New Jerusalem by all the steps of God's organic salvation, salvation in Christ's life (Rom. 5:10): regeneration, sanctification, renewing, transformation, building, conformation, and glorification. The more we experience these steps, the more we become the parts, the constituents, of the New Jerusalem as a corporate person. This is our destiny. Sooner or later, all the believers in Christ, whether in this age or in the coming age, must become the New Jerusalem through the application and experience of God's organic salvation.

A proper understanding of the New Jerusalem as a corporate person and as the ultimate consummation of God's eternal economy is the key to a truly biblical eschatology. God's goal is not to have a heaven populated with happy believers; God's goal is to have the New Jerusalem constituted with glorified, divine sons. God has always had this goal, His beloved eternal, corporate expression, in view, and He has been working toward it and will continue to do so, in all the dispensations within the old creation. In the age before the law and in the age of the law, God was working out the New Jerusalem from within the old creation. In the age of grace, the age of the church and of mystery, God continues to carry out this unique work for His unique goal. Even in the coming age of the millennial kingdom, God will continue His work to build up the New Jerusalem by perfecting the immature, defeated believers and by perfecting the saved and repentant Jews. Eventually, the work will be completed; all negative persons and things will be cast into the lake of fire, the new heaven and new earth will appear, the nations will be restored, and the New Jerusalem will come down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her Husband, the redeeming God. This, we wish to testify, is an accurate and faithful presentation of a biblical eschatology. **LC**

Works Cited

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