

LESSON 9 - GOD FINISHES

The Doctrine of Last Things

“From first to last, and not merely in epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving... the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, and of every Christian existence and of the whole Church.” - Jurgen Moltmann¹

Where is your ultimate hope?

The final, or some would say, first, subject of the Bible is the promise of God to finish his work of redeeming humanity and all creation. A discussion of the end times naturally conjures up images of popular Christian books in recent history like the *Left Behind Series* or *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. Formally speaking, this subject on the last things or end times is called *eschatology*, from the Greek word *eschatos* meaning last things. People often associate the subject with speculation about when the rapture will occur, the current state of Israel, who is the anti-Christ, and the judgment that will pour out on the earth. This is not primarily what eschatology is about. It's about hope! It's about the vindication of God and his people and the restoration of all creation. It's about good triumphing over evil and the end of sin, death, and all evil forces. It's about the victory of the Son of God for once and all. The King of kings and the Prince of Peace dwelling with his people here on earth. The work of God to make creation and fill it with people who reflect his image finally being completed. Eschatology is about the hope of the gospel.

SCRIPTURE

Read and Reflect on the following passage: Matt. 24; 1 Pet. 1:3-12; Rev. 21-22

REFLECTIONS

Why does Jesus tell the disciples to watch?

What is the hope of a Christian?

How is watching related to Christian hope?

How does the gospel bring hope?

Do you find this comforting when you face difficulties in life?

PRAYER

Reflect on where your ultimate hope lies. Pray the Lord would help in your understanding of the future he intends to bring. Thank him for all the wonderful provisions he has made and the tremendous promise to redeem *everything!* Ask the Lord that he would help you to live your life in accordance with the future glory he will bring.

PRACTICE

The spiritual discipline to practice is *sabbath*. Our ultimate rest is in Christ's finished work (Heb. 4) and we are waiting for the final rest to come in the kingdom of heaven. However, in our extremely busy, incessantly stimulated culture through TV, games, cell phones, movies, music, radio, etc., we need to stop and remember who God is. Sabbath is a practice of *ceasing* by stop our constant striving to be God thinking we can create the heavens and the earth in a day, *resting* in the reality that God is in control and the world will be fine if we take a break, *embracing* God's calling on your life rather than your ambitions to rule the world, and *feasting* by worship of God and with people who restore our souls for another busy week. Sabbath is very difficult for North Americans. Take one day and do no work. Perhaps fast from TV, your cell phone or video games. Schedule time with people who fill you up. Remind yourself you cannot do it all. God is in control.²

Eschatology in the Now

WILLOW GLEN BIBLE CHURCH

The Future: Matt 25:31-34, 41; 1 Cor 15:22-26, 40-44, 50-58; 1 Thess 5:1-11; 2 Thess 2:1-12; Rev 3:5; 20:12; 21:1-22:5

There will be the imminent, bodily and visible return of Jesus Christ to this earth to bring to completion His kingdom, to judge the world in righteousness, to fulfill His prophetic promises to Israel and to the rest of mankind concerning the future, and to create a new heaven and a new earth. All people who have died will be raised from the dead, and those who have been redeemed will participate in eternal life in the presence of God, but those who have rejected Christ will suffer eternal punishment and separation from God.

OVERVIEW OF THE CATEGORIES

We have several factors to sort through with this large and easily confusing subject. First, eschatology covers the course of history. It serves to tell us that history is going somewhere. God is directing history toward an end result, the redemption of creation. A Christian view of history is optimistic if you are a believer, but pessimistic if you are not. Second, it deals with what happens when we die. This is referred to as the *intermediate state*, the time between death and the final resurrection. Thirdly, it deals with eternity and God defeating evil forever. This vindication of God results in the judgment of everyone who has ever lived, all angels and demons, and Satan himself. The result is either eternity with God - "heaven," or eternity without God - "hell." Fourth, it addresses the kingdom of God and the new heavens and new earth. Our ultimate hope is not to be in heaven floating around in spirit bodies. Our ultimate hope is to live in our resurrected glorified bodies in the presence of Jesus on earth, in the kingdom, and in the City of God forever and ever. All of this serves to give hope in the midst of suffering, perseverance through persecution, and motivation to live out our eternal destiny in Christ now. Eschatology is ultimately about our hope in Christ that sin and evil will end. Therefore, the Bible considers it imperative that we live in light of that future reality now but putting sin to death and persevering in the face of evil even to death.

We must first begin discussing the nature of Biblical prophecy and how to understand it. How are we to interpret biblical prophecy, especially the book of Revelation? The *futuristic* asserts that most of the events in Revelation are yet to be fulfilled in the future. The *preterist* view sees most of the events referring to things that took place during the first century. They are primarily in the past. The *historical* view sees the events as in the past and in the future most commonly with increasing intensity as history progresses. The *symbolic view* sees the events as spiritual realities and timeless truths, not necessarily literal historical occurrences.³ The writers behind *The Left Behind Series* and *The Late, Great Planet Earth* ascribe to a futuristic view fueled by dispensationalism which is relatively new in Christian history. It takes a more literal approach to reading the prophetic material in the Bible. It was primarily developed by John Darby in the 1800s and spread through grassroots movements throughout the United States. The events of World War I & II led to increased interest in and popularity of this view, and much of the date speculation about the rapture is peculiar to Christianity in the United States. But if we ask what has been most commonly taught across Christian history across many traditions it would be either the historical premillennial or the more symbolic amillennial view.

HOPE FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

It is very important to recognize that from Genesis to Revelation, biblical prophecy often comes in the context of suffering, persecution, and judgment. The significance of this can-

not be overstated. In the Old Testament, God's people have expected the *coming redeemer*. This expectation builds on itself for the redeemer to come and fulfill the office of prophet, priest, and king (Dt. 18:15; Ps. 110:4; Zec. 9:9). The coming redeemer is to be the Immanuel, literally "God with us" (Is. 7:14). He will be a *suffering servant* (Is. 42:1-4; 49:5-7; 52:13-15; 53) and the *son of man* (Dan. 7:13-14). He will bring the *kingdom of God* with him and he will establish a *new covenant* (Jer. 31:31-32). Additionally, God promises to bring the *restoration of Israel* (Is. 11:11) and that there will be an *outpouring of his Spirit* (Joel 2:28-29). This restoration will not occur without repentance (Is. 24-27). An important theme frequently mentioned in the prophets is *the day of the Lord*, which will be a day of wrath for some and blessing for others (Is. 13; Amos 5:18; Joel 2:32; Zeph. 1:14-15; Mal. 4:2, 5). God will also bring the *new heavens and new earth* where the stain of sin and evil will be removed (Is. 65:17; 66:22). These hopes for Old Testament people were also believed to take place in the near *and* distant future.⁴

The New Testament sees the coming of the redeemer, or Messiah (Matt. 1:20-23) but with *partial* fulfillment of the OT prophecies (Matt. 2:5-6; 2:14-15; 21:4-5; Jn 1:11; 19:34; Acts 2:24-32; 1:9). The great event promised in the Old Testament has taken place but much is still to come in the future.⁵ The kingdom came in part through Jesus Christ who is the fulfillment of the new covenant (Heb. 8:8-13). The day of the Lord was partially fulfilled in judgment of nationalistic Israel with the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD. But the final judgment day for all nations and people has not yet taken place. Eschatology in the NT is therefore, *inaugurated* or "already but not yet." The blessings of the present age are the guarantee and pledge of the greater blessings to come in the future (Acts 1:11; Heb. 9:27-28; Tit. 2:11-13). Oscar Cullmen put it well when he said the believer lives in the age between D-Day when WWII was effectively won by the allies and V-Day when the Axis powers and the Nazi Regime finally surrendered.⁶

History therefore has a purpose and a goal: the redemption of all things in the new heavens and the new earth. God is the Lord of history and history is the working out of his purposes. All things are under his control, and all of them are bringing about the culmination of his redemptive purposes. Christ is appropriately the center and climax of history. We are beyond the halfway point in the eyes of God. However, during this age both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan continue to grow and grow. For every invention that appears to be a great advancement there are corresponding disastrous consequences; consider the splitting of an atom and the atomic bomb. The same is true for cars, computers, iPhones, and every other kind of human achievement. The treaties of Europe, intended to ensure peace, were also a direct contributor to WWI & II with the formation of national alliances. However, like all other pivot points in history that God has brought about, there will be continuity and discontinuity. The significance is that what we do now will have an impact on the future to come (1 Cor. 3:14; 15:58; Col. 3:1; Rev. 14:13; 21:24, 26).⁷

Christianity's view of the future then is basically optimistic. Since we are in the church age where the kingdom has been inaugurated, we can have hope in the midst of suffering and persecution and by faith in God we will in the end overcome (Rom. 8:37). We know that the present sufferings pale in comparison to the glory to come (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:7-18). Now we experience the blessings of the Holy Spirit. We must begin the work of living out the holy life we are called to *now* in anticipation of the glory to come. Yet the tension we live in ought to give us humility, for the reality is that our flesh is still sinful even though we can have victory through the work of the Holy Spirit. We still suffer because sin has not been abolished, but it is in the midst of suffering and persecution that God's glory can be clearly displayed (Rom. 5:3-4; 8:17-18; 2 Cor. 4:1-18; 12:9; 1 Pet. 4:12-13; Heb. 12:11). It also means we are resident aliens in the world (1 Pet. 1:1). We are to be in the world but not of the world. We live in a tension between the culture we live in and the culture of the kingdom. Furthermore, we must be careful to not take justice in vengeance. The church does not bear the sword of war but the gospel of peace. Eschatology teaches us that God will bring justice very soon. His impending justice is just around the corner though it may feel far off to us. We need not fear any evil thing for God will be victorious and he will vindicate his people as he did Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 3:18-22).

Eschatology and the Future

SIGNS AND REWARDS

Jesus told his disciples to watch for the signs of the times (Mt. 24). What is to be made of the signs of the times? Lets first review the purpose of the signs and rewards. Then we will view the signs in relation to the second coming of Christ. The primary purpose Christ tells the disciples to be watchful of the signs of the times is *so that they are not deceived* (Mt. 24:4). It is a charge to continue to be faithful no matter what may come (Lk. 12:35-48; Mt. 25). We do not know when Jesus will return and it could be at any moment. Knowing that Christ could return at any time, what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to stock up on canned goods and bottled water? Are we supposed to prepare our bomb shelters? Are we supposed to frivolously spend and not follow through on commitments since we might be raptured tomorrow? No. We are supposed to be diligent in loving people, pursuing the fruit of the Spirit, winning people to faith in Christ, and using the gifts God has given us (1 Pet. 4:7-11). We are supposed to be busy living the Christian life! Jesus warns his disciples of the signs so they are not deceived by false Christ's, false teachers, and fears of death and destruction. If we focus on interpreting the newspaper as an indication of the "signs", we are in fact likely to be guilty of being faithless and judged for not investing the talents God has given us. Amos 5:18 strongly warns against those who long for the day of the Lord, assuming

it will be a day when they escape the hardship of this life. In fact, it will be a day of darkness. A day when they will give an account for the Lord and be judged.

This brings us to the passages that speak of rewards (1 Cor. 3:8-15; Mt. 25:14-30; and many others). But we should be very careful how we understand them. They are gifts of God's grace and not a reflection of differing degrees of enjoyment but rather of responsibility. Rewards are not earned. Rewards are not bigger houses or more material goods in heaven. This reveals an American materialistic view of heaven that is unbiblical. Rewards are the quality of Christian conduct, the stewardship of our gifts, the impact we have on others for their faith in Christ and growth in righteousness, greater responsibility in the kingdom, and ultimately to be like Jesus and see him face-to-face (Lk. 16:10-12; 19:17-19; 2 Cor. 1:14; 1 Thess. 2:19-20; 1 Cor. 13:12; 1 Jn. 3:2).⁸ Judgment day will reveal the quality of your work and whether it was actually good for the kingdom. This pertains to any kind of job someone does but especially ministries. Some ministries *look* very successful in this life but are built on worldly principles and will be revealed to be worthless since they were not built on Christ. It will be a shameful day when some Christians reveal their work was all for naught. On the other hand, faithful and humble stewardship of one's resources and gifts will result in praise from God, "Well done, good and faithful servant." What greater reward could there be?

Now let's return to the signs. There are specific signs things that precede the second coming. The signs of the times are not exclusively miraculous or catastrophic events such as a massive earthquake. These are but the birth pains. They also do not refer to just the last days but characterize the entire church age which is in the last days ever since Jesus' ascension (Heb. 1:2). They point to what God has done in the past and will do in the future, the ongoing battle between the kingdom of forces of evil. They implore us to make a decision, and call for constant readiness.⁹ The specific signs Christ speaks of are the proclamation of the gospel to all the nations, the salvation of the fulness of "Israel" (which could be understood spiritually as all believers Jews and Gentiles, or literally), the great tribulation, the apostasy, the antichrist, wars, earthquakes, and famines. The first two reveal the grace of God. The next reveal opposition to God. The last three reveal the judgment of God.¹⁰

THE SECOND COMING

The second coming of Christ is the event every Christian anticipates. It is the point in which all will be revealed and there will be no more secrets or mysteries. But it is subject to a variety of interpretations concerning the events surrounding it. The return of Christ is both near and far off. It is near in that we can expect it at any moment and therefore should be ready to see him. It is far off in that God's forbearance is at work in order that as many as possible may come to Christ to whom God may demonstrate his love, mercy, and compas-

sion (2 Pet. 3:3-9). Christ's return is a literal and bodily return in all his glory for all to recognize and see. It will be clear to all that he is King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:11-21).

The order of these events, the signs and Christ's return depends on various views on the millennium. There are four major views: postmillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, historic premillennialism, and amillennialism. The key deciding factors for each is how one interprets prophecy, whether literally or figuratively, and how one understands the relationship of Israel and the church. Dispensational views take a strict literal reading and an absolute distinction between Israel and the church and the prophecies related to each. The postmillennialist view essentially says that one day the earth will be Christianized and then Christ will return to a happy earth, few theologians and scholars ascribe to this view. The most dominant positions in church history are the historic view and the amillennialist view. The historic premillennial view sees overlap between Israel and the church, takes the millennial reign of Rev. 20:1-6 literally but has varying degrees of "literal" or "figurative" for the rest of Revelation, depending on what is the best reading of the passage. The amillennial view sees the entire church age as the millennium and entirety of which is characterized by the signs. For them, Christ rules in heaven now and through the church. When he returns the kingdom will come in its fullness and eternity will begin. Amillennialism is by far the simplest to grasp. But takes a more symbolic and figurative interpretation of the passages in question with Israel and the church, having little distinction between them.

It may be helpful to give one example contrasting how a dispensational premillennial view vs. amillennial view would interpret the allegiance of the Beast and the Dragon of Revelation 13. The former have tended to interpret it as a future prediction of an oppressive one world government that is anti-Christian. The latter interprets it as a reflecting a theme throughout the Bible of the arrogance of Empires whose pride makes them enemies of God even if they view themselves as God's agents.

Here is a brief synopsis of how the historic premillennial view works. As history progresses towards the ultimate goal, eventually the last things will come. Persecution of believers will increase in intensity as will wars and natural disasters (Mt 24). The great tribulation of seven intense years of suffering of believers and wrath upon unbelievers will take place (Dan 9:20-27; Rev 16). During this time the antichrist and his false prophet will be revealed. The state will be in league with Satan (Rev 12-14). Satan and all those in league with him will gather for a battle with God's people. Then Jesus Christ will literally return as believers still living will be raptured to meet him in the air and then immediately descend with him to reign on earth. He will defeat Satan and all those with him in a single blow (Rev 19:15). Christ will then establish the millennial kingdom on earth and believers will rule with him. After the millennium is over (Rev. 20:1-6) then judgment of Satan takes place and the new heavens and earth will begin.

LIFE AFTER LIFE AFTER DEATH

Since death is the result of sin, upon death one's soul or spirit is separated from their body. This is not what human beings were created for; we were intended to be a soul-body unity. Death is unnatural. It is also necessary that we die for this corruptible body must pass away (1 Cor. 15:42-49). Only Christ's death satisfies the penalty for sin, but our death does mean that we have ceased fighting sin. Therefore for the Christian, death was once a curse and now it is a blessing because we enter into his presence (Phil. 1:21; 2 Cor. 5:8). After death, one enters into what is called the intermediate state, or the realm of the dead. The Christian goes to heaven to be in the presence of Jesus. This is also referred to as paradise or Abraham's bosom (Matt 17:3; Rom. 8:38-39; Phil 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:1-10; 11:4; Lk. 16:19-31; 23:42-43; Rev. 7:4). Heaven is the realm in which God reigns.

However, the Bible says very little about the *nature* of this existence. It is clear about the *quality* of the existence which is different for the righteous and the wicked. The quality is described as the ideal of being with the Lord and his people for all eternity without the presence of sin, evil, or suffering. The nature of that existence, of this *intermediate state*, is described as people being "unclothed" or lacking a body, both for the righteous and the wicked until the resurrection. Little else is said, thus scholar N.T. Wright states it well that the Bible focuses on our "life after life after death." The focus is on the resurrection and eternity in either the kingdom of God or hell. Our hope is not simply life after death in heaven. Our ultimate hope is in the resurrection and being in God's presence with eternal life in the new heavens and new earth. There is therefore, no discussion in the Bible about a believer going to a "half-way" house for further purification (i.e. purgatory). The believer is purified upon death (Heb. 12:23).

As for those who do not have faith in Jesus Christ, they enter into the realm of the dead: *sheol* in the OT and *hades* (Mt. 11:23; 16:18) in the NT. While the two terms are not exactly the same, the NT does build upon the OT teaching. Luke 16:19-31 depicts the rich man suffering in Hades. Hell, or the lake of fire, is the place all opposed to God will go after the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment for all eternity. Hell is reserved for Satan, the fallen angels, and those who rejected Christ. It is a conscious eternal torment in a resurrected body. It is referred to by other names such as the Valley of Hinnom (2 Ki. 23:10; 2 Chron. 28:3), Gehenna (Mt 5:22; Mk 9:43; Lk 12:5; Jam 3:6), the Abyss or "bottomless" (Lk 8:31; Rev 9:1-11, 11:7, 17:8, 20:1-3). It is described with various metaphors like consuming fire and weeping and gnashing of teeth (Is. 29:6; 30:27). Hell is most simply separation from God who is the source of all that is good. Hell is something that the wicked choose. God desires that no one should go to hell and that all should repent and receive his mercy. Hell is the result of being given our greatest desires and the fruit of our rebellion, idols that are creations of our own hands. It is an everlasting torment because one lives without the very thing they based

their life upon. Since unbelievers are judged according to their works, there are varying degrees of punishment in hell (Lk. 12:47-48; Mt. 16:47; Rom. 2:6; Rev. 20:12; 22:12). There is no biblical basis for universalism or annihilationism. These two errant views teach that either everyone will eventually be saved or that the wicked will be extinguished and will cease to exist. These other views should be rejected because quite simply no one speaks of hell more than Jesus, the loving savior and judge of all.

In conclusion, the point of all of this is that Christ will return literally and victoriously. He will deliver his people once and for all. He will resurrect all people: those who have faith in him for glory and peace with him in the kingdom of God for all eternity, but for those who reject him to eternal condemnation and separation from God. Our ultimate hope is essential to the gospel. God will be victorious over all sin, death, evil, and Satan through Jesus Christ. God will bring justice. He will not overlook the evils of this world but he will judge them and purify his creation and restore it to an even greater glory because the new heavens and earth will be incorruptible. Thus, we have hope no matter what may come knowing by faith God will do this. We have hope knowing that our work, our sufferings, and history itself will have meaning and be redeemed. The world is not a total loss and our efforts are not pointless. They will impact the kingdom of God in the new heavens and new earth. We will enjoy many of the pleasures of this life in glorified resurrected bodies that do not decay in a perfect earth, in a perfect city, in a perfect job, in perfect community, all as we perfectly worship the wonderful and mighty and loving and perfect triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for all of eternity.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Surprised by Hope by NT Wright

The Bible and the Future by Anthony Hoekema

Culture Making by Andy Crouch

¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 46, as quoted in Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 3.

² Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

³ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 1160-1161.

⁴ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 11-12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸ *Doctrine*, 420.

⁹ Hoekema, 133-135.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.