



Spiritual Due Diligence

Exploring questions of eternal significance

Study 8 End Times and Eternity

presented by Links Players International

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Spiritual Due Diligence

Introduction to this study

WHEN A MAN OR WOMAN CONSIDERS making a significant financial investment, they normally do not rush into the decision. Rather, they begin a process commonly known as due diligence—a gathering of facts and considerations that will allow them to judge rightly whether this investment is appropriate for them.

Of course, due diligence does not guarantee success. However, if an investment fails and we ask the investors whether or not they did their due diligence, the most embarrassing answer they can give is, “No, we did not.”

While thousands of wise investors each year avoid that embarrassment by conducting due diligence in their financial endeavors, millions of people never take the same careful steps in their spiritual lives. While they have heard stories of God and the afterlife, and while they may have even toyed with such questions loosely in their minds, they have never set about the task of spiritual due diligence—considering the information that would support these eternally significant claims.

Intent of this series

The intent of this series, *Spiritual Due Diligence*, is to assist potential spiritual investors with regard to investigating the claims of the Bible, particularly as they point to a relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ. One study in this series focuses on the claims of other faith systems, but that is not our primary intent here. Instead, by a thorough examination of the Bible, you will have opportunity to study Christianity in depth, and thereafter you will have the tools necessary by which to measure other faiths and religions.

The audience for this series

At least three categories of readers should find great value in this series: those who are beginning their first serious investigation of the Bible, those who are desiring to increase their knowledge and understanding of the Bible, and those who may be speaking with others about their own established Christian faith.

Focus of this particular study

This study is the eighth and final one in the series. Its particular focus is end times and eternity as they are discussed in Scripture. Because all investigations of future events in the Bible are based on prophecies, some matters are much clearer than others. For the most part, we will avoid differences in interpretation that have arisen through the centuries among theologians. Rather, we will emphasize what is clearly revealed by Jesus, Daniel, Paul, John and others—those prophets whose words about the future are recorded in Scripture. We hope that you find this study interesting and hope-building as you progress through its lessons.

— Jeffrey Cranford and Jeff Hopper, for Links Players International



End Times and Eternity

Lesson One: Signs of the times

ANYONE WITH AN OUNCE OF HUMILITY AND A POUND OF EXPERIENCE will quickly admit that there is a head for business and there are rewards for sweaty toil, but that “luck” plays a role unlike any other. A venture started at one place and time may succeed amazingly, while a similar plan implemented in a different context goes nowhere. And yet there are those who seem to push the right buttons with every endeavor. They have, as we have come to say, “the Midas touch.” This is no magical quality, but rather an uncanny ability to assess the landscape, to “read the signs.”

Jesus clearly stated that there are signs of the times for those who would look to the long-term future as well: signs of His return, signs of “the end of the age,” signs of eternity.

The purpose of this entire study is to investigate some of these signs as they are presented in Scripture through what are known as “prophetic passages”—passages that point to future events for the instruction and edification of those who would understand them. Admittedly, however, many prophetic passages remain mysteriously veiled until after they are fulfilled (as with some of the prophecies surrounding the birth, life and death of Jesus). Throughout this study, we will emphasize those passages that are interpreted with consistent certainty by Bible scholars.

Let’s begin in this lesson to build our understanding of the importance of “reading” such signs of Jesus Christ’s return by exploring passages where He and others emphasized the need to be aware of the future He will enact.

Evidence and readiness in Matthew 24

This chapter provides us with the quintessential exchange between Jesus and His disciples regarding signs of His future coming, for they come to Him with great curiosity and He responds with lengthy content. *Read Matthew 24:3.* What specific information were the disciples seeking?

What evidence of some of these signs do you find around us today?

Read Matthew 24:4-8 and verse 13. What signs did Jesus identify as indicative of His return? What reward is promised to those who endure through these difficult end times?

Read Matthew 24:36-44. While Jesus taught His disciples that they should be reading the signs of the times and looking for His return, He also was clear that no one except God in heaven knew what dates and times were attached to these signs. How does this truth help us respond to “prophets” in our time who attach dates and times to their warnings? Do you think stated dates and times are indications of false prophets, or have these prophets just overstepped the revelation of coming world events by attaching this specific information?

Read Matthew 24:43-51. Consider the importance Jesus placed here on two traits: readiness and faithfulness. How would you say that a person can show evidence of these traits in their walk with Christ?

Trouble and salvation in Daniel 12

Read Daniel 12:1-3. How does this Old Testament prophetic passage confirm the words of Jesus that we have studied in this lesson? Note how the passage carries the themes of intense trouble to come, relief for those who are saved, and judgment for all.



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Lesson Two: Messages to the churches

OK, SO IT'S THE AGE OF THE EMAIL. Folks don't write letters so much anymore, though a thoughtful card of thanks is always appreciated, even by the most modern of minds. A few years ago, however, a book of letters gained popularity for the insight it offered into the sweep of 20th Century history. The book, *Letters of the Century*, was a fascinating read, especially for those who like the perspective of "primary sources."

Perhaps surprisingly, the New Testament is also filled with letters. Many of these—written by the apostles Paul, Peter, James, and John—comprise full books. But in the Bible's final book, Revelation, we find a series of brief letters to churches, which give us insight into God's desire for the readiness of His people.

Bible scholars are not certain whether the churches referred to in these letters were or will be actual physical congregations, or whether they are representative of certain ongoing characteristics. This is incidental. What is of greater significance is the truths we can learn about what God regards as holy and unholy behavior in advance of the return of Jesus and other end times events. In a thorough reading of these seven letters, consider the strengths and weaknesses of each church. If we are in Christ, these letters should challenge us to personal and corporate pursuits of greater holiness.

The church in Ephesus - Read Revelation 2:1-7

What strong qualities does this church possess? _____

What weaknesses? _____

The church in Smyrna - Read Revelation 2:8-11

What warnings are given to this church? _____

What encouragements? _____

The church in Pergamum - Read Revelation 2:12-17

What commendation is given to this church? _____

What things are found at fault among them? _____

The church in Thyatira - Read Revelation 2:18-29

What strengths are identified in this church? _____

What faults are held against them? _____

What do we discover about God's evaluation of us in verse 23? _____

The church in Sardis - Read Revelation 3:1-6

What warnings are given to this church? How are they told to respond? _____

The church in Philadelphia - Read Revelation 3:7-13

How is this church commended? _____

What promises are given to them for their faithfulness? _____

The church in Laodicea - Read Revelation 3:14-22

What is the prevailing weakness of this church? _____

In verse 19, we get a glimpse of God's expression of love. What is surprising here? _____

An overall view

What themes occur in all of these letters? How does this provide an understanding of God's key desires for us?



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Lesson Three: Growth of the kingdom and increasing darkness

ABOUT THE TIME TIGER WOODS JOINED THE PGA TOUR IN 1996, veteran Davis Love III authored a book about the relationship he had with his late father, the noted golf teacher, Davis Love, Jr. Near the end of the book, as he surveyed the years ahead in his career, Love could not help but comment on the presence of Woods and the effect that he would have on others: “I think he will spur the other leading golfers in the game to improvement. I don’t know a greater compliment to pay him.”

In essence, Love was saying that the Tiger explosion would lead to a counter explosion among his competitors. Through the years, Love’s prediction has proven true. Woods has become the game’s dominant player—if not its best of all time—and the rest of the players on the Tour have concurrently responded with renewed commitments and improvements to their own games. Even players in their 40s have accepted the challenge and have shifted the “prime” of a professional golfer by several years.

Interestingly, as we assess the Bible’s discussion of the events and trends we can anticipate as we move toward end times, we find a balance of growth between opposing forces. For one, Jesus said that the kingdom of God would flourish as time moved forward. But at the same time, darkness instigated by the enemy of God, Satan, would also increase dramatically. In this lesson, we review the biblical passages that point to this simultaneous explosion of good and evil.

Parables of the kingdom

While the full nature of the kingdom of God awaits disclosure after Christ’s return, Jesus was open about the kingdom’s existence and the way that it would begin small by His presence on earth and grow through time into a noticeable vastness. Let’s consider two parables Jesus told about the kingdom in Matthew 13.

Read Matthew 13:31-32. How is the small beginning of the kingdom depicted? To what extent does the plant grow? How might we apply the pictures in this parable to the growth of the kingdom, as Jesus intended? Would you say that you see evidences of kingdom growth around us today?

Read Matthew 13:33. With the picture of leaven (yeast) in mind, how thorough is the reach of the kingdom of God? Why is this important if men and women are going to be held responsible in the end for the way they have responded to the offer of salvation through Jesus Christ?

Desolation and despair

Read Matthew 24:9-28. It is not clear from either from this passage or complementary passages in Daniel what the “abomination of desolation” is. However, considering the extreme difficulties that Jesus says will arise during the time of the abomination of desolation, it becomes evident that this abomination will be overwhelming and unmistakable. Drawing from this passage, what evidences of increasing darkness will rise as the abomination of desolation is established and end times approach?

Read Luke 21:10-24. How does this passage support what we have learned so far from Matthew, both with regards to trouble and perseverance?

The advancement of false teaching

Read 1 Timothy 1:3-7 and 2 Peter 2:1-3. How do these passages support the realization that false teaching and doctrine will arise amidst the teaching of the truth? What is the key component of false teaching (that is, what chief doctrine is it refuting?), and why is this so dangerous for one’s faith in Christ?



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Lesson Four: The restoration of Israel

EVERY CHRISTMAS, EYES ARE FOCUSED ON BETHLEHEM, the tiny town in Israel where Jesus was born. Every Easter, the eyes go elsewhere, to Jerusalem, where the events of Christ's Passion transpired 2,000 years ago and are revisited by those who know the drama—and more so, the meaning—of those events.

We are, then, whether or not we are fully aware of it, a people who know the importance of Israel, at least on the stage of history. For all of that, however, Israel carries an ongoing presence and remains as God's grand future stage—the chosen place for God's chosen people. If we were Jewish men writing these words, we might be called "Zionists," those whose chief focus is this enduring place and the Jews' exclusive right to it. We are instead followers of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, so He is our chief focus; but the Bible that tells His story also tells of the coming restoration of Israel, not only as a land but as a rejuvenated people reborn through Christ. So let's explore the Bible's teaching on these matters.

The identity of Israel

We should begin by recognizing that the Bible uses a number of terms to refer to the same people: Israel, Hebrews, Jews, the chosen people, the circumcised. For centuries this was seen as a physical/national affiliation, as well as a spiritual connection to God. The apostle Paul was himself Jewish, and he honored the Jews throughout his New Testament writings. In fact, he said plainly that it was to the Israelites that the following had been given: the adoption (as God's people), the glory (God's presence), the covenants (God's specific agreements with people), the giving of the law (God's instructions), the temple service, the promises, and the generational forefathers. God most certainly has moved purposefully among the Israelites throughout history.

The trouble for the Jewish people, according to Paul

But Paul asserted the difference between those who prided themselves on "being Israel" through the flesh and those who identified with Christ through faith. Through Paul, once a provocative Jewish leader, God revealed that the physical/national connection was secondary to the spiritual connection: "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants" (Romans 9:6-7). This, in spite of the fact that Christ Himself was noted by Paul to be "from their race, according to the flesh" (Romans 9:5).

Following the Jewish leadership of the time, traditional Jews considered themselves separate from Gentiles (non-Jews) on the basis of their adherence to the law of God. The problem here, according to Paul was that "they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were by works" (Romans 9:32). Using the evidence of God's initial promise to Abraham in Genesis, Paul argued that faith is the righteousness God desires, rather than an obligatory adherence to laws that were designed to expose the inability to save ourselves and open our eyes to God's promised salvation through the Messiah.

All of this, according to Paul, meant great trouble for Jewish people who did not put their faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah. Because they were rejecting the promises of God through Jesus, God had opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles as well, an idea that was anathema to all traditional Jews. However, Paul drew upon Old Testament prophecy to demonstrate the accuracy of what he was writing: “I will call ‘Not-My-People,’ ‘My-People,’ and she who is ‘Unloved,’ ‘Beloved.’ And it will be in the place where they were told, you are not My people, there they will be called sons of the living God” (the prophets Hosea and Isaiah quoted in Romans 9:25-26).

With this background in mind, let’s take a few minutes to explore what God has in mind for Israel in the end times, for His plan was never to leave them behind for the Gentiles’ sake, but rather to fold the Gentiles into the promises given to Israel.

How salvation comes to any people

Read Romans 10:1-13. This passage replaces an old way of thinking with a clear picture of how men and women of any background access salvation through Christ. How is that salvation attained?

Jews who remain

Read Romans 11:1-11. How does this passage show that God has not rejected Israel? Found in verse 5, what method does God use to maintain a remnant of believing Jews? How does it make sense in verse 11 that the salvation offered to Gentiles would make the Jewish people jealous (desirous)?

Respect from the Gentiles

Read Romans 11:13-24. In this passage, the root is Jesus Christ, the branches are the Jewish people, and the grafted-in branches are the Gentiles. How does Paul appeal to the Gentiles to honor the Jews?

Mercy from God

Read Romans 11:25-32. What role does God’s mercy play in providing salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike? How is it, then, that many Jewish people will be restored to God in the end times?



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Lesson Five: The return of Christ and marriage to His bride

FOR SEVERAL LESSONS NOW, we have been alluding to the return of Christ. Even casual observers of Christianity usually have picked up the bit of knowledge along the way that Christians are waiting for Jesus' "second coming." What does this mean, both in terms of the waiting and in terms of the return itself? These are the questions we will explore now.

The first and second comings—how are they related?

Messianic Jews (those who believe that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament prophecies) will tell you that their Jewish friends who do not believe in Jesus missed the fact that those prophecies pointed not to one coming of the Messiah but two. The first of His visits to earth as God in the flesh would be disastrous in human terms. He would be "led to slaughter" as the sacrifice for the sins of humanity for all time. Those who believe in Jesus count this death as His greatest act, when He demonstrated the fullness of His forgiving love and made permanent atonement in a way that the priests could not. But those who were looking only for another kind of Christ—a triumphant, world-ruling Messiah—were not going to find him in this "defeated" carpenter from Nazareth. What the Messianic Jews and their Gentile fellow believers contend, however, is that *that* Christ, the one who will rule, is indeed Jesus, now ascended to heaven with God (Acts 1:6-11) and awaiting His second visit.

When will this second coming occur?

Perhaps because of our own desire to "cheat toward the flesh" until it happens, one of the great questions always asked by people who know of the second coming of Jesus is, "When will it occur?"

Read Matthew 24:36 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3. What do these passages make clear about the timing of Jesus' return?

Read Matthew 25:1-13 and 1 Thessalonians 5:4-11. What premium do these passages place on readiness for Jesus' return?

What will Jesus' return look like?

Many people have been intrigued through the centuries by the biblical descriptions of Jesus' return. Indeed, the Bible lays out some exciting pictures of His return. Let's begin here:

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. How does this passage describe Jesus' return? What will happen to His followers, both those whose bodies are already in the ground and those who are alive at the time of this event?

It must be noted here that the Bible depicts a number of future events (in 1 Thessalonians, as well as in Matthew, Daniel, Revelation and elsewhere), and that theologians have been unable to reach agreement about the precise order of these events. From the passage in 1 Thessalonians and Matthew 24:36-42, some theologians assert the idea of a "rapture," a time when the followers of Jesus are lifted from earth and brought into the presence of God through Christ. While not all theologians agree on the full nature of this event (or its placement among a progression of events), it is commonly accepted that Jesus' return will be (1) dramatically pronounced and (2) that His people will join His presence from that day forward.

Jesus and His bride

Bride and groom. There's a concept we all understand. What few people realize, however, is that the wedding day picture established in the Bible has eternal implications, not for men and their wives, but for Christ and His church. In several places throughout Scripture, culminating with a marriage supper described with great joy in Revelation 19, Jesus Christ is featured as the bridegroom in love with His bride, which is the universal church of believers. Therefore, it is important to recognize that Jesus will be thrilled to be united forever with the believing church. His second coming will accomplish this greatly anticipated union and usher in its eternal relationship. Before ending this lesson, let's review some of the Bible's evidence for this holiest of matrimones.

Read Ephesians 5:25-33. How does this passage align earthly marriage with Christ's marriage to the church?

Read Matthew 22:1-10 and Revelation 19:6-10. How do this parable and prophecy correspond with one another in forming a picture of the joyous celebration of Christ's wedding to His bride, the church? What details of the event and its participants make an impression on you?



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Lesson Six: Coming judgment

IN NEARLY EVERY ENDEAVOR, even the most artistic efforts, there comes a day of judgement—a day when we expose ourselves to adjudicators and their critiques or scorekeepers and their renderings.

We play in a golf tournament or participate in community theater or even take a position of leadership in a church. All the while we know that an evaluation will be made, objectively or subjectively, of our work. And though we may say that these evaluations mean little to us, that we participate for the love or the beauty of it, we sure feel good when people respond positively to what we have done and bad when they do not.

But perhaps strangest of all this is that we almost always—once we have left school behind anyway!—volunteer for this. We willingly put ourselves in the path of judgment.

When it comes to *the judgment*, however, the perspective of many often changes. They think that all God's judgments are for our benefit—"Everyone will end up in heaven one way or another." Or they do not think that any judgment of an eternal nature is fair—"Who does this God think He is to tell me what my life was worth?" Or they dismiss any judgment with such monumental consequences—"I'm sorry, but I just can't believe that there is a God out there ready to sift through each person's life, person-by-person and action-by-action."

What these people have rarely done is consider what the Bible says about eternal judgment, which is the very reason we are conducting our spiritual due diligence.

'The Day'

Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. Note how Paul uses the expression "the Day" (capitalized in some translations) to depict a certain Day. What is the purpose of the Day? How will people be assessed and rewarded differently on that Day?

Read Revelation 20:11-15. This passage records the prophecy of the Day, as it will specifically be enacted by God. According to this passage, what will be the demarcation between those who are cast into the lake of fire and those who are not (see verse 15)? *Read Revelation 21:22-27 about the eternal Jerusalem.* What is one of the

rewards that will be granted only to those whose names are written in the book of life?

Read Revelation 13:8. How does one get his or her name written in the book of life? What association must be in place?

The end of Satan

Many people refuse to accept that God would be so “unloving” as to cast those who have not believed in His Son Jesus Christ into the lake of fire for eternity. We have argued in prior lessons that a loving God would not require people to spend eternity with Him when they have chosen to reject Him all their lives. But we should also mention here that God did not “invent” the hellacious lake of fire for the purpose of sending people there. God truly does love all people and desires that “none should perish” (2 Peter 3:9). God created the fires of hell for Satan and his demonic legions. Indeed, they shall be judged first.

Read Revelation 20:1-3, which shows a 1,000-year period during which Satan will be held captive. Then read Revelation 20:7-10 to see the final judgment of Satan. How does this information combat the belief that cosmic forces are engaged in an unending stalemate?

The sad fact remains, however, that many men and women will willingly choose to separate themselves from God, both now and into eternity. These people will be judged for this choice as we see in Matthew 25:41: “Then He will also say to those [who have treated Him ill], ‘Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels!’” Notice that this passage shows both that the fires of judgment were created for Satan and that those who choose to align themselves with him rather than God through Jesus Christ—these are the only two choices—will be sent to the fire of hell as well.

Judging the angels

One extra piece of information that is of interest here is that the judgment of demons (fallen angels) will be done by those whose names are in the book of life. *Read 1 Corinthians 6:3. If you are in Christ, what sort of confidence does this instill in you? What sort of humility does it encourage?*



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Lesson Seven: The exaltation and glory of the Lord

IN CLOSING THE LAST LESSON, we encouraged you to take note of the fact that the judgment of Satan and his eternal assignment to the lake of fire demonstrates that the cosmos are not locked in some eternal battle without a winner. In the end, the Bible tells us, Jesus Christ will win. And what a victory it will be! If Jesus' first coming was marked by His voluntary servitude and brutal sacrifice, His return as Eternal King will bear no resemblance to that visit 2,000 years ago—with one notable exception. Let's take some time in this lesson to explore the exaltation of Christ, and its connection to what He has already done.

The Lamb who is worthy

Read Revelation 5:1-7. In this passage, God is prepared to bring a series of catastrophes to the unbelieving people on earth. In order for this to happen, the Messiah must come to open the scrolls. When the Messiah comes before God's throne, what several names are given to Him? How is He recognized (verse 6)?

Read Revelation 5:8-14. How is Jesus exalted in this passage? What is He cited as being worthy to receive?

The great reversal

Read Revelation 12:7-12. Whose power is undone in this passage? How was he conquered? Who takes his place?

Note that at the end of this passage, reference is made to the "short time" Satan will be given to do his final work on earth. While theologians are not in agreement about the exact order of events, Revelation clearly presents a period when Satan will rule with great evil before Christ seizes his reign.

Eead Revelation 15:1-7. What several titles are given to the Lamb in verses 3 and 4? How does this passage affirm Jesus' deity?

The leader of armies

Read Revelation 19:11-16. Here again we see Christ exalted, this time as the leader of the armies sent out to bring final defeat to the world's evil leaders. What titles are given to Jesus in this context? How are He and His followers described?

The marks of His love

At the beginning of this lesson, we mentioned that there is a notable exception to all of the images of Christ exalted in the Bible's accounts of the end times. To understand this exception, look at the following verses:

Then I saw one like a slaughtered lamb standing between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders.... You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals; because you were slaughtered, and You redeemed people for God by Your blood from every tribe and people and nation. (Revelation 5:6,9)

He wore a robe stained with blood. (Revelation 19:13)

The blood and death of Jesus, as the very elements that enable Him to rule through eternity, are evident throughout Revelation. All of the spoils of victory do not cover the suffering He enduring out of love for His people; rather those spoils came to Him *because* of His suffering—the two cannot be separated.

Eagerly awaiting the King

Read Romans 8:18-23. This amazing passage from Paul's letter to the believers in Rome compares the sufferings of earth with the glory that will be found in heaven with Christ by those who have given their lives to Him. What leaps out at you from this passage? Are you as eager for Christ as it suggests?



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Lesson Eight: Eternal existence—A life with Christ

ALTHOUGH WE HAVE NOT SPENT THESE LESSONS surveying the whole of the book of Revelation, we have gathered quite a bit of information. For a moment, let's review what we have discovered, and set ourselves up for the grand question of what eternity will be like.

First, **Jesus Christ**—the same Jesus of Nazareth who was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit, being sent of God to die sacrificially for the sins of humanity, and who was resurrected and ascended to heaven to be with God—**will return** to claim those who have committed their hearts and lives to Him.

Second, because the Bible presents this return as a certainty but also as an event that cannot be pinpointed in time, it warns that **we must always be ready** for Jesus' return.

Third, the importance of readiness cannot be understated because before the eternal state of the universe is ushered in, **we will be judged** according to whether or not we have aligned ourselves with Christ and our names our written in the book of life.

Fourth, not only will all people be judged by Christ, so will **Satan and his fallen angels** (demons), who **will be assigned to the lake of fire** for eternity.

With these four major occurrences in place, the eternal age will begin, for all evil will have been removed from the universe and Christ's eternal reign will be established. As we have also seen, **Jesus will be exalted** by the court of heaven and He will lead armies to the victories that will wipe out this evil. So we can now turn our attention to what it will be like to live in a kingdom ruled by this Eternal King, Jesus.

Trouble to triumph

Read Hebrews 11:32-40. Consider the lives of the people described in this passage. What were their lives like? How, according to verse 39, were they approved by God?

Verse 39 notes that these believers in Christ, many of them martyrs, did not receive what was promised—that is, the Messiah did not come during their lifetimes. Then verse 40 explains that perfection (i.e., completion) would still be theirs through Jesus, only they would wait for that perfecting until all of God's chosen people through time

(including the people of the early church and us) were brought to faith.

Now read Revelation 20:4-6. This passage points to a time before Satan's final judgment. Here we find those full of faith in Hebrews 11 (as well as those who endured similar fates during the final sweep of evil on the earth in the end times) ruling with Christ. What does verse 8 tell us of their specific role during this 1,000-year period (often called The Millennium)?

The wonder of this passage is that a certain group of believers will rule alongside Christ, being rewarded in a specific way for the exercise of their faith while on earth. The Lord of all includes His beloved not only in His presence but in His work!

The presence of Christ

Of course, the presence of Christ is the essence of our eternal life and our eternal joy. While the Bible assures us that He is with believers now by His Spirit, we anticipate a time when that presence will not be fettered by our own sin and the sins and distractions of the world around us. In Study 5 of this series, "Death and Life After Death," we noted that those in Christ who die in their bodies are moved into an intermediate heaven, which is the presence of Christ in their spirits. In the eternity to come, their physical bodies will be resurrected (as we saw in 1 Thessalonians 5 in Lesson 5), joining those who were alive on earth at the time of Christ's return. But what will this eternal life with Christ be like? To this question we turn our attentions now.

Read Revelation 21:3-4. The promises of this passage are quite familiar, often read at funerals. What do they include as they tell us about eternal life with Christ in God's presence?

Read Revelation 21:8. How does this verse show that those who have not turned to Christ for forgiveness and have persisted in sin to the end will live much differently for eternity?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:13. In this verse, we are told that of all the gifts God has given us, those that are eternal are faith, hope, and love. Considering what we have read about eternity with Christ and the His eternal kingdom, how does this idea ring true? What role does hope especially play in your own life as you consider eternal matters?



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Lesson Nine: Eternal existence—The new heaven and earth

THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS THEY SEEM. That is an expression well-known to all of us. Pictures are painted of excellence and beauty, then we discover that those pictures were frauds, meant to lure us into another reality. Sometimes this presents no big problem; we just walk away. Other times, however, false expectations can lead to tremendous disappointment.

Many people have a false picture of eternity. They have been told that heaven is a haven for angels and that when we die we will be made like them—ethereal, wispy, and musical. Or they have been told that heaven’s full activity will be the ceaseless praise of God, which they recognize as the hymn-singing time in a traditional church service. In other words, eternity in heaven may be OK for some folks, but for a lot of others it holds little appeal.

When we read what the Bible says about the heaven and earth to come, however, we get a much different picture. And while we addressed this matter of the new heaven and new earth in Lesson 7 of Study 5 (“Death and Life After Death”) of this series, we go further here. Let’s begin.

The created earth

You will likely recall, even if your knowledge of the Bible is somewhat limited, that the early earth, designed by God’s hand, was perfect in its order. The environment was harmonious and untainted. Humanity—though limited in number—was without sin. And those people, Adam and Eve, lived in a paradise called Eden, where they walked with God, able to converse openly with Him. We might go so far as to say that they lived in “heaven on earth” (though the Bible always draws a clear distinction: heaven is the dwelling place of God; earth is the dwelling place of people).

While Adam and Eve’s sin would destroy the perfect nature of this paradise, it gives us a glimpse of what a wonderful world God can create. We get a true picture of what God had in mind: a place of meaningful work and life in His presence.

The re-created earth

It makes sense, then, that when the time comes for restoration and a perfect eternity (1) humanity will dwell on earth, and (2) that earth will look much like it did before the entrance of sin and its curse. When we review the prophecies of Revelation, we find this reasoning to be true.

Read Revelation 21:1-2. How does this passage establish the truth of a new order?

Read Revelation 21:9-21. What is the source of this new Jerusalem? What are some examples of the physical nature of the city? What features make it exceptional, evident of God's own hand in its creation?

Earlier we studied how the church of Christ is called His bride. Be sure to notice that the new Jerusalem is given the same title in verses 9 and 10 of this passage. Some theologians assert that part of the reason for this is that the new Jerusalem is being formed even now through those whose faith is in Christ.

Absent sanctuary, present God

Read Revelation 21:22-27. Why will there be no sanctuary in the new Jerusalem?

Consider the meaning of the word sanctuary as “a place of protection and peace.” How does the fact that “the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” will be the city’s sanctuary serve this definition?

The mark of God

Read Revelation 22:1-5. According to this passage, what will life be like for those who dwell in eternity with Christ?

Relationships in eternity

The most important relationship with eternity will be the renewed, unencumbered relationship between every believer and their Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus came and died to restore the perfect relationship with God that was enjoyed by Adam and Eve in Eden. Those with Christ in eternity will serve Him as their King. Additionally, the relationships among people will be restored—there will be no jealousy, unforgiveness or strife. All will appreciate and respect one another. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, as described in Galatians 5—will be fully evident.

Some also ask about family relationships in eternity. Jesus noted that none will marry or be given in marriage after His return. However, we can anticipate continuing relationships with those we have known and loved on earth, as well as establishing new friendships throughout eternity as we live and work together for eternity.



End Times and Eternity

Lesson Ten: In review—What do we know about the age to come?

THIS STUDY INCLUDED MORE LESSONS THAN OTHERS IN THIS SERIES, and yet we limited the discussions to the most essential pieces of knowledge, as well as those generally agreed upon by all who take on the task of interpreting the end times prophecies. Let's take a short time to review the key components of our learning.

Readiness

Review your notes in Lessons 1 and 2 (pp. 4-7). How important is the readiness of God's people for the times that are to come? What are indications that God's people are properly ready? What is a matter of readiness you need to work on in your own life?

The kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness

From Lesson 3, make note of the corresponding increase of spiritual activity on both God and Satan's "sides." How will these increases each be recognizable in the world as we know it?

Jew and Gentiles together under Christ

From Lesson 4, how are Jewish and non-Jewish people vital to one another in God's ultimate plan?

The return of Christ

Theologians remind us to be prepared for Christ's "imminent return"—that is, a return that could happen at any time. How does Lesson 5 confirm this idea of an imminent return?

The coming judgment

What does Lesson 6 reveal about the final judgment, and what does Lesson 7 tell us about the One who will judge us?

Life in eternity

Review Lessons 8 and 9. What new information increased your own knowledge or understanding of what is to come in eternity?

Much more to read

Many people make a personal study of end times and the book of Revelation. And there is certainly far more to investigate there than we have covered in this study. Here is some suggested reading for further study:

"Understanding the Book of Revelation" (Rose Publishing, 2009) is a sharp pamphlet that provides insight into four major interpretations of the Bible's culminating book. Rose also offers a pamphlet called, "What's So Great About Heaven."

For a similar treatment in greater depth, you might turn to Steve Gregg's *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1997).

These resources should begin to satisfy interests in the plagues, the beast, and other events from Revelation, while maintaining a balance among differing commentaries.

WHAT'S NEXT?

This is the eighth (and last) in a series of studies on spiritual due diligence. The complete set of studies allows for a thorough investigation of a number of spiritual matters:

- The need for due diligence
- The nature of man
- The nature of God
- The nature of Scripture
- Death and life after death
- Christ and other religions
- The invisible realm
- Ends times and eternity

If you have missed any of these studies, you may wish to go back to our web site, www.linksplayers.com, and work your way through these materials found in the Bible studies section of the site. You will find other studies that may be of interest as well.

Meanwhile, we are committed at Links Players International to the continued development of resources like this one, in a specific effort to promote the spiritual growth of individuals and of those in small groups like our many Links Fellowships around the world. We are aware that the cultural and intellectual landscapes of our present world provide challenges to the claims of Christ and the enduring statements of Scripture. Therefore, we make every effort to clearly present the teachings of God's Word so that these challenges can be faced with the understanding and equipping of Scripture.

While the study of the Bible can certainly be done alone, it is exceedingly valuable to hear from a qualified teacher and engage in conversations with others in pursuit of biblical knowledge. If you are not in a study with others at this time and would like to be, call Links Players at 800-90-LINKS and we'll offer some suggestions for groups who might encourage you in your thought and discussion.



Spiritual Due Diligence

Leading a group study

IT CAN BE DAUNTING TO BE CALLED ON to teach the Word of God. Indeed, many potential leaders have told us that while they are capable of and eager to bring a group together, or to act as host, teaching is an entirely different level, one for which they do not consider themselves prepared.

Others don't feel so much weight when it comes to teaching. They know their Bibles well, or they're naturals when speaking to a crowd.

It is, then, the precise goal of the structure of these Links Players Bible studies to provide a fully operational Bible study for those teachers who need much assistance and yet a format that leaves room for experienced leaders to bring their own learning to the table.

The lessons include these features:

- An **introduction** providing connections for the reader between what they see and know in their lives and the topic of study at hand. While we are primarily a sports-minded ministry aimed at golfers, our materials are used by many non-golfers. Therefore, these introductions use examples from more common experiences, as well as those tied to athletics.
- A **narrative** progressing through the main ideas of the lesson. Some leaders may choose to read this with the participants verbatim (or nearly so). Others may use it as a general guide for presenting the material. As these Spiritual Due Diligence studies progress, this narrative is shortened and participants are called upon to do more personal reading in the Bible to discover the accounts and instructions included there.
- A **Bible study**, drawing from particular specific Scripture passages. In this more advanced study, the references are provided but most need to be read in an accompanying Bible. You may find that you wish to read the broader context for these passages as well. You may also wish to look up these passages in other translations to see how the alternate wording can assist in understanding.
- Sometimes a **reflection** is included, challenging participants to make some mental connections and decisions about what they have studied.

In addition to these studies, as your group grows together, you will want to include opportunity for prayer among the participants. Even with a study like this one, which may include a number of participants who are just beginning their investigations of God, Christ, and the Bible, prayer is often an open door for those who are truly seeking God. Offering to pray for personal and family needs is often the best way to begin this practice.

We also strongly encourage leaders to stay in touch with participants throughout the week, simply making themselves available for further questions and discussion.

In the same way, we are available to talk to group leaders about their experiences and to answer questions regarding the studies. You may call us Monday-Friday at 800-90-LINKS.

What is a Links Player?



Spiritual
Due Diligence

THE LINKS PLAYERS BIBLE STUDIES, including "Christ and other religions," are produced by Links Players International, a Christian sports ministry aimed primarily at golfers. The good news is that sometimes in that aim, we miss! That is, there are plenty of non-golfers who have found benefit in the Daily Devotional, Bible studies, and magazines we have published through the years.

There is a reason for this, of course, and that is because truth transcends our human experiences. For instance, while we often hate to admit it, in many ways we cannot improve on how the previous generation lived. Technologically, we may have made some nifty advancements, but in terms of human interaction—and, we believe, humans interacting with God—we don't make any real progress through time.

Therefore, whether or not you are a golfer, we think that the chief principles we teach and learn can apply to you. A Links Player tries, by the power of God's Holy Spirit in them, to live according to the following principles:

LOVE GOD AND OTHERS. When asked the greatest commandment of Scripture, Jesus replied, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."* He went on to say, *"This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"* (Matthew 22:37-39)

INTegrate CHRIST'S REIGN AND INTEGRITY INTO ALL OF LIFE. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the crowds, *"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things (the necessities of life) will be provided for you."* (Matthew 6:33)

NETWORK FRIENDS TOGETHER IN CHRIST. When the followers of Jesus met together after His ascension into heaven, it was said of them: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.* (Acts 2:42)

KINDLE COMPASSION FOR THE POOR AND NEEDY. Jesus told a parable of the eventual judgment of each man and woman by God. In it, He provided insight into the standards of this judgment: *"The King will answer them, 'I assure you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me.'"* (Matthew 25:40)

SHARE CHRIST. One of the chief of Christ's apostles, Paul, wrote to the church at Corinth this reminder: *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ; certain that God is appealing through us, we plead on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God."* (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Today, you may find that you have reason to be reconciled to God and to become a Links Player yourself. If so, you need to tell God in prayer: *Heavenly Father, Through Your Son Jesus Christ, I am prepared to offer my life to You. Please take it and all of my sin, and begin to renew me as Your ambassador. Amen.* If you have prayed that prayer, you will also want to share your decision with a trusted friend who knows Christ. This way they can encourage and lead you in your new walk of faith. It will be a challenge worth every step!

