

Michelangelo, detail of Sistine Chapel

# Andreascourse 10

End-of-the-world-scenario's and the final judgment.

*The 'Last Days'*

'Be watchful, you don't know at what hour the thief is coming', Jesus once said to his disciples. You find these words in Matthew 24. He reminded them of the 'last days' of this world, just before his return as the glorious King. He announced that there will be a lot of suffering because of wars, and also natural disasters in nature in these last days. False prophets will also appear and they will try to seduce the children of God. There will also be discrimination against and persecution of God's people. Jesus said that another very important sign of the last days is: the Gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed to the whole world. So: 'Be prepared, be watchful', Jesus said, 'who stands firm to the end, will be saved'.

When are these 'last days'? We noticed that the apostle Peter cited the prophet Joel when mentioning the 'last days' (Acts 2:17). Joel – as well as many other prophets connected this with a special day: 'the Day of the Lord', in which God started to collect his final harvest. It was a time of judgment with unexpected events in nature, and a lot of suffering among the nations. It was the time in which God divided the chaff from the wheat, the unrighteous from the righteous. That's why the prophets in the Old Testament called the people to repentance and faith, so that they wouldn't be rejected on the Day of Judgment.

Jesus continued the prophetic message of judgment in Matthew 24 and 25. He announced the final judgment and the great divorce between the people who want to serve Him and those who only want to serve themselves.

*The book of Revelation*

The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, also called the 'Apocalypse', deals with the end times. It is a prophetic book written by the apostle John. It starts with a glorious appearance of the living Lord to John the apostle, who is in exile on the island of Patmos. John meets Christ, not as the suffering Servant, but as the glorious King who will return soon! John is commanded to write seven letters to seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2 and 3). These are moving letters to encourage the congregations and to warn them against seduction and apostasy.

The main part of the book of Revelation is a *prophetic description of the end times*. It is not easy to read and understand. There are horrific scenes. In many visions John sees cruel beasts representing anti-godly powers, like the power of the atheistic state, the power of political propaganda. He also describes the power of idolatry and the power of boundless consumerism. The apocalypse isn't meant to be a script for a horror film, instead it is a book of comfort, showing that the living God is in control, despite all fearful events!

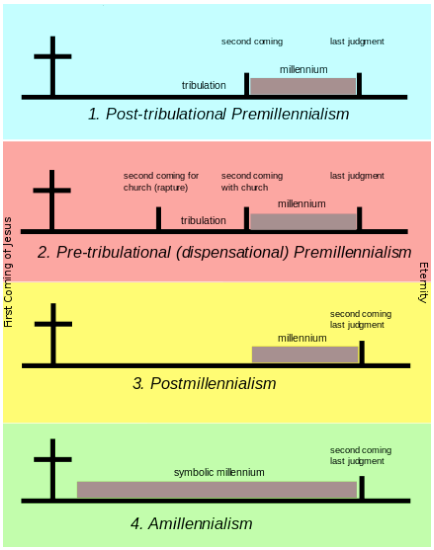


Adoration of the Lamb of God, van Eyck, Ghent, 1432

In chapter 4 and 5 John sees the throne of God in a heavenly vision with the Lamb, representing Jesus who suffered as the lamb that carries away the sins of the world. In following chapters he sees many angels exercising God's judgment on all the evil that has spread itself across the world. Finally God's great enemy, Satan the source of all evil, is captured and conquered, and a new heaven and earth appear. It is a beautifully renewed universe full of joy and full of God's glory. No pain, no suffering, no evil will be found there!

*Different teachings on the Millennium*
Christians of all ages have tried to explain all the details of the visions in the book of Revelation. There are many different opinions about the end times. We will mention two main approaches, dependent on how you see the Millennium:

1. Many Christians say: 'The 'last days' indicate the period that actually started with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This is the last phase of God's salvation plan.' You see the signs: spreading of the Gospel across the globe, suffering by persecution, many wars and disasters, etc. They say: 'we have already been living in the last days already for two thousand years.' They take the Millennium (thousand years of peace because Satan is bound, mentioned in Rev. 20) purely symbolically, as the period of growth and flourishing of the church untill the full measure. They see the 'anti-christs' embodied in emperor Nero who persecuted Christians severely, or in Hitler, who unleashed a most cruel world war, and many other dictators. At the same time the world will come to a full measure of wickedness and be judged and condemned on the day of Christ's return. After this judgement He will bring the new heaven and earth, on which all his people will live with a renewed body.
2. Several other Christians like a more literal explanation of the book of Revelation. They say: 'We still expect the Millennium, a period of a thousand years of peace among the nations and of a blossoming church, before the final return of Christ. This will happen after a time of crisis and tribulation and show a remarkable return of the people of Israel to the living God. Other 'millenialists' say: Christ will return after the period of tribulation and establish his reign of peace on earth. He will govern together with his elect and with a restored Israel. After this Millennium the final judgment will take place. Again others say: Christ will collect all who love him before the great tribulation and bring them to heaven. They call this: 'the great rapture'. Later He will return with them to reign for 1000 years on earth and he will restore the nation of Israel. After that the final judgment will take place.



Comparison of Christian millennial teachings

**We read several parts of the book of Revelation. It needs reflection time and prayer to understand it. Let us not forget to think through what it means to us personally!**

**Day 1** Revelation 4 *Heavenly scene*
- Find a good place and moment to be able to concentrate and to pray.
- (Re) read the passage and write down what strikes you.

- You might have many questions and may not be able to answer them all. Here are some question to help further reflection:
    - It is hardly possible to imagine what Johns sees. He describes the indescribable! Try to identify what is here and how it all adds to the glory of the One on the throne.
    - The vision of John reflects earlier prophetic visions that you can find in the Old Testament, like: Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7. What does it say about God?
    - How are you helped and encouraged to honour the living God by this passage?
- Suggestion for closing in prayer: take time to concentrate on God's greatness and to praise Him for his majesty en glory.

**Day 2** Revelation 5 *The Lamb in the middle*

- Maybe you are very busy today. Still try to find a calm moment in which you concentrate on this part of the Word of God.
- Read and 'chew' on what the apostle John sees here.
- Questions for further meditation
    - The book (scroll) in the hand of the One-on-the-throne is the book of history, describing everything until the end of time. Why, do you think, did John cry when he noticed that the book was closed?
    - How is the Lamb described here? Why is He described like this?
    - How does this passage help you to honour Jesus because of Who He is and what He did?
- Closing prayer: can it be a humble adoration of the beauty of the Lamb of God?

**Day 3** Revelation 13: 1 - 10 *The beast from the sea*

- Ask for God's guidance and wisdom from the Holy Spirit
- Read and reread the passage. Accept that you will not understand everything.
- The beast out of the sea represents the power of the (Roman) empire that persecuted the Christians severely. It is described with prophetic pictures partly deduced from the Daniel the prophet (Daniel 7). The heads of the beast represent kings or emperors. A horn is always a symbol of power. Here are some questions to help further reflection:
    - The beast is inspired by a dragon (symbol of Satan, mentioned in chapter 12). What are the characteristics of this 'evil inspiration' ? Do you recognize some of these today?
    - How does God help the people who suffer because of persecution?
- Closing prayer: ask for understanding of the times, and the political and economic powers that threaten the church of Christ.

**Day 4** Revelation 20 *The millennium and the last judgment*

- Try to find a quiet place and a calm moment to concentrate on God's Word
- (Re)read the chapter. This passage might provoke many questions. Not everything can be explained easily. If you like, you can write down your main questions and bring them to the meeting.
- Questions for further reflection:

- What are the main characteristics of the thousand years as described here?
- Can you imagine that this passage contained a lot of comfort for the first readers (Christians who were persecuted severely)? In which respect, do you think?
- On the final judgment (verses 11-15). Why should there be a final judgment? How can we pass such a judgment?

- Commit yourself to God and pray that you may be written in the book of Life.

**Day 5** Revelation 21: 1-8 *A new heaven and earth*

- Find a good moment during the day to be able to be with the Word of God without disturbance.
- Read and meditate on the passage.
- Questions for deeper reflection:
  - What are the main characteristics of the new world that is described here?
  - What does this passage say about God?
  - How can you be sure that you may partake in this new creation at the end of time?
- Closing prayer: do you want to praise the living God with words that are mentioned here?

City of God, R.Wilson, Stained glass, Eugene, US



**Day 6** Revelation 21: 22 – 22: 5 *The city of God*

- Try to calm down your thoughts and feelings. Maybe you will have or had a busy day. Take time to pray before you start exploring the Bible text.
- Read carefully. If you like, put exclamation marks and questions marks in the text.
- Here are some questions for more reflection.
  - In Revelation 21 John describes a beautiful city, the New Jerusalem. Actually words are too small to describe the reality. Why, do you think, doesn't John see a temple or church in this city?
  - What gives us the right to be an inhabitant of this glorious city?
  - John also sees a life-giving river. What, do you think, does this river symbolize?
  - Does the vision of this new paradise influence our day-to-day work now? Why, or why not?
- To close in prayer: thank God that this world will not finish in chaos and despair. That He will bring a new universe full of Gods presence, full of life, full of joy and full of peace and righteousness. Pray that, because of this, you will do your daily work and studies with growing hope and joy.