

PART 12: LAST THINGS

The study of last things, known in theology as eschatology, covers a multitude of subjects such as the rapture of the church, the coming of the Antichrist, the end of world and has been the subject of much debate and disagreements among Christians. But regardless of our different opinions its primary purpose is to motivate our obedience and give hope for the future (Deut. 29:29; Rom. 15:4; 1 Peter. 1:3; John 15:14-15).

This study will not so much look at the divisions between believers but try and find a common ground and will concentrate on three major points: the impending judgment of all of mankind, the return of Christ, and the here-and-now-usefulness of being mindful of what happens when God puts an end to history.

THE IMPENDING JUDGMENT OF ALL MANKIND

Before His ascension to heaven Christ promised His disciples that He would return one day bringing His kingdom with Him. At that time He will not only come for those of His children who are living but also for all the saints that have experienced death. At 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. God also promised to create a new heaven and a new earth, and bless His chosen ones with a final release from sin and death.

"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. ...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)

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).

It is only in this life that mankind is giving the opportunity to respond in faith and enter into a relationship with God and receive forgiveness for after death 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)

For the righteous death will bring the full goodness of God but for the unrighteous it will bring the immediate judgment of eternal punishment. 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 torment, 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)

Although judgment for sin begins at death for the unsaved, Scripture also 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!

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)*

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

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)*

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 points in eschatology there are different views concerning Christ's return and how the rapture figures into what is known as the Great Tribulation. 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.

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.

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. But the purpose of this study is not so much to explain the impending events but to try and obtain a bit more reverence for the majesty of God, confidence in 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

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 with worry. 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.

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 but the above warning about the "*faithful and wise servant*" is not up for debate and this is what deserves our closest study.

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)

Theologian R.C. Sproul reminds us that the message of the present world is thoroughly secular in that it conveys to everyone through the media that "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). "Our lives are forever. Beyond the secular...there is the eternal. That is what Christian faith is all about." ([Lifeviews](#)) And it is with this perspective we should live our life. Amen.