

## *Top Ten Things God Has Planned for the Future*

### *1 Thessalonians 4:18*

We have considered some of the top ten lists from the Bible including: top ten reasons to be a Christian; top ten good things to do; top ten sins to avoid. Today we page through the Bible to draft a top ten list of things God has planned for the future. We are all curious about the future because we are personally involved. God's future is also our future.

The list is not necessarily in chronological order because the Bible doesn't always tell the chronology and because some items on this list may overlap with one another. For example, if you were to list the top ten great events in your life you might include education, marriage, a new job, having a baby, moving to Minnesota. There could be lots of overlap because you were married while you were in graduate school and your second child was born during your move to Minnesota. So, don't worry too much about the order of God's future plans. Just be impressed that God has definite plans for all of our tomorrows.

First on the list is an item you may not think even belongs on the list. It is preparation for the future. If we believe God has plans for tomorrow and for eternity and that our part depends on our choice now, we want to be well prepared for what is to come. It is like studying for a test or prepping for a job interview or packing for a long vacation. Getting ready is the all-important prelude to God's future.

Jesus makes a couple of important points in Mark 13:32-33. First, he says that no one knows when predicted events will occur. Second, he says we should be ready whenever they occur. Mark 13:32-33 quotes Jesus as saying, *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come."*

Jesus' clear teaching is that none of us knows in advance when things are going to happen, although that is a clear teaching of Jesus that has been ignored for centuries. In AD 960 a German theologian, Bernard of Thuringa, calculated that the world would end in AD 992. He was so sure and he convinced so

many people that panic swept across Europe. It didn't happen.

On New Year's Eve AD 999 thousands of people packed into St. Peter's Basilica in Rome to pray with Pope Sylvester II because they believed that the end of the age was coming at the stroke of midnight. It didn't happen.

German astrologer Johann Stöffler predicted that an overwhelming flood would occur on February 20, 1524. When it didn't happen he revised his date to 1588. It still didn't happen.

In 1874 Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, predicted the Second Coming of Jesus would occur in 1914. When it didn't happen in 1914 the prediction was changed to "very soon after 1914."

American Herbert W. Armstrong, publisher of The Plain Truth magazine, focused on January 7, 1972. Nostradamus, the famous 16<sup>th</sup> century prognosticator, anticipated a Martian invasion of earth in 1999. And, for those who consider some of these to be ancient nonsense, remember the Y2K

scare that swept across America? Millions of Americans hoarded gas, food and cash in dread of midnight on December 31, 1999.

Jesus was clear that God does not reveal dates. Jesus was equally clear that we need to be ready all the time. Just as you want to save money before a rainy day or learn the Heimlich maneuver before the person next to you is choking, so you want to get ready for God's future plans before they begin.

Number two on the list of things God has planned for the future is the return of Jesus Christ to earth. It is by far one of the most important upcoming events on God's calendar. While there are differences and controversies among Bible scholars about some of the future events, on this there is broad agreement. As Jesus once came to earth as a poor baby visited by shepherds, he will return to earth as a triumphant King for the world to see.

After Jesus' death, resurrection and forty days of appearances he ascended to heaven. Angels ap-

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peared to Jesus' followers who witnessed his ascension and gave a very specific prediction that we find in Acts 1:11, "*Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.*"

Now understand that this is a really big deal. It is a central teaching of Christianity. It is the cornerstone of all biblical prophecy. It has been and is the basis for Christian hope, that no matter how wonderful or painful this life has been, the best is yet to come. Jesus will come back to earth to be reunited with Christians and to judge and rule the world.

This makes a difference in how we live. Anticipation of Jesus' return is a key basis for Christian living. That was pointed out by St. Paul when he wrote in Titus 2:11-14:

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*

Number three on the list is the rapture. Just as the citizens of ancient cities would run to welcome home their conquering king, so Christians will be supernaturally transported to meet Jesus when he returns. It will be a wonderful and unexplainable experience. It's described in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17:

*According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."*

The details are few but the prospect of being on Jesus' "Welcoming Committee" is glorious.

Number 4 is not so glorious although it is on the list of God's top ten plans for the future. It is called the Tribulation. This period is typically calculated to be somewhere in the vicinity of seven years when there will be a great cataclysmic conflict between the forces of good and evil. This is an exponential escalation of what history has previously known. The wars are worse. Bloodshed is enormous. Diseases are awful. It is a battle for the human race. For those then living it will be a terrible ordeal! Jesus describes it in Mark 13:19 saying that "*those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again.*"

Number 5 is resurrection. This is very different from much of the rest of the list. Resurrection is mostly spread out over the future, but it is also part of history. Jesus rose from the dead on Easter and became the prototype for future resurrections.

Those in industry know well that a prototype is a very expensive sample that is built to prove that the technology exists to make millions more. When Jesus came back from the dead God proved it could be done and showed us what to expect for ourselves. It's really amazing.

The Bible predicts life after death. But understand that it is not just bringing back to life this body exactly as it is. It is not resuscitation of the bodies we have now. Nor is it reincarnation—coming back as something else or in someone else's body. Resurrection is different. Resurrection is a new body that is supernaturally cloned off the bodies we have now—although definitely upgraded. Resurrection isn't a point in time event; it will happen at different points along God's future timetable. Here's what it will be like according to St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44:

*So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.*

*If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.*

The week after Easter 2004 the Wooddale Forum sponsored an event featuring a scholar named Dr. Gary Habermas, an authority on resurrection. He

is a PhD who has studied the topic for nearly 35 years and written many books on resurrection. What he didn't tell us when he was here was his own experience.

In 1995 his wife, Debbie, had the flu. When it didn't go away she went for some medical tests. The doctor told her, "You have got some serious problems here." She died four months later of stomach cancer at age 43.

In coming to terms with his wife's death, he moved beyond the historical and theoretical evidence.

He imagined a conversation with God that whenever he asked questions about Debbie's cancer and dying God would say, "Gary, did I raise my Son from the dead?"

"Of course you did, Lord," he would respond. "But why is Debbie dying?"

"Gary, did I raise my Son from the dead?"

"Yes Lord, but . . ."

"Gary, did I raise my Son from the dead?"

Gary Habermas says, "I imagined God repeating the same question until I got his point. There was an answer to Debbie's suffering, even if I didn't know it. If Jesus has been raised, then I can trust that Debbie will be raised too."

Winston Churchill planned his own funeral for St. Paul's Cathedral in London. When the funeral was over and the benediction had been pronounced, a bugler high in the cathedral's dome played Taps, the universal military tune signaling day is done. Then, another bugler elsewhere in the dome of St. Paul's played Reveille, the universal military wake up call.

It's all about number 5 on the list of things God has planned for the future.

Number 6 is the Millennium. This word comes from the French word "mille" which means thousand. The Millennium refers to a future time of one thousand years when peace and prosperity will prevail across the earth and Jesus Christ will directly rule our world. It will be the best of times with true liberty and justice for all. The kingdom of God will control our earth.

This amazing ten century period is hinted at in the Old Testament but is specifically described at the very end of the Bible. It is graphic language with lots

of symbolism telling what happens after the Tribulation and how the Millennium happens. John says in Revelation 20:1-4:

*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 anymore until the*

*thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.*

*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.*

Number 7 is judgment. It is in the courtroom of God where humans and history are judged and eternal consequences are announced.

It's interesting to know what Americans think about the judgment of God to come. According to a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll of adults over age 18, 79% of Americans say that "there will be a day when God judges whether you go to heaven or hell."

That day is described in 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 open. 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 death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The*

***It is in the courtroom of God where humans and history are judged and eternal consequences are announced.***

*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.*

Number 8 on this list is heaven. Actually, heaven already exists as the home of God. While it is true that God is omnipresent, that he is everywhere, there is one place that he lists as his address—the place he calls home—and that is heaven. Heaven is the promise of God to all those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sin and eternal life that they will get to be with God forever.

This heaven is better than anything we could ever imagine. Typically we take the best of everything we now know and extrapolate that into the future and say that's what heaven must be like. But heaven is the best God can design. And the truth is that Christians are designed for heaven. We will be a perfect fit for the heaven God has created. We'll be right at home!

Jesus talked about heaven, promising that he will have it ready when we get there. In John 14:1-3 Jesus is quoted as saying:

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”*

Number 9 on our list is hell. Just as heaven is on our list, so must hell get equal time and place. Hell is the eternal destiny of those who do not believe. Hell is forever without God. Hell is death that lasts for eternity.

While most Americans seem to assume they will go to heaven no matter what, the belief in hell is amazingly strong.

Dr. Maurice Rawlings, a cardiologist at the University of Tennessee, and his colleagues interviewed more than 300 people who reported near-death experiences in the hospital emergency room. These interviews took place immediately after the near-death experiences occurred, unlike other studies with interviews long after the near-death experiences.

Rawlings found that nearly 50% of those interviewed reported images of fire, torment and sights that were far from what you would expect to see in heaven. However, in follow-up interviews months and years later Rawlings' colleagues found that many

of these people changed their stories. What they later reported in their near-death experiences was much more positive and pleasant. Apparently they felt it was too painful to tell their family, relatives and even researchers what they had actually experienced.

Dr. Rawlings says, “Just listening to these patients has changed my life. There is a life after death, and if I don't know where I am going, it is not safe to die.”

Number 10 and last on the top ten list is a new heaven and a new earth. The Bible anticipates that one day our world will die and God will replace it with a new earth and a new heaven that are far better. It will become everything God originally intended—like the Garden of Eden—only better! 2 Peter 3:13 says that *“in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”*

Our family purchased the movie “Miracle” on DVD. It is the story of Minnesotan Herb Brooks and the upset victory of the USA Olympic Hockey Team over the Soviet Union in Lake Placid, New York. I was caught up in the tension. I anxiously watched every play and player. There were moments when I was scared that Team USA might lose. Then I thought, “Hey, I haven't seen this before, but I know how it ends. It wouldn't be a movie if we lost. We're going to win.” I didn't know all the details or exactly how it was going to happen, but I knew that in the end the USA was going to win.

It's the same with God's future predictions whether there are one or ten or more. Watching history unfold we can get kind of nervous and worried. We don't know the details or exactly what is going to happen, but we know the end—and God's going to win!”

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