

PART 12: LAST THINGS

The study of last things is known in theology as eschatology, from the Greek word “eschaton,” which means “last things.” This is the doctrine that looks to Scripture to inquire into what God has to say about the end times and is primarily connected to impending events such as the future of mankind, the nation of Israel, the coming of the Antichrist, the end of world and creation (as we know it at present) and what happens to us after death.

Eschatology is important for the Christian life. As Theologian Floyd H. Barackman points out: “The Bible is the only literature on earth that reveals with certainty the future of mankind (cp. Isa. 46:9-10). Hidden from the world’s understanding (1 Cor. 2:6-8), this divine revelation is given to God’s people for the purpose of motivating their obedience and stimulating their hope (Deut. 29:29; Rom. 15:4; 1 Peter. 1:3; John 15:14-15).” (Practical Christian Theology)

In church history eschatology has been the subject of much debate especially since the advent of Dispensational theology in the 19th century. But the purpose of this study is not so much to explore the disagreements among Christians but to draw out some crucial points from Scripture that believers should give their attention to in order to strengthen their faith for the future and increase their discernment in the present. Therefore, our study will concentrate on three major points: the impending judgment of all of mankind, the return of Christ, and the

practicality of eschatology, the here-and-now-usefulness of being mindful of what happens when God puts an end to history.

THE IMPENDING JUDGMENT OF ALL MANKIND

Many Christians approach the study of the last things with both excitement and trepidation. Time itself is a great mystery. No one really knows for certain what the future might bring (James 4:13-16). We seem to live only in the present. We can remember the past and plan for the tomorrow, but in reality we do not know what is going to happen in the next few seconds.

We do know from Scripture that man was created to live eternally in peace and harmony with God and given authority to reign over the earth in stewardship under God. But when sin intruded into his life, bringing with it the ensuing fall of creation, along with physical and spiritual death (Gen 3:19; Rom 5:12), man faced judgment and all of creation faced corruption (Gen 3:17).

But Christ came to restore eternal life to man, and before His ascension to heaven He promised His disciples power from on high. Scripture also promises that Christ would return one day and bring His kingdom with Him. At that time God will create a new heaven and a new earth, and bless His chosen ones with a final release from sin and death. And upon His return He will not only come for

those of His children who have yet to taste death, but also for all the saints that have experienced death. Upon the sound of His voice those who have died in faith will come forth from the grave and be united with a resurrected, glorified body.

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth — those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, (John 5:24-29)

Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3:13)

But Scripture also warns that the Lord's return will usher in a final judgment for all who have lived in rebellion against their creator (Rom 14:10).

Ever since the Fall of our first parents in the garden we have been placed on a period of probation. That is to say, the human race has a chance to repent until death or the final judgment. With this thought in mind, we should be aware that every one has been granted a certain lifespan, known only to God, in which to repent and turn their life around. As the book of Job tells us: *Since a man's days are already determined, and the number of his months is wholly in Your control, and he cannot pass the bounds of his allotted time — (Job 14:5) AMP*

That is why the great commission to the church is to preach the gospel.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matt 28:18-20)

It is only upon hearing the message of salvation that mankind is able to respond in faith and enter into a relationship with God and receive forgiveness.

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:14-15)

For it is after death that everyone will be judged and held accountable for their life.

And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, (Heb 9:27)

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences. (Cor 5:10-11)

Everyone faces death. The thought of losing our lives and the lives of our loved ones is not pleasant but it is unavoidable. But physical death, which occurs when the soul is separated from the body, holds two different outcomes for the human race.

For the unrighteous death will bring the immediate judgment of eternal separation from God's goodness, but for the righteous death will bring the full goodness of God. Jesus spoke of this accountability and instantaneous judgment in His discourse of the rich man and the beggar named Lazarus.

"There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of

sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. (Luke 16:19-23)

Here we find the rich man in eternal punishment, but there is nothing but good news for the beggar Lazarus who was counted righteous by God. His experience is one of continuous joy. After the very moment of physical death, the soul of the Christian is directly ushered into the presence of the Lord to enjoy life with God free from sin, death and sorrow. We know that there will be no more suffering for God's chosen ones because God Himself will wipe away all our tears.

(Revelation 21:4)

So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. (2 Cor 5:6-8)

Paul, in his ministry as an evangelist, warned his listeners at Athens that: *Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge*

the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." (Acts 17:30-31)

With this statement Paul links the two great truths of judgment and repentance.

Judgment is the rightful consequence of man's rebellion. Ephesians says that *we: all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, (Eph 2: 10)*

As a result of spiritual death and the wicked behavior that flows from our fallen state, we have all rebelled against God's authority. And it is this rebellion that leads to all manner of sin, even those committed against our fellow man. In other words, man is not a sinner because he sins, he sins because he is already a sinner.

King David acknowledged this fact when after his acts of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah, he cried to God saying: *For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight (Ps 51:3-4)*

David was not denying his wrong-doing against Bathsheba or Uriah but was simply recognizing that his sins were, in the final analysis, rooted in rebellion against God's moral right over Him.

All sin, regardless of its nature, can be traced to our disobedience against God's law, and because of our rebellion we are due the rightful judgment and wrath.

Paul commanded the Athenians that the only way to escape this judgment is through an act of repentance.

Throughout the Bible, God has been portrayed as both savior of the righteous (Ps 64:10) and judge of the wicked (Rom 1:18); as one who always rewards those who, as believers, are reverent toward Him, and punishes those who fail to recognize Him as Lord and honor Him.

But the Lord shall endure forever; He has prepared His throne for judgment. He shall judge the world in righteousness, And He shall administer judgment for the peoples in uprightness. (Ps 9:7-8)

Abraham said of God: *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25).* Here Abraham, in his appeal to God for the city of Sodom, acknowledged God as the ultimate judge of right and wrong and that God would judge according to His righteous character and not punish the righteous with the wicked.

Moses also wrote: *For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He. (Deut 32:4)*

Although judgment for sin begins at death for all of the unsaved, Scripture speaks of several final judgments that will eventually come to all of the unrighteousness, such as the final judgment of fallen angels and Satan (Jude 6, Rev 20:10), final judgment of the unsaved (Matt 25: 32-46) and even final judgment for demons who cried out to Jesus pleading: *"What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?"* (Matt 8:29)

But believers need to remind themselves that judgment itself is not a negative event but a positive one for those who have entered into a relationship with God through faith and trust their future to His mercy, grace and forgiveness. God loves His adopted children, so we have no need to fear judgment. Christ has already paid the penalty for all his sisters and brothers!

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us. (1 John 4:17-19)

Jesus also reminded His followers of the rewards waiting those who have been faithful in their work for the Kingdom (Matt 25:34-36, 1 Cor 3:10-15).

Paul spoke of his future prize saying: *Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Tim 4:8)*

There are questions about how many judgments will take place and when they will take place. But regardless on the differing opinions, we know for certain that the Lord has appointed a time when He will judge all of mankind, for the book of Revelation speaks of a final judgment.

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Rev 20:11-15)

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

Another important teaching that can be found in eschatology is the certainty of Christ's return. The New Testament is replete with promises of the bodily, visible, sudden return of Jesus to this earth.

When Jesus ascended into heaven the angels spoke to the disciples saying:
"Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

Jesus had earlier told His disciples: *Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other* (Matt 24:30-31)

When Jesus returns one of the things believers have to look forward to is the "Rapture of the Church". Paul explains: *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.* (1 Thess 4:16-18)

As with other point, in eschatology, there are different views concerning Christ's return and how the rapture figures into what is known as the Great Tribulation, an event believed by some as being foretold of in the books of Daniel and Revelation.

The great majority of Christians throughout history have held the view that Christ will return only once, when both the righteous and unrighteous will rise from the grave for either judgment or reward. On the other hand, most Dispensationalists believe that there will be two phases in the second coming in that the Lord will come first to carry the church to heaven before the Great Tribulation and then return again for the final judgment.

Both of these views have their strengths and weaknesses and their defenders claim support from Scripture. But regardless of what view one may hold, the return of Christ is assured and physical death is not the end of our story as Jesus is coming for both the living and the dead.

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth — those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:28-29)

There are also different opinions among denominations concerning the one-thousand reign of Christ on earth, after His return, known as the millennium period spoken of in Revelation 20:4-6.

And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. (Rev 20:4-6)

There are three basic positions on the millennium: Amillennial, Postmillennial, and Premillennial.

The Amillennial position is that the millennium refers to Christ's spiritual rule today from heaven. This is also known as the symbolic view of the millennium because Christ does not really come down from heaven in order to rule in person.

The Postmillennial position is that Christ will exercise a spiritual rule through preaching and teaching in order to improve the world as a kind of precursor to His return.

The Premillennial position is that there is an actual thousand-year reign that will fulfill God's promises to Israel about a return to their land and all the blessings that come with it. On this view, Revelation 20 is to be taken literally and not symbolically.

In large part, the problem we face in eschatology is that much of it is based upon the book of Revelation which is an apocalyptic book penned by the Apostle John while living in exile and during a time of great persecution of the church and it is based on visions written in symbolic imagery. It is precisely because of its symbolic approach that the book is, in some ways, difficult to understand, and many have interpreted it differently.

When reading and interpreting Revelation, all believers should heed the advice found in Eerdaman's Handbook of the Bible; namely that "Revelation belongs to a particular type of literature-apocalyptic. It is poetic and visionary, expressing its meaning through symbols and imagery. To take this picture-language literally, or treat the book as a logical treatise or timetable, is to go against the whole spirit." For one thing, John's visions are not always sequential; that is to say, John is not trying to write a narrative history in which events follow a sequential timeline, one

after the other. The events described in one vision may or may not be followed by the events described in a later vision. Yes, all the visions given to John will happen in history, but they probably will not happen in the order of the visions given. Thus, we should always keep in mind the soundest rule of all when interpreting Scripture, especially prophecy: always interpret obscure passages in light of clear passages.

Having emphasized these warnings about a too-easily-gained interpretation of Revelation, we should also point out that God would not give us incomprehensible Scripture. God wants to be understood. That is why He inspired men to write His words. This does not mean that no Scripture is a challenge to our understanding; only that we should take heart when we read something as challenging as Revelation. John's vision is related to and echoes figures and symbols found in other parts of Scripture. Thus it is no surprise that so many faithful expositors of Scripture would disagree over the meaning of the details of the visions. Nevertheless, the main thrust of what God wants to reveal to us through John comes through clear enough. God triumphs in the end and His chosen ones become citizens of a new earth in glorified resurrected bodies, while those who rejected Jesus suffer eternal punishment.

We also would like to remind the reader that despite all of the different interpretations of the book of Revelation its main theme is still the main theme of the Bible, which is clearly stated when John writes: *Then I saw another angel*

flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth — to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people — saying with a loud voice, "Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water." (Rev 14:6-7)

In summary, we merely want to point out that the study of eschatology should be undertaken, not so much to gain a perfect knowledge of a chronological timetable of the impending events or exactly when or exactly how they will happen (an impossible task), but to try and obtain a bit more reverence for the majesty of God, His control of coming times ahead, His love and protection for us, and most important, how our life at present will impact that final day when we all will stand before His throne.

HERE-AND-NOW USEFULNESS

The study of eschatology is not something just for theologians or writers looking for interesting material to make the next end-of-the-world novel or film. It is useful for all believers. Theologian Wayne Grudem captures the practical importance of the teaching about final judgment in particular by drawing our attention to the fact that: "The doctrine of final judgment has several positive moral influences in our lives.... "It satisfies our inward sense of a need for justice in the world.... It

enables us to forgive others freely.... It provides motive for righteous living....
Provides a great motive for evangelism.” (Systematic Theology)

By studying eschatology, believers can rest assured that justice will be done in this world. We can more easily forgive others because we realize that the person who has hurt us is liable before God and will either come to know God’s grace and receive forgiveness from God or never know God’s grace and receive judgment for that offense. We have a special motive for doing good because when we stand before God, who we desire to love with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, we want to hear that wonderful phrase: “Well done thy good and faithful servant!” We have the supreme motive for evangelism, for we know the unspeakably terrifying end for all those who reject the gospel of God.

In any study of future events it is important to bear in mind that, although eschatology is given by God for our benefit, we must not let our concern for the future rule our present life. In other words there is a danger of getting so wrapped up about future battles to be fought that we become blind to the battle of today. Paul warned the church at Thessalonica that not only was there a lawless one to come but lawlessness itself was already at work in the world.

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, ... Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son

of perdition, ... And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, (2 Thess 2:1-8)

In other words, the church at Thessalonica had a present spirit of lawlessness to contend with and it is on that and not some future event that Paul wanted to focus their attention.

The same can be seen in the book of Revelation itself. The visions that John experienced and wrote about are filled with imagery of warfare against the dragon, the beast, the anti-christ and the false prophet to come. It reveals the wrath of God on the ungodly in visions of plagues, bowls of punishment being poured out on the earth, and trumpets that sound His judgments. But before John's visions Jesus instructs him to: *Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches. (Rev 1:19-20)*

John was commanded first write to seven particular churches of his day with a message of encouragement, admonishment and warning. They were facing such problems as persecution, losing their first love of the Lord, luke-warmness and

defection from the moral teachings of the Apostles. The church at Thyatira was even involved with immorality and a false prophetess called Jezebel. They had reached a point of being threatened by God with a sick bed of suffering.

Again we must always remind ourselves that in being too worried about the Dragon (a figure of Satan) of the future we might miss the Dragon we have to contend with at present.

In Matthew's gospel, after discussing the destruction of the temple and what was to happen at the close of the age, Jesus gave a warning His disciples:

"Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt 24:45-51)

We may all disagree on how to interpret Jesus' teaching about the end of the age and about the timing of His return, but the above warning about the "*faithful and wise servant*" is not up for debate and this is what deserves our closest study.

The sure and certain promises of Scripture are that death is imminent for all before the return of Christ, Christ will come again, and that there will be a resurrection of the dead with judgment along with reward or punishment.

This is not to say that we must live our lives in constant introspection or with a morbid attitude, but simply to live life as unto the Lord.

And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. (Col 3:23-24)

Finally, we would like to end this study with an important reminder from theologian R.C. Sproul concerning the world we live in at present. Our world is thoroughly secular, and the message that it conveys to everyone through the media is: "There is no eternity, there is no eternal perspective.... All reality is restricted or limited to the now.... Life is to be consumed at the present." But the Bible speaks with an eternal judgment and warns that what we do in this life will be accounted for (2 Cor 5: 9-11). It is with this perspective in mind that we should

live our life... in light of eternity. A Christian's values are to be measured by transcendent norms of eternal significance" (Lifeviews). Amen.