

Lesson Plan & Study Guide



Exploring Spirituality:

Human Destiny

Meeting with Jesus

iFOLLOW

The iFollow Discipleship Series



About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

Curriculum Development: The iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition curriculum development was lead by the **Center for Creative Ministry**. **General Editor:** Monte Sahlin; **Assistant Editor:** Debbonnaire Kovacs; **Directional Advisory:** Brad Forbes, Carole Kilcher, Ceri Myers, Cesar Gonzalez, Clayton Kinney, Curtis Rittenour, Dave Osborne, Dave VanDenburgh, Gerry Chudleigh, Jane Thayer, Jerry Thomas, John Appel, Jose Rojas, Kim Johnson, Nicole Chao, Paul Richardson, Rich DuBose, Shasta Nelson, William Sutton; **Pastoral Advisory:** Claudio Consuegra, Collette Pekar, Dave Hutman, Don Driver, Fredrick Russell, Jerry Nelson, Jesse Wilson, Leslie Bumgardner, Loren Fenton, Rebecca Brillhart; **Unit Authors:** Alberto Valenzuela, Althea Pineda, Corienne Hay, Debbonnaire Kovacs, Ed Dickerson, Gianluca Bruno, Gil Bahnsen, Greg Nelson, Jack Calkins, James Whibberding, Karen Collum, Monte Sahlin, Norma Sahlin, Pam Splawinski, Patty Ntihuka, Reinder Bruinsma, Ryan Bell; **Additional contribution** by Maria Ovando-Gibson; **Additional editing:** Dave Gemmell, Meredith Carter; **Graphic Design:** Mind Over Media; **Layout:** Paul D. Young; **Web Development:** Narrow Gate Media.

License

iFollow Discipleship Pastor's Edition is produced by the NAD Church Resource Center for use by Seventh-day Adventist Congregations in Bermuda, Candada, and the United States. Churches may freely copy the lessons and PowerPoints for use within their congregations. Any other usage is prohibited without prior written consent from the NAD Church Resource Center. iFollow Discipleship, Copyright 2010, the North American Division Corporation of Seventh-day Adventists. NAD Church Resource Center, 12501 Old Columbia pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, 301-680-6339.



iFOLLOW

www.ifollowdiscipleship.org

Human Destiny

This is material that can be used to create a presentation designed for people who have not yet come to a point in their spiritual journey where they have decided to become a follower of Jesus.

Learning Objectives

1. Get a basic overview of eschatology or “end times”
2. Understand two basic streams of Christian eschatology
4. Explain how humanity is moving in a direction
3. Understand that humanity has a purpose and an end of the story

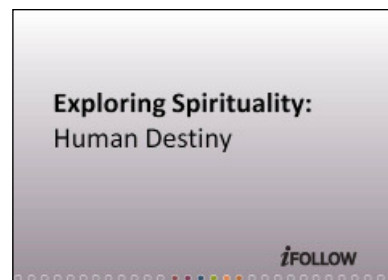
Content Outline

- A. What is Eschatology?
- B. Two Streams of Christian Eschatology
- C. Eschatology of Hope
- D. The Coming of God in Four Movements
- E. Living with the Absence of God
- F. Signs of the Future

Background Material for the Presenter

Eschatology is the study of the end of history and the world as we know it. It relates to the ultimate destiny of humanity. It is from two the Greek words; eschatos, meaning “last” and logy, meaning “the study of.”

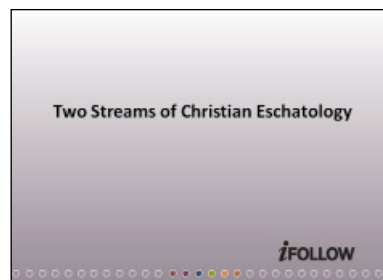
In Christian theology, eschatology is the study of the religious beliefs concerning the future, final events or the “end times,” as well as the ultimate purpose(s) of the world, of mankind, and the Church. Eschatology refers to doctrine about the destiny of all things. In a Christian context, this inquiry is vested in prophesy and the purposes of God as documented in the Bible. Another way to look



at eschatology is “the coming of God,” because in Christian theology, the coming of God is the decisive event that signals the end of an age and the beginning of a new age.

Two Streams of Christian Eschatology

In this unit we consider eschatology in the most basic sense, as it would relate to a person who is not (yet) a follower of Jesus. That is, the person you are conversing with has not made any commitment to follow Christ. Therefore the approach of this lesson will be specifically directed toward that kind of spiritual seeker. While we will discuss specific theological categories to provide background information for the presenter, it is not necessary for you to pass this information on to your conversation partner or group.



The subject of eschatology is a touchy one. As a presenter you will need to tread lightly. Especially in the United States, the subject of eschatology has been deeply politicized. Views about end time events have become the subject of foreign policy debates. This should not really be a surprising development. It might even be said that all wars have been fought over competing views of eschatology, especially if eschatology can be broadened to its secular sense. That is, all wars are fought over competing visions of “the end of humanity” or the purpose or destiny to which humanity is or should be moving.

Because of the current social and political environment, especially in North America, many nonbelievers are very skeptical about grand visions of the end of the world, especially as those visions entail widespread destruction and bloodshed. There skepticism is not a bad thing. Many of the views widely published are not what God has in mind. Post-modern people in particular need a different way to come at a conversation about “ends,” or the destiny toward which humanity is moving. Many people will no doubt have images of world-wide destruction in their mind when they hear about end-times because some Christians have for so long spoken in those terms. Many people wonder, “If God loves the world so much, why is He so bent on destroying it?”

In order to broaden the conversation about eschatology, especially for the person who is not committed to following Jesus, it is important to understand two main streams of Christian eschatology. These are broad categories that include many specific, detailed approaches. One is an eschatology that focuses on escape. The other is an eschatology that focuses on hope.

iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Meeting with
Jesus

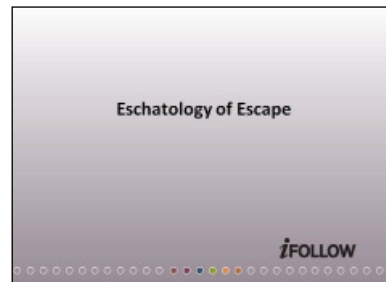
Action Plan
& Presenter
Notes

Exploring
Spirituality:
Human
Destiny

2

Eschatology of Escape

In this category are all those views that are more or less rooted in a fundamental assumption that the world as we know it today is completely **discontinuous** with the world as it will be when the Kingdom of God is fully restored. It is, in the words of N. T. Wright, “a different world altogether, a world where we really belong, where everything is indeed put to rights, a world into which we can escape in our dreams in the present and hope to escape one day for good—but a world which has little purchase on the present world except that people who live in this one sometimes find themselves dreaming of that one.” (Wright 2006, p. 9)



This view seems to be supported by texts such as 2 Peter 3:10: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”

This view is built on a binary **assumption** that posits a bad world and a good heaven, which drains away all the theological motivation for making the world we actually live in a better place. Why “do justice and love mercy” (Micah 6:8) if the world as we know it is going to perish completely and be abandoned for a place called heaven? The only answer that can be given from within this paradigm is that these actions will hopefully be useful in persuading a person to make certain theological commitments so they, too, can escape to heaven.

Secular and religious people today have an internal compulsion to do good in the world. Most of us know the world is not as it should be. Most of us feel a desire to “do something” to make people’s lives more livable. With millions and millions of people ravaged by curable and manageable disease, senseless wars, and lack of access to the basic necessities of life, and with our very planet being threatened by environmental decay, there is a calling within a person’s very being to do right in the world. (More about this below.)

But if the world and all that is in it is going to perish, then what motivation do we have to work for good in the world? Indeed, many in our society see Christians as part of the problem precisely because of their eschatological commitments. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf writes, “Belief in the eschatological annihilation and responsible social involvement are logically compatible. But they are theologically inconsistent. The expectation of the eschatological destruction of the world is not consonant with the belief in the goodness of creation: what God will annihilate must either be so bad that it is not possible to be redeemed or so insignificant that it is not worth being redeemed. It is hard to believe in the intrinsic value and goodness of something that God will completely annihilate.

And without a theologically grounded belief in the intrinsic value and goodness of creation, positive cultural involvement hangs theologically in air. Hence Christians who await the destruction of the world (and conveniently refuse to live a schizophrenic life)

iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Meeting with
Jesus

Action Plan
& Presenter
Notes

Exploring
Spirituality:
Human
Destiny

3

shy away as a rule - out of theological, not logical, consistency - from social and cultural involvement. Under the presupposition that the world is not intrinsically good, the only theologically plausible justification for cultural involvement would be that such involvement diminishes the suffering of the body and contributes to the good of the soul (either by making evangelism possible or by fostering sanctification). Comfort, skill, or beauty - whether it is the beauty of the human body or of some other object - could have no more intrinsic value than does the body itself; they could be merely a means to some spiritual end. (Volf, 90-91; emphasis in original)

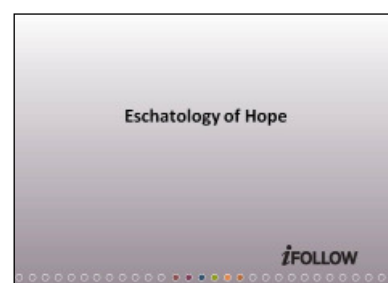
A certain view of the eschatology known as dispensationalism, including theories of the rapture, have been thrust into the public consciousness due to the incredibly popular Left Behind novels. In some cases this has given rise to Christian Zionism. Most nonbelievers do not realize that this approach is a minority opinion among Christians. Most Christians do not believe in dispensationalism.

As N. T. Wright points out in his most recent book, *Surprised by Hope*, the idea of “going to heaven” as the final destination of the redeemed is an invention of medieval theology, supported by a variety of modern theories. The Bible teaches that the earth is our home. In fact the Bible states that the earth will be God’s home as well (Revelation 21:1-4). It is in this sense that eschatology with an emphasis on “going to heaven” and escaping this evil world makes a crucial mistake. Our final home is not heaven, but earth. And God is not ultimately destroying the earth, but restoring and renewing it. The fact is that the Biblical narrative is a story of redemption and restoration.

Eschatology of Hope

A presentation of an eschatology of hope can begin with the text of scripture itself. One of the clearest statements about God’s future for creation is in Romans 8: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:19-25)

Here Paul depicts the entire creation groaning in agony, subject to futility, and literally rotting in the results of sin. But Paul also says the same creation also lives in **hope**, “hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom



of the glory of the children of God.”

We all live together in this hope of redemption, not just of our spirits or souls, but of our bodies. The entire physical creation is being redeemed and renewed by God and this is our hope. The Spirit of God is the down payment on this future redemption. So, we, along with the creation, wait in patience.

In contrast to an eschatology of escape or annihilation, the Bible pictures not so much a new earth as a **renewed** earth. God is renewing his creation. One of the factors that contributes to this confusion is the passage from 2 Peter 3:10 quoted above. What we often forget to consider is the different ways that fire functions. Fire is useful in purification, not just annihilation. (As a matter of fact, *pur* is the Greek for “fire.”) We often see the destructive role of fire rather than the purifying role of fire. But consider this passage from the same Bible author: “These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” (1 Peter 1:7)

Here, the fire of God purifies and cleanses rather than destroys. Dross is burned up, the pure gold remains. This is more consistent with the whole narrative of God’s work to reconcile all creation to Himself.

The important point to notice is that this vision of the future—this eschatology of hope—still involves a power outside of ourselves. It is God’s fire. The question is not whether or not God will intervene in human history to fully accomplish His purpose. The question is what kind of action will God take in human affairs? The answer that scripture presents is one of restoration, reconciliation, repair and healing. These concepts are the opposite of wanton destruction and annihilation. Nevertheless, some things are consumed by the fire. The part that is not gold, the part that is not consistent with God’s good and peaceful kingdom, will perish in order that God’s good creation can be restored.

The practical result of this is two-fold. On the one hand, we cannot disregard the world as something disposable, something that will perish anyway. Keeping our eye on the beginning of the story we remember that God created a good world. His good creation has been corrupted and abused and, according to Paul’s statement above, held in “bondage to decay.” But it is good nonetheless and God is intent on restoring it. On the other hand, we cannot fix what is wrong with God’s creation ourselves. It will take power outside of human effort to accomplish God’s redemption. It is this tension that is the heart of Adventist eschatology. The world is not disposable, like a used-up bag from which the important contents have been removed. But neither is the human race ultimately capable of a final solution to sin and decay. We act today in harmony with that which we believe, our hope. We act in hope now, knowing that God will complete God’s work of healing His creation. From a human perspective then, we neither take ourselves too seriously (reasoning that we are the answer and that ours is the moment in history) nor do we disregard our role in God’s work (reasoning that God will do whatever God will do, and we are free to pursue our own selfish gain). Instead, we are enlisted, as citizens of God’s kingdom, to do

now what we anticipate. We are invited to act now in hope, witnessing to the world that will one day be here in fullness.

This tension is sometimes expressed as the “now and not yet” nature of God’s kingdom. This language—“now and not yet”—arises from the fact that some scripture speaks as though the kingdom is present now. Other passages speak of God’s kingdom as something off in the future. One helpful way of looking at this apparent paradox while doing justice to the whole narrative is that Jesus, particularly by His resurrection, inaugurated a new age that has yet to come fully to fruition. Jesus’ resurrection, in other words, marks the beginning of the end (goal, purpose toward which history is moving) but we still look forward to the end of the end. So we see signs of God’s kingdom all around us. The Bible writers are careful to say that the kingdom is “at hand,” never “in hand.” We don’t have the kingdom. Nor can we “bring in the kingdom” by our own strength or organizational abilities. Rather we are called to enter and serve God’s kingdom and in so doing bear witness to the way the whole world will one day be.

To close this section on the eschatology of escape vs. the eschatology of hope, we should note one very important point, which highlights why the subject of eschatology is so important. It is this: **if we get the end of the story mixed up, we won’t know how to live in the story now. How we enter the narrative of God’s redemption today depends on where we think this story is going.** Eschatology is a conversation about understanding the end of the story. So, even though eschatology is the study of end times, it is really a matter of first importance.

The Coming of God in Four Movements

This section can be used as is for a presentation to people who have not yet come to the point in their spiritual journey where they have decided to be a follower of Jesus. Gender issues in speaking of God have been avoided as much as possible.

Eschatology talks about the coming of God. Another word for “coming” that we sometimes use in theology is the word “advent.” Advent literally means “coming” or “arrival.” While eschatology, both the word and the field of study, speaks about issues of the end, in Christian theology this end is always occasioned by the arrival of God, the coming of God into human affairs, in the realm of time and space.

Understood in this way there is an advent character to the whole Bible. All talk about God in scripture relates to God’s self-revelation and desire to be with His beloved creation.

Notice that in the grand sweep of the Bible narrative the coming of God to our world happens in four movements, or three acts of a play and then the final curtain. Although, this would be one of those stories that does not say “the end” on the last frame of the movie, but “the beginning,” or “the New Earth,” to quote Revelation 21. (Though many

iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Meeting with
Jesus

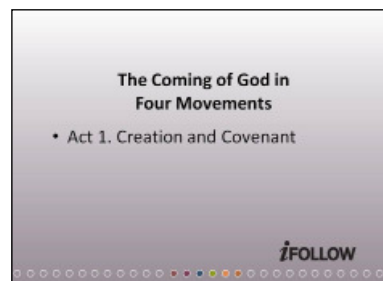
Action Plan
& Presenter
Notes

Exploring
Spirituality:
Human
Destiny

6

have described eschatology in similar ways, we are indebted to Dr. John Webster, dean of the School of Theology at La Sierra University, though he is in no way responsible for our formulation and adaptation of his thoughts here.)

Act 1. Creation and Covenant: In the beginning God created a perfect world and placed in it two human beings, created in God's own image; a man and a woman who would enjoy God's continual presence. They would reflect God's character and glory in the world and be God's active agents in the creation.



After Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, Genesis 3:8 wistfully records what the reader can only assume was a regular occurrence in the garden of Eden, "When the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden."

Here was God walking and talking with Adam and Eve. They enjoyed the unfettered and unmediated presence of God. They and all creation were in perfect harmony with God, the Creator, whose personal presence was with them. This creation was good and perfect, in the sense that all parts of God's creation operated in harmony.

After the man and woman sinned against God by not trusting, God's immediate presence was withdrawn and an angel was posted to guard the Tree of Life. This clearly signaled a serious and significant loss. Without God's intervention, the creation was in peril. But God did intervene, instituting the covenant, God's promise to restore the original creation order of peace and harmony. One day, God promised, there would be no death or sorrow and any kind of evil in the world any more. The covenant was expressed and repeated through the ages by God's faithful representatives; prophets, priests, poets and philosophers. Their writings comprise the Hebrew Scriptures.

God was also present with God's people in worship. Both the movements and rituals of worship and also the physical geography and articles of worship carried a tangible sense of God's presence. Nowhere was this more powerfully seen than in the *shekinah* presence that dwelt in the Most Holy Place of the wilderness tabernacle above the ark of the covenant. Inside the ark were also symbols of God's presence: the Ten Commandments, written with God's own finger, a bowl of manna which was God's direct act of feeding the people in the wilderness, and Aaron's rod that budded, a sign of God's direct leadership of God's people. Indeed, the very word *shekinah* means "presence of God" or "dwelling of God." Embodied in the liturgy of Israel was God's real presence. So real was this presence that people met their end when they trifled with it. One can recall Uzzah, who reached out and touched the ark to steady it as it was being carried and died instantly. (1 Chronicles 13:9-10) When the ark was in its usual place, inside the wilderness tabernacle, no one was allowed to go into the Most Holy Place, where it was kept, except for the High Priest, and even then, only once per year on the Day of Atonement. During the rest of the year

iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Meeting with
Jesus

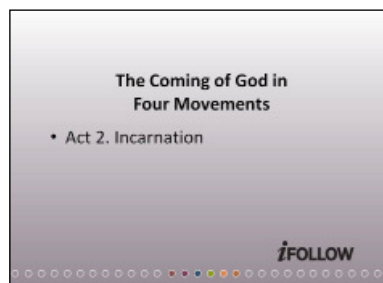
Action Plan
& Presenter
Notes

Exploring
Spirituality:
Human
Destiny

7

the blood of the animal sacrifices was sprinkled in the tabernacle outside the curtain between the Holy and Most Holy. All of this signifies how real was God's presence with God's people in their wilderness journey. There was a corresponding absence of God when the *shekinah* was no longer present among the Israelites. (for example, 1 Samuel 4)

Act 2. Incarnation: The most striking revelation of God's presence happened in the birth of Christ, which Christians understand to be the incarnation of God in human flesh. This is, of course, saying a mouthful. What we mean is that God is uniquely revealed in the person of Jesus, whom Christians call, the Christ, or the "anointed one," the Messiah. He is both 100 percent God and 100 percent human. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. Matthew relates the story in this way:



This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

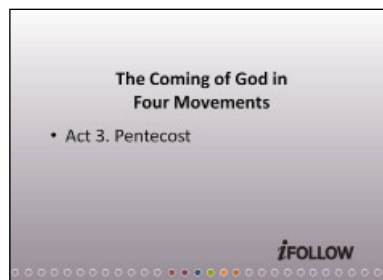
All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us." (Matthew 1:18-23)

Matthew considers the birth of Jesus to be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah (7:14) that Messiah would be born of a virgin. And notice what He is called Immanuel, which means God with us. This is why the birth of Jesus, as the God-Man is often called the First Advent or First Coming. But as we've seen, this isn't entirely true. God has appeared to people in various ways in times past although only now has God spoken to us by God's Son coming to live with us (Heb 1:1-2).

This coming of God is called "Incarnation" and its effect is reconciliation. The coming of God in Jesus the Christ, His subsequent life, death and resurrection, achieved reconciliation for all humanity.

Act 3. Pentecost: Forty days after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples are faced with the **absence** of Jesus/God. His final words to his followers are recorded in first chapter of Acts:

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you



at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “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.” (Acts 1:6-11)

With the ascension of Jesus and consequent absence of God came a pair of promises. First, Jesus repeated His promise that with His departure they would not be left alone, but the Holy Spirit would come to them. (See also John 14-17.) Second, the angels promise that the “same Jesus” who ascended into the heavens will “come back in the same way you have seen him go” into the heavens.

The first of these promises is fulfilled ten days later on the Jewish Day of Pentecost (or *Shavuot*). “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” (Acts 2:1-4)

The purpose of the coming of the Holy Spirit was multifaceted, according to Jesus’ teaching. The Holy Spirit, understood by Christian theology to be the third person of the Godhead, would comfort and guide the followers of Jesus in his absence. The Spirit would be the presence of Jesus to his people. The Spirit would instruct them, remind them of what Jesus taught them, give them words to speak, and lead them into all truth.

The second promise, made by the two angels on the day of Jesus’ ascension, points us to the fourth movement of the advent of God in history, the Consummation.

The Consummation: This fourth and final coming of God is what many Christians and non-Christians alike think of and frequently refer to as the Second Coming or Second Advent. It is second to Jesus’ incarnation as His first appearing. But if we look at the whole sweep of Christian history we see that this is the fourth major movement of what could be described as God’s unrelenting effort to restore creation to its’ original beauty and perfection.



The final coming of God is to once and for all establish God’s reign on earth. (Where one places the millennium in this process is a conversation for another time and another unit

in this series.) In the broad view, God's ultimate plan is to restore Earth to its original, pristine condition and set up His kingdom here and reign on earth. God's final coming achieves this restoration. What was spoken of by the prophets, inaugurated by Jesus, will be finally complete. All wrongs are put to right. All injustice is eradicated. Sin is no more. Sorrow and crying are gone.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their Father. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. ... I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.'" (Revelation 21:1-3, 22)

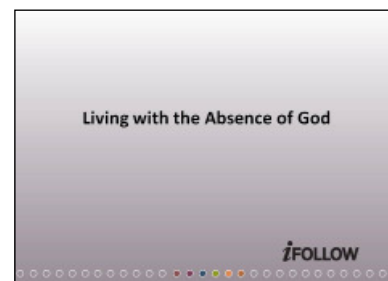
Notice that "now the dwelling of God is with humanity" and in verse 22, there is no temple in the city. Remember, the temple was the way God has mediated divine presence to human beings throughout history. The temple was the dwelling place of God among people. It was a way of mediating and even moderating God's powerful presence. But now, in the consummation, no mediation is necessary. God lives directly among God's people.

Living with the Absence of God

The flip side of any theology of God's presence is the existential reality of God's absence. In talking with people who are not yet committed followers of Jesus there will most likely be a deep sense of God's absence, if indeed this sense of absence can be understood as "God" at all.

The worst thing a Christian could try to do is deny this sense of absence or explain it away as though it only seems like God's absence. The first thing we must do is honestly acknowledge that the experience of the absence of God is real and palpable at times. If we are honest we will recognize this ache in our hearts as well. Questions about why God doesn't act to spare innocent people from terrible events are only one example of the sense of God's absence.

Being Adventists in the most general sense of the word means being people who live in hope; people who live in the midst of the tension between the presence and absence of God. This tension captures very well one of Jesus' final discourses with the disciples. In John 16:16-24 Christ told His disciples, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then



after a little while you will see me.” The passage continues:

Some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by saying, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,’ and ‘Because I am going to the Father?’” They kept asking, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don’t understand what he is saying.” Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, “Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me’? I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

Notice the disciples’ confusion about the presence and absence of Jesus. Jesus says “you will see me no more” (absence). Then He says “you will see me” (presence). What is going on here? In answer to these questions Jesus uses the metaphor of birth pains. There is severe pain in child birth, but once the baby is born, the mother forgets all about the pain because of her joy in the new child. Jesus also gives a double answer about His presence in this chapter, referring both to the coming of the Holy Spirit and His own physical return.

Christian life—indeed, life in general—is an exercise in living with the presence and absence of God. This is why the Bible speaks of Christians living in hope and anticipation and admonishing the vital and active spiritual discipline of “waiting.” (See Matthew, chapters 24 and 25)

Finally, we should recognize that the sense of God’s absence is potentially an evidence of God’s presence. The longing for a thing is an indicator that the thing itself exists, at some level. A sense of loneliness speaks powerfully of the reality of companionship and friendship. Emptiness means that there is fullness, both a space to be filled and something with which to fill the space.

In most people’s personal experience they can recognize that indeed the sense of God’s absence was in fact a sign of his presence. As the presenter you can share your personal testimony in this regard.

Signs of God’s Future

These preceding sections are background material about some ways of approaching eschatology that may help you communicate about this important topic with a secular person or one with a postmodern worldview, a person who is incredibly suspicious of

end-of-the-world scenarios. So, rather than emphasize a view of the end of time which is focused on getting one's self out of here safely and to a "better place," you can speak about God's "ends" in terms of healing a broken creation and our privilege to be a part of this process by working for justice, peace and fairness in the world.

But even this may be too advanced a place for a person to begin. What if the person to whom you are speaking seems to have no basis for understanding God whatsoever? Imagine that your friend is a self-professed atheist but is nevertheless interested in why you believe that there is a God. More to the point, let's say your friend is curious about two specific things. First, she wants to know, "Why do you believe that your God, who you say created a perfect world but somehow let the whole thing fall apart, wants to destroy the whole thing in an apocalyptic ball of fire?" Second, she wants to know what this belief has to do with the reality of life today.

You have some resources above to suggest that not every Christian believes in some of the popularized Christian notions of an eternal lake of fire, the annihilation of all creation (rather than purification by fire), etc. But in closing (and perhaps this is the place we should start with some individuals) here are some ways you can suggest to your friend that she might sense, in N.T. Wright's memorable phrase, "echoes of a voice." This voice speaks about the way the world should be.

1. Justice: There are two realities that are important here: First, our innate impulse to fairness, goodness and justice, and second, the promise of God to put the world to rights.

Every human being who pauses long enough to consider the point, knows that the world is out of kilter. The human race is out of joint. Things are not right. When children in Uganda, for example, are armed and told to shoot and kill other people in a war they are not capable of understanding, you don't need to be super spiritual or religious to know that's simply not right. When people die of starvation, from lack of clean water, or from preventable, curable diseases, it is not right. When wars of ethnic cleansing are fought, we intuitively know this is terribly wrong. The question is, where does this intuition come from?

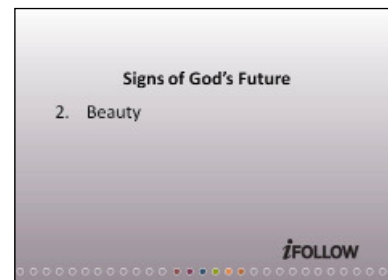
People all over the world, regardless of their religious affiliation, if any, are working to solve some of the greatest problems the human race has ever faced. Why is it that we all want the world to be made right but we can't seem to do it? Even more disturbing, why is it that more often than not know I know what I should do about these issues, but I don't do it?

One more disturbing question: Why do Christians sometimes use their faith as an excuse **not** to be involved in putting the world to rights? When we see that happening we can almost be sure that a faulty eschatology is at work. But, by the same token, the echo of a voice in the heart of each person is, whether they realize it or not, reaching out after a God-given vision of the way the world should be.



By beginning with a passion for justice to be done on earth, we can begin to understand the eschatological prayer of Jesus: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:10) The desire for justice is a desire for the kingdom of God. The longing in our hearts for fairness and peace and right is a longing for our internal sense of the way the world should be. This is the seed of God’s kingdom that is planted in every person’s heart.

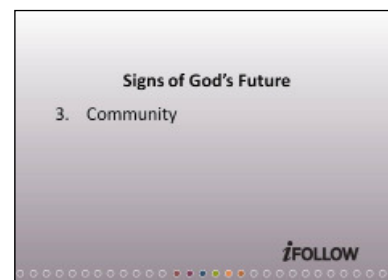
2. Beauty: Another “echo” is in the realm of beauty. N.T. Wright writes, “This is the position we are in when confronted by beauty. The world is full of beauty, but the beauty is incomplete. Our puzzlement about what beauty is, what it means, and what (if anything) it is there for is the inevitable result of looking at one part of a larger whole. Beauty, in other words, is another echo of a voice—a voice which (from the evidence before us) might be saying one of several different things, but which, were we to hear it in all its fullness, would make sense of what we presently see and hear and know and love and call ‘beautiful.’” (Wright, 2006, 40)



The beauty that we see in the world—in people, relationships, nature, music, art, children—is not equal to God or even necessarily an accurate picture of God. Just as a desire for justice sometimes misdirects people into violence (one of the great paradoxes), so beauty fades and misleads, because it is incomplete.

But the point that can be perceived is that in the mind of the Creator, the original masterpiece still exists. Though we don’t see the complete picture—just shadows—the beauties we perceive around us are like signposts, pointing to something greater. And they point to the beauty that will one day arrive when God the Creator rescues, heals, restores and completes the beautiful creation.

3. Community: Like justice and beauty, relationship—the longing for community—is an “echo of a voice.” And, like beauty and justice, relationships are not uncomplicated. Indeed, they are perhaps one of the most complicated features of being human. But this is also an echo. We were created for each other, to live for something beyond ourselves.



There is a deep longing in the human heart to know and be known. This is confused with lust and sex. People end up exploited and broken, but the longing for true love—the love and be loved—is undeniable, and points toward a reality that, once again, lives just out of reach.

Much more could be said about all three of these categories, and others, but this will give the presenter some idea of how to go about engaging in conversations, whether through public speaking, lecture, small group or one-to-one conversation, about the way the world ought to be. This sense of how the world ought to be is a sign of the eternal that

God has placed in every heart.

Intuitively we know that humanity has a destiny; that we were created for more than our own selfish pleasure. This intuition is an opportunity to introduce people to what the Bible says God has in mind for creation, a plan to restore God's whole creation to its original beauty and to eradicate sin and pain and brokenness once and for all.

Handouts in this Package

1. The Coming of God in Four Movements
2. Signs of God in a Broken World



iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Meeting with
Jesus

Action Plan
& Presenter
Notes

Exploring
Spirituality:
Human
Destiny

Additional Resources

Hill, Craig C. (2002). *In God's Time: The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Lewis, C. S. (2001). *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins.

McLaren, Brian (2003). *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Moltmann, Jurgen (1996). *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Paulien, Jon (1994). *What the Bible Says About the End Time*. Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association.

Wright, N.T. (1999). *The Challenge of Jesus: Recovering Who Jesus Was and Is*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.

Wright, N.T. (2006). *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Wright, N.T. (2008). *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*. New York: HarperOne.

iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Meeting with
Jesus

Action Plan
& Presenter
Notes

Exploring
Spirituality:
Human
Destiny

15

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the opinions concerning the destiny of the world or humanity to which you have been exposed? Do you have an opinion?
2. Why does it matter what we think about the end? What difference, if any, does it make to our daily lives?
3. This presentation makes the claim that the whole Bible is about God “coming” into the world in four movements: Creation, Incarnation, Pentecost, and the Consummation. Has this opened up to you any new ideas or insights?
4. What are some ways that you try to deal with the “presence and absence” of God?
5. Do you agree that the presence of the desire for justice, beauty, and community in the world suggest a Creator? Why or why not?

Group Activities

Purpose: To make real and tangible the difference it makes to have “an eschatology of hope.”

Preparation: Find a place in your area that acts in practical ways for peace and justice in the world. It could be a soup kitchen, a Habitat for Humanity project, an Earth Day event, or even a sit-in or march about some issue of justice or morality. Make arrangements for your group to volunteer for a day or an afternoon.

Assignment: Before or after the group does this project, discuss it very specifically in light of the two kinds of eschatology—escape or hope. What difference will it make, if any, to the actual actions of feeding people or helping to build a house? What difference, if any, will it make to the attitudes of those doing the acting? What difference, if any, will it make to the attitudes of those being helped? It might be best to have this discussion both before and after your volunteer work. After the project, the discussion could begin with sharing any ideas, responses, or emotions raised by the experience.

Time: Will vary depending on what you do and what schedules participants have. You will probably need at least half a day. Usually projects of this kind take an entire day.

iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Meeting with
Jesus

Group
Activities

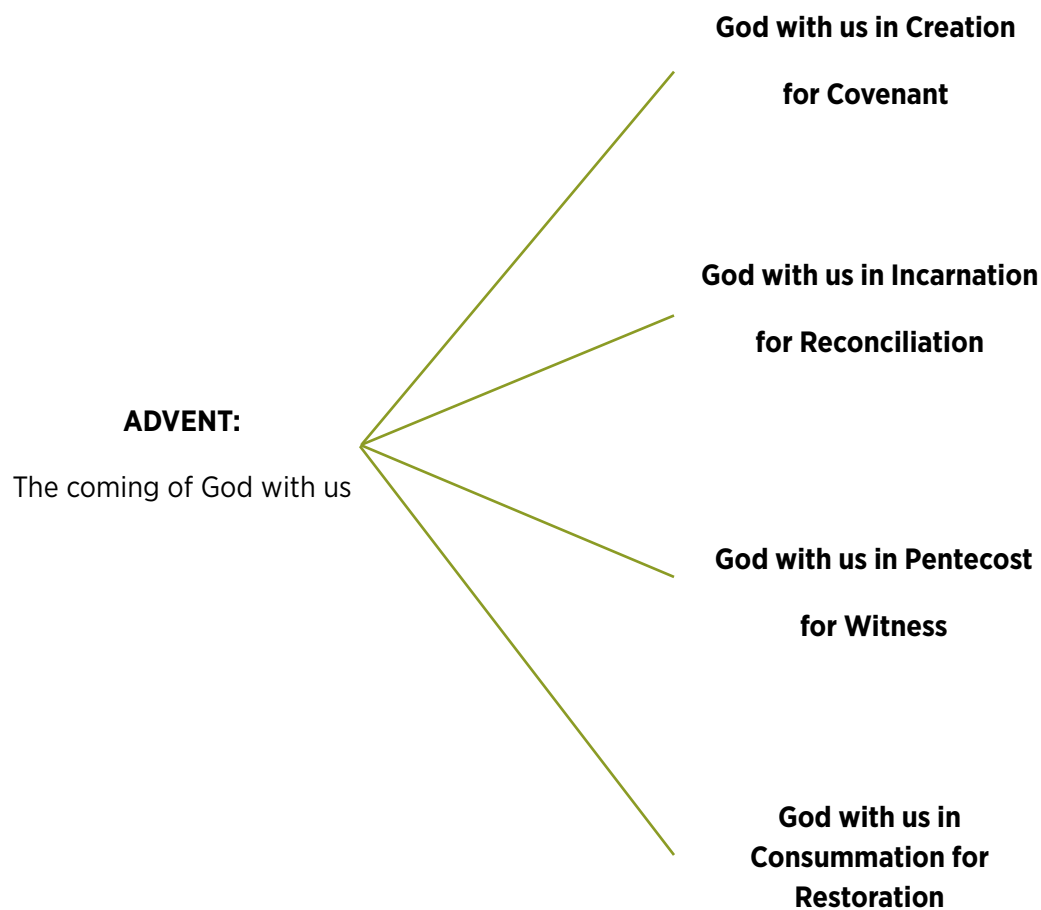
Exploring
Spirituality:
Human
Destiny

17

Handout 1

The Coming of God in Four Movements

There is one advent (coming of God) in scripture, expressed in four movements throughout human history. Like acts of a play, God's coming to restore creation and put all wrongs right develops over time. All expressions of the advent of God are pieces of the larger purpose of God to restore creation.



iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Meeting with
Jesus

HANDOUT

**Exploring
Spirituality:**
Human
Destiny

Handout 2

Signs of God in a Broken World

1. Justice

2. Beauty

3. Community

iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Meeting with
Jesus

HANDOUT

**Exploring
Spirituality:**
Human
Destiny