

Second Thoughts about the Second Coming

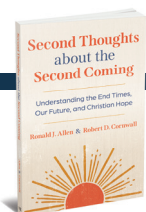
SERMON SERIES ON THE SECOND COMING

Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

A subject sometimes calls for a degree of theological and homiletical interpretation that goes beyond the time available when preaching in conversation with a single text from the Revised Common Lectionary. The lectionary seldom appoints a sequence of texts from which a preacher can develop a broad and deep consideration of an important theme. Consequently, preachers who regularly follow the Revised Common Lectionary sometimes break away from the lectionary for a sermon series—several sermons that ponder a particular issue from several important points of view. Preachers who do not follow the lectionary sometimes take up occasional sermon series. Some preachers, of course, go from one series to another. In any event, a sermon series affords the opportunity to help the congregation consider a subject with more discernment and penetration than a single Sunday sermon.

There are two broad patterns in sermon series. In one pattern, perhaps the more common, the preacher intends for the series to promote a particular point of view. In the same way that a preacher in a single sermon seeks to explain the text and draw out its implications, so the series uses the texts to explain the subject matter of the series and to draw out implications. The sermons all work together toward one point.

In the other pattern, the individual sermons summarize different viewpoints on the subject at the heart of the series. The goal is not to push a particular conclusion but to bring the voices into the conversation, in search of which ones seem to make more and less sense with respect to interpreting the topic. Preacher and congregation try to identify strong points, weak points, points at which questions linger, and areas for further consideration. Some conversations end with resolution. Others end by respectfully recognizing that different perspectives will continue to exist side by side in the church, but with listeners having more mature perceptions of the different voices and their relationships with one another. A few conversations, including some in North America today, reach points of polarization and even antagonism.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

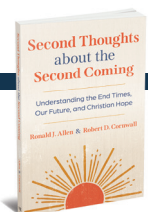
WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

There is no fixed number of sermons for a series. Different congregations are socialized to series of different lengths. Our impression is that many congregations in historic mainline denominations maintain interest in series that last four to six Sundays. Some congregations, especially in evangelical sectors, are accustomed to much longer series.

We now consider representative possibilities for developing sermon series related to interpreting the second coming in particular, and more broadly to interpreting the complete and final manifestation of God's purposes. The possibilities for series we set forth are only examples. Because questions and issues about the second coming and God's final aims are often part and parcel of the circumstances of particular congregational contexts, preachers are limited only by their imaginations in the kind and number of series they might create.

Some preachers and congregations may find some of these series better suited to settings outside the worship space, which allow for more interaction between preacher and participants than is typical of services of worship. As a parishioner said to one of us after a short series, "That should really have been in the Wednesday night Bible class rather than in the pulpit on Sunday morning." Many subjects raise questions and pose provocative points of view about which congregants would like to have more conversation than can take place in the typical worship service.

When developing a series, preachers can help listeners discern common themes, as well as points of difference, in different biblical passages and theological families and schools of interpretation. How do distinct voices contribute to the discussion about the second coming itself and about the bigger umbrella of how to understand God's highest hopes for humankind, the natural world, and the cosmos itself? Most importantly, preachers can help the congregation reach as much clarity as they can about what they really believe and, of course, how to respond appropriately.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

A Series Helping the Congregation Grasp the Importance of the Second Coming in the Bible

In some congregations, the second coming is the center of the congregation's theological life. It is perpetually the focus of preaching, singing, and conversation. In other congregations—particularly in the mainline denominations—the second coming is seldom given serious attention. It may be mentioned—say, when the congregation recites one of the creeds—but it's really not a part of active congregational consciousness.

Ironically, a series focusing on different biblical texts dealing with the second coming may serve both communities. Churches who live and breathe the second coming often smush the different biblical presentations into one undifferentiated second-coming scenario. Such a series could help such listeners distinguish between different emphases regarding the second coming in different biblical writers. Such a series can heighten the consciousness of churches that are only vaguely aware of the second coming and its centrality in the Gospels and Letters and some streams of Christian theology. The series can help the congregation not only become more cognizant of this theme but reflect theologically on how to relate to it.

Here is an example of a series in the spirit just described. It is intended to orient the listening community to the origins of apocalyptic thinking in the period of the Old Testament and to expose the congregation to some representative texts in the Gospels and Letters.

Sermon 1

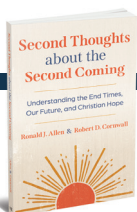
Daniel 7:9–14

When dealing with this text, as with any text, the preacher would need to set it in its historical and literary context, which would simultaneously allow the preacher to explain the origins of apocalyptic theology, its purposes, and the literary qualities of an apocalypse (making many of its points through imagery, etc.).

Sermon 2

1 Corinthians 15:12–28

The writings of the apostle Paul are the oldest in the New Testament. This passage presents Paul's thoroughly apocalyptic view of the culmination of what happens at the climax of history for the individual (resurrection) and the world (handed from Christ to God for eternal rule).



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

Sermon 3

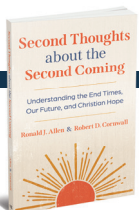
Mark 13:1–23

This is the Markan version of the final extended statement of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (cf. Matt. 24:1–25:46; Luke 21:5–37). Mark uses this passage to interpret the destruction of the temple and the social chaos in its aftermath as signs that Jesus, the “one like a human being [‘son of man’],” is about to return as the final judge and redeemer.

Sermon 4

Revelation 1:9–16

The book of Revelation is the only fully developed apocalypse in the Gospels and Letters. This passage is the first image in the book and reveals the author’s fundamental concerns to unmask Caesar and the Roman Empire as idolatrous, remind the community of the present and coming judgment and redemption, and warn the community to live faithfully during the great season of transition—or face the consequences.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

A Series on Old Testament Texts Pointing toward Apocalyptic Theology

A preacher might help a congregation develop its historical awareness with a series on texts from the Old Testament that point to the emergence of the two-age thinking characteristic of apocalyptic or second-coming theology. While Daniel 7–12 is the only instance of full-blown apocalyptic theology in the Old Testament, there are several proto-apocalyptic passages. That is, there are passages with elements that move slightly beyond God’s actions in the present moment to restore life by laying the groundwork for God to replace the present world with a new one. In each case, the preacher could sketch the historical situation of the community to which the biblical author spoke and then note how the text contains elements that move toward the idea of replacement.

Sermon 1

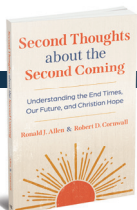
Isaiah 25:6–10a

Most scholars think that Isaiah 24:1–27:12 is from a social situation and world of thought similar to that of an author called Third Isaiah, who is responsible for Isaiah 56–66. Isaiah 24:1–23 foresees a coming apocalypse that spells doom on the sinful world. The speaker specifies an apocalypse-like event in Isaiah 25:1–5. The text for this sermon, Isaiah 25:6–10a, sets out a vision of a transformed existence in which God replaces the powers that have caused so much brokenness in the post-fall world (signified here by the shroud, the sheet, and death).

Sermon 2

Isaiah 65:17–25

This passage also comes from Third Isaiah. The prophet sees God interrupting history and stepping in to reconstruct it so that evidence of the curse disappears and is replaced by structures of blessing. After describing the setting in which Third Isaiah addressed this oracle, the preacher could note the moves toward apocalypticism evident in God creating “new heavens and a new earth.” God will not simply repair Jerusalem (and all that it represents) but will re-create Jerusalem as a joy in which (per Isa. 25:6–10) social conditions work together for the peace, abundance, and security of all.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

Sermon 3

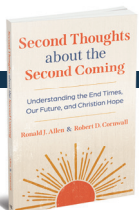
Zechariah 14:1–21

Scholars generally regard Zechariah 9–14 as a kind of Second Zechariah (on the order of Second and Third Isaiah), a section of the book added by a later prophet to the original Zechariah 1–8. The second part of the work bearing Zechariah’s name takes a more significant step in the direction of end-time thinking than Third Isaiah. This is particularly true in Zechariah 14:1–21, where the speaker adapts the ancient conflict myth to the judgment and transformation of current circumstances. The changes in nature are especially noteworthy in this regard. The preacher might also use this text as an occasion for noting that the Gospel accounts of Jesus on the Mount of Olives presuppose this proto-apocalyptic background (e.g., Matt. 21:1; 24:3; 26:30; Mark 11:1; 13:3; 14:26; Luke 19:29, 37; 22:39; John 8:1).

Sermon 4

Daniel 8:1–27; 12:1–3

The actual “text” of the sermon is the whole narrative of Daniel 7–12, but the preacher can use the above passages as examples (or can find others). In addition to sketching the background to which Daniel 7–12 was spoken, the sermon can highlight the characteristic apocalyptic use of a vision loaded with symbols and an interpretation of the vision. Daniel 8:1–27 would be an example. The sermon would also show how Daniel 7–12 articulates an apocalyptic perspective on future developments.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

A Series Rising from Texts in the Revised Common Lectionary

As we observed earlier, the Revised Common Lectionary sometimes appoints texts in succession that a preacher can functionally treat together as a series. One of the clearest examples of this phenomenon is the readings from the Gospel of Matthew on the last Sundays of Year A: the parables of the Ten Bridesmaids (Matt. 25:1–13), the parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14–30), and the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31–46, Reign of Christ). The preacher who wants to stay strictly with the lectionary could provide a little teaching introduction to the end-time nature of these parables, perhaps accompanying the reading of the Scripture texts in the services in which the parables are the focus of the sermon. The preacher could then devote a sermon to each parable.

The teaching introduction would set the series in the literary context of Matthew 24:1–51, with its emphasis on being aware that the end is approaching and on being prepared for that end, even though the second coming is delayed longer than anticipated. The congregation needs to be prepared to live through the delay. “Being prepared” in this case means living faithfully according to the teaching of Jesus in the First Gospel. This teaching guides the community in enacting the values and practices of the Realm of God.

Sermon 1

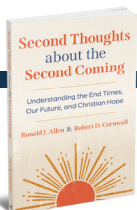
Matthew 25:1–13

The parable of the Ten Bridesmaids reminds the community that while they await the second coming, they are to keep their lamps lit. This image evokes Jesus’ admonition from the Sermon on the Mount, “You are the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). That is, it is a model for how all people can live together in communities of mutual support under the aegis of the principles and behaviors of the Realm.

Sermon 2

Matthew 25:14–30

The parable of the Talents reminds the community that even though they are in a difficult situation—the increased social chaos and violence resulting from the fall of the temple, interpreted by Matthew as a sign that the second coming is on its way—they are to multiply their mission. They are not to retreat into safety awaiting the end but are to do what Jesus says: live as the light of the world, which includes evangelizing Gentiles and welcoming them into the community (Matt. 28:16–20).



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

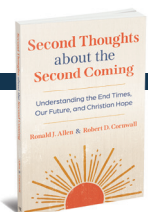
WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

Sermon 3

Matthew 25:31–46

The parable of the Sheep and the Goats emphasizes that the believing community will be judged on the last day, along with all the other peoples of the world, according to the degree to which they have lived in covenantal mutuality represented by providing food for those who are hungry, water for those who are thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing for those who are naked, treatment for those who are sick, and freedom for the prisoners. Since this Sunday is the Reign of Christ, the preacher can underscore the nature of the Reign as one that makes for a secure, supportive life and world.

Possibilities for series within the context of the lectionary come up most frequently during Ordinary Time after Pentecost Day. While we have highlighted a series from the readings from the Gospels, the Letters also present such possibilities. For example, the writings of Paul assume an apocalyptic underlay. The preacher could lift up the end-time motifs assumed in the semicontinuous passages assigned in Year B from 2 Corinthians.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

A Series That Comes from a Single Chapter

Several chapters in the Bible can be broken down into segments that can constitute a series. The first examples that come to mind are the so-called Synoptic apocalypses, to which we have referred in passing (Mark 13:1–37; Matt. 24:1–25:46; Luke 21:1–37). The preacher could divide one of these passages into meaningful units and help the congregation understand how the Gospel writers use symbolic images woven with conventional expressions to generate a persuasive theological interpretation of their moment in history.

Passages in other parts of the New Testament also provide extended discussions of the last things. One of the longest and most detailed, 1 Corinthians 15, also contains material that intersects with many questions raised by contemporary parishioners. First Corinthians is not so much an apocalypse in its literary form as it is a summary statement of Paul’s apocalyptic theological expectation. From Paul’s point of view, the Corinthian congregation had violated many of the principles and patterns of relationship that should be characteristic of a community representing the Realm of God. One principal transgression likely emerged because many of the Corinthians had collapsed the future into the present, believing that the possession of the Spirit in the present was the fulfillment of God’s purposes. Therefore, they were living without taking into account a future judgment and transformation. In essence, they denied the possibility of resurrection.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to help the congregation revive its faithfulness. Paul places 1 Corinthians 15 at the climax of the letter to implicitly remind the congregation that participation in the reconstituted world depends upon changing their attitudes and behavior to be more like those of the Realm of God. Rather than directly threaten, Paul seeks to lure the community to faithfulness by vividly portraying what will happen as the Realm comes to fullness.

Sermon 1

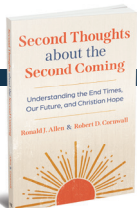
1 Corinthians 15:1–19

The apostle invokes the tradition of recounting the resurrection and the appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples as a way of invoking the apostle’s own authority in this letter. Moreover, Paul stresses the certainty of the resurrection of Jesus as the paradigm for the resurrection of the believers. This line is likely polemical and serves as a reminder to the congregation that their current behavior may disqualify them for the future hope: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19).

Sermon 2

1 Corinthians 15:20–28

Paul lays out his expectation of how future events will unfold. This is Paul’s “timeline,” but the emphasis is not on a succession of events but on setting out a structure for the proper disposition



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

of power. End-time theology centers on who has power and the purposes for which power is used. For Paul, one group of powers seeks to wrestle control of the world away from God so that the world can serve its deformed purposes. Their greatest exercise of power is death. By contrast, the resurrection demonstrates that the ultimate mode of power in the universe comes from God and is for the purpose of resurrection. Paul describes the process of transferring transformational power from its penultimate exercise by Christ to its ultimate and final exercise by God. Note that Paul's theology is theocentric: the power goes to God "so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

Sermon 3

1 Corinthians 15:29–34

Paul begins with a question that comes up occasionally today—the immersion of the living on behalf of the dead. But in the drumbeat of this slightly eclectic section, the apostle pleads for the Corinthians to take the future day of resurrection seriously, because their own resurrections hang in the balance.

Sermon 4

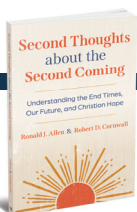
1 Corinthians 15:35–49

To encourage the Corinthians to embrace the idea of living in the present for both the present and the future, Paul gives one of the fullest descriptions of the resurrection body in the ancient world. Indeed, the writer strains language to its limits to picture the body that believers will have after the second coming. As we have recognized frequently in the book, many people today are concerned with the question of what the afterlife will be like. This passage provides a jumping-off point for such a discussion, but a preacher needs to be careful not to promise too much in the way of detail.

Sermon 5

1 Corinthians 15:50–58

At the climax of the text, the apostle foresees the great transformational moment. In the twinkling of an eye, God will change persons as they are in the old world into their new selves. Then they will live in the Realm of God forever. Death, the most savage force of the old age, is publicly defeated and dethroned. The preacher could narrate what Paul expects here and bring it into conversation with other possible ways of conceiving how the maximum expression of God's purposes might come about. For example, the preacher could use this text as the launching pad for a discussion of the theological families mentioned in the next section.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

A Series of Topical Sermons Based on Different Theological Families

While most Christian preaching takes place in conversation with passages from the Bible, the Christian tradition does contain a tradition, respected by many, of topical preaching. In this approach, the sermon does not offer an exposition of a biblical text with implications for today. Instead, the preacher begins with a topic and helps the congregation interpret that topic in light of its deep theological convictions. The preacher may refer to perspectives from the Bible as voices and points of reference in the sermon. This phenomenon would be especially true when preaching on the second coming. However, the biblical viewpoints do not control the sermon the way that they do in conventional preaching. The real “text” of the sermon is what the preacher believes about the nature of God, God’s purposes, how God operates in the world, and appropriate responses.

The different theological families and their interpretations of God’s ultimate purposes could form the basis of a series of topical sermons. In each case, the preacher might provide information about the background and distinctive features of the viewpoint and help the congregation assess its strengths and weaknesses. This series follows the discussion of these theological families in Section Four, “How Do We Make Sense of the Second Coming Today?: Contemporary Voices,” chapters 9–13.

Sermon 1

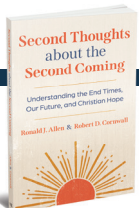
The traditional open-ended expectation of the second coming. This initial sermon would delineate a traditional open-ended expectation of an actual return of Jesus as the backboard against which to compare and contrast other points of view.

Sermon 2

Removing the husk and exposing the ear of corn (demythologizing). The preacher would call attention to the differences in worldview between the ancient and contemporary world and remove the mythological husk and identify the abiding value of the core conviction.

Sermon 3

Present and future theology of hope. The preacher might call attention to two things regarding this perspective. For one, the preacher can set out the idea that some of the powers and qualities of the Realm are already at work in the present. Hence, the congregation can begin to embrace and live into them now. Second, the preacher can point toward the hope for a future consummation, when all things will be made right, but under circumstances and at a time that are indeterminate.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

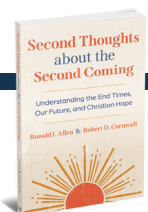
Sermon 4

Liberation theologies. While the liberation theologies tend not to dwell on technical matters regarding when or how the completion of God’s purposes might take place, they encourage the congregation to recognize that liberating developments in the present represent intentions of the Realm of God. Some liberation theologies hold that a final liberation with perpetual effects must take place for God to be finally and fully just, especially to those who have been deprived of justice and liberation in this life.

Sermon 5

Open and relational theologies. These theological families approach texts presenting the second coming similarly to those above who see differences in worldview between antiquity and today and who set aside the mythological husk from the first century to identify the core and abiding conviction. The open and relational theologies, however, explicitly include the conviction that while God cannot bring the world to an apocalypse, God is always at work—in every person, in every situation, in every community—inviting people to relate with one another according to the values of the Realm of God.

If the preacher’s ecclesial tradition insists on the presence of a biblical text, a preacher might choose a text as an illustration of how each approach plays out in practice. However, the preacher should be clear that the sermon is not a conventional exposition of the text.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

A Series on the Different Millennialisms

As we observe in the book itself, Christians in popular North American culture think that premillennialism, represented by *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey and the *Left Behind* series of books and movies by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, is the only way to interpret God's ultimate purposes for the world. A sermon series focusing a sermon on each of the different kinds of millennialism could broaden the congregation's consciousness and raise questions related to the degree to which millennial perspectives have more and less claim to responsible methods of biblical interpretation, adequate theological analysis, and appropriate moral outcomes.

Since Revelation 20:4–6 is the key biblical passage in the world of millennial thinking, the preacher could use this text as the jumping-off point for each sermon. The preacher could explain the historical circumstances in which each millennial viewpoint came to expression. The preacher could describe how each millennial family interprets this passage and could name the practical effects of that interpretation for the human community and, where pertinent, the effects on the world of nature. What kind of life and world comes with each different perspective? This series follows the discussion of the millennialisms in chapters 6 through 8.

Sermon 1

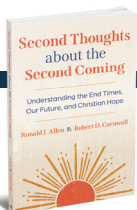
Revelation 20:4–6

Premillennialism. Since this viewpoint is familiar to many, it might be a good starting place. The preacher can then easily compare and contrast other perspectives. The preacher might outline the premillennial conviction that God has ordained dispensations with a timeline for the end of history, indicating how premillennialists read historical events with an eye toward locating where we are on the historical timeline and identifying things still to occur, such as the rapture and the apocalypse itself. A preacher would likely want to distinguish between the different kinds of premillennialism as congregants do hear these viewpoints articulated, defended, and attacked, such as pretribulation and posttribulation models.

Sermon 2

Revelation 20:4–6

Postmillennialism. According to this perspective, people work together to create the conditions of the Realm of God on earth. Only when those conditions are in place will Jesus return. Whereas premillennialism places almost all the initiative for the millennium and the final apocalypse on God, postmillennialists place a great deal of initiative on the human community. Although not using the language of postmillennialism, some contemporary expressions of liberal theology as well as liberation theology are similar to postmillennialism.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

Sermon 3

Revelation 20:4–6

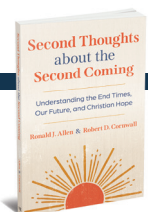
Amillennialism. Amillennialists believe that the reference to the millennium in Revelation 20 is figurative. Therefore, one should not expect the millennium will occur in history as an actual thousand-year period. Many amillennialists believe that the millennium, so to speak, is actually the history of the world now and that we cannot know when Jesus might return. Expressions of amillennialism are often similar to the phenomenon we have called open-ended expectation.

Sermon 4

Revelation 20:4–6

Millennialisms and progressive contemporary theological discussion. In many churches, the preacher can help congregations realize that the language and ideas associated with the various millennialisms largely take place in evangelical theological circles. These concepts seldom play active, positive roles in contemporary liberal and progressive theological discussion beyond the evangelical world. When developing a sermon with a progressive leaning, the preacher could not only identify such differences but, more importantly, spell out some important themes regarding God's ultimate purposes. Many listeners in mainline congregations would be illuminated by comparisons and contrasts.

This series is amenable to visuals on the big screen. The tech team could create simple but informative slides that represent the timeline according to which things happen for each model. These aids could be especially useful in the sermon on premillennialism in explaining things like pretribulation and posttribulation events.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

A Series on Ways of Thinking of the Afterlife

As we note in the book proper, many people in the mainline churches are curious about what might happen beyond death. A preacher could address this concern with a series focusing from week to week on different perspectives, as outlined in Section Five, “‘Will the Real Afterlife Please Stand Up?’: Voices on the Life after Death,” chapters 14-20 of the book. In each of these sermons, the preacher might describe the worldview within which the particular view of the afterlife is set. The sermon would posit what happens to the person at the time of death and beyond.

Several questions are important to many people today. What makes it possible for a person to live a happy existence beyond the grave? Must one make a confession of faith, be baptized (even immersed), and live a faithful life? Is everyone admitted to the future state of blessedness, or are some denied admission? What about hell? Despite all the jokes about fire and brimstone, are some people condemned to eternal punishment? One of the most common questions that comes to Bob and Ron is this: Will the families that have been together on earth be reunited in heaven?

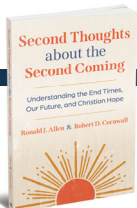
These subjects lend themselves to topical approaches in which the preacher could cite biblical points of view, voices from historical and contemporary theologies, and pastoral considerations. As we mentioned in connection with a previous series, if the preacher’s ecclesial tradition requires a biblical text in connection with a sermon, the preacher could identify a text as an example of the school of thought in which it has a place but not center the sermon in the exposition of a text. This series follows the discussion in the book of different notions of the afterlife in chapters 14–20.

Sermon 1

Modest views of the afterlife in the Old Testament. Many Christians are surprised that the Old Testament speaks of an afterlife and are even more surprised to learn that the first promise of resurrection is found in the book of Daniel. The preacher does need to be careful not to feed anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism by downgrading views of the afterlife in the Old Testament.

Sermon 2

The resurrection of the dead (apocalyptic). This perspective originated in the concern for justice on the part of God on behalf of those who suffered for their witness or who otherwise suffered innocently. God would raise the faithful to life in the Realm to compensate for their struggle. The preacher can thus help people recognize that resurrection is not “pie in the sky by and by” but is something intended to support faithful witness in the present, even in the face of conflict. The self dies at death. The body is entombed, where it awaits the second coming, when Christ will raise the dead and launch them into eternal life in the Realm. The preacher might help people recognize that, while not universal, this viewpoint is the most common one in the New Testament.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

Sermon 3

Eternal life in the present (the Gospel of John). Many preachers love the Johannine perspective that suggests that the experience of eternal life begins in the present. In many congregations, the preacher needs to explain the characteristic of eternal life and how people can recognize when they are caught up in it in their current existence. People also want to know when and how they move from eternal life in the present into the heavenly world with God, and what that world may be like.

Sermon 4

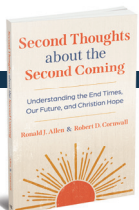
The soul goes to heaven. This viewpoint presupposes that the self is made up of the non-material (spiritual) soul and the material (physical) body. At death, the soul leaves the body and goes to be with God in heaven (or, in some theologies, to the eternal fire of punishment in hell). The soul retains its individual identity in heaven. Many Christians believe that life in heaven will be an improved version of life on earth, with a special emphasis on families being reunited forever. This way of thinking is often associated with comments such as, “My relative is in a better place now.”

Sermon 5

Reunion of soul and body. Roman Catholics see the separation of soul and body at death. The soul separates from the body and enters into a process of purification to prepare it for the return of Christ. In the meantime, the body waits in the ground. At the second coming, the soul and the body are reunited for eternity.

Sermon 6

Afterlife as consciousness in the consciousness of God. This approach to the afterlife is the most difficult for the preacher to explain. Some process theologians believe that at death the body disintegrates, but because God remembers all things, the consciousness of the human being is a living consciousness in God. People are aware of themselves as consciousnesses, even though they do not have bodies. Consequently, the human consciousnesses can experience awareness and can interact with others. The preacher should acknowledge and deal with questions that come up in light of this belief that every consciousness is alive in God: What about justice for those who have exceedingly violated God’s purposes? What about Hitler?



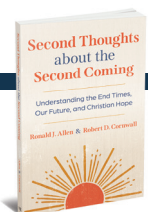
Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

Sermon 7

No afterlife. Some Christians think that death brings all aspects of human existence to a close. When the eyes close for the last time (so to speak), the light of consciousness goes out. The self is no longer aware. Indeed, the self no longer is, at least as a present entity. A sermon could explain why some people hold this view. A sermon can also explore consequences for present life in thinking that there is no future awareness.

The preacher should approach this series with considerable humility. In the strict sense, the preacher does not know with absolute certainty. The preacher can commend a future possibility as a word of hope without falling into the trap of making promises that may not be true.



Sermon Series Based on *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming*
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS