

The Doctrine of the Last Things

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he doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology) is a broad topic. It includes the issues of 1) temporal death; 2) the condition of the soul between death and the resurrection; 3) the second advent of Christ; 4) the resurrection of the dead; 5) the final judgment; 6) the end of the world; 7) eternal damnation; and 8) eternal salvation. It is called the doctrine of the Last Things because it deals with those things that come at the end of the present world, either for the soul individually in death or for the world corporately at the end of the age.

When a person dies physically, or bodily, there occurs a separation of the body and the soul. The body has served as a sort of shell, housing the soul, and at death the soul departs its house and moves on. The souls of all men are immortal. They cannot cease to exist. The bodies of all men also will live forever, even though for a short time they go into the ground and decay, awaiting the resurrection, either unto eternal life or eternal damnation. They again cannot cease to be. And it really doesn't matter what a person thinks or believes about this. His belief or unbelief cannot change what is. He is immortal whether he believes it or not.

However, there is a very great difference in destination based upon whether one believes in Christ or not, that is, whether one believes in the holy Gospel, 'how that Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor 15:3). Upon physical death, the bodies of both believers and unbelievers return to dust because of sin and await the great day of the resurrection of the dead. Their souls, however, go in opposite directions. The souls of believers go to 'paradise' (Luke 23:43), while those of unbelievers go to 'prison' (1 Peter 3:19). As to where these are, Gerhard writes, 'Scripture, by a general appellation, speaks of a place. Not that it is a corporeal (bodily, SW) and physical place, properly so called, but because it is a "where" into which souls, separated from their bodies, are brought together. Scripture enumerates only two such receptacles, or habitations, of the souls, one of which, prepared for the souls of the godly, is called by the most ordinary appellation (name, SW) heaven, and the other, intended for the souls of the wicked, is called hell.' (*Doctrinal Theology*, p. 632.)

The death of believers is depicted in Scripture by sweet names, such as 'the gathering to their own people' (Gen 25:8,17); a 'departure in peace' (Luke 2:29); 'a turning away from the evil to come' (Is 57:1); 'a resting or sleeping' (Matt 9:24; 1 Thess 4:13). Death, for them, is the gateway to eternal life. The souls of believers are immediately in God's hand (Acts 7:59,60; Luke 23:46), with Christ in paradise (Phil 1:23; Luke 23:43). They are supremely happy in their new heavenly life (Ps 16:11; Rom 8:18; Rev 14:13). In fact, they are so far removed from all earthly trouble and sorrow that they are completely ignorant of those who live upon earth (Is 63:16), and their needs no longer concern them (Is 57:1,2). In death the soul of the believer is purified of all the remaining dross of original depravity, as the phrase 'in paradise' (Luke 23:43) proves. Paradise is the dwelling place of sinless man.

The death of unbelievers is far different. Death leads them directly into everlasting agony and anguish (Ps 106:16-18; Luke 16:23-31). Their souls are described as 'spirits in prison' (1 Peter 3:19). In their earthly lives they did not want God, and now they are forever without Him. Hell is, by definition, the exclusion of God. If God is a God of comfort, there can be no comfort in hell. It must be a place of total torment. If God is a God of mercy and grace, there can be no mercy or grace in hell. It must be a place of total helplessness and despair. If God is a God of wisdom, there can be no wisdom in hell. It must be a place of total insanity. If God is a God of fellowship and joy, there can be no fellowship or joy in hell. It must be a place of total isolation and sorrow. If God is a God of goodness, there can be no goodness in hell. It must be a place of total wickedness. What an unspeakable tragedy that anyone should end up in this awful place 'prepared for the devil and his angels' (Matt 25:41)!

The Scriptures also clearly teach that our Lord Jesus Christ is going to visibly return to this earth in judgment at an appointed hour (Matt 24:27,30; John 5:28,29; Acts 1:7; 1 Thess 5:2). He will come in great glory, with His holy angels, and will appear to all men at one time (Matt 25:31; 1 Thess 4:16). He will come to judge 'all nations' (Matt 25:31), both the living and the dead. The precise time of Christ's second advent is both unknown (Matt 24:36; Mark 13:32), and unknowable to men (Matt 24:44; Mark 13:33-36; 1 Thess 5:2,3). However, while we should not try to compute the time of the Lord's return, we should carefully observe the signs of the times, which God has appointed in order to arouse us to greater watchfulness and preparedness (Matt 24:32,33; Luke 21:29-31; 2 Thess 2:3ff). As sickness is often a sign of impending death, so also the disturbances in the world foretell its final destruction. Luther writes:

'Heaven and earth creak and crack like an old house ready to crash and collapse and act in every way as though they divined that the world is soon to come to an end and that The Day is close at hand.' (SL VII:1480f.)

At His second advent, Christ will raise both believers and unbelievers bodily from the grave (John 5:28,29). However, while the same body that went into the grave will rise from the grave, it will have new qualities. The resurrected bodies of the believers will be spiritual (1 Cor 15:44), that is, suited to the spiritual, heavenly life with God in glory. Holy Scripture describes the spiritual bodies of God's saints as incorruptible, glorious, and powerful (1 Cor 15:42-52); as 'fashioned like unto His [Christ's] glorious body' (Phil 3:21); and as like unto 'the angels of God in heaven' (Luke 20:36; Matt 22:30). Francis Pieper writes:

‘Since seed-time and harvest, food and raiment, etc., cease with this world, the spiritual body will no more be an eating, sleeping, digesting body, but will be spiritually fed and sustained by God and be indestructible life.’ (*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol III, p. 538).

Following the second advent of Christ and the resurrection of the dead will be the final Judgment (Matt 25:31,32). The basis of the judgment will be the Word of God (John 12:48; Rom 2:16; Rev 20:12). The criteria of the judgment will be men’s works (2 Cor 5:10; Matt 25:35-45). Believers, however, will be judged only according to their good works (Matt 25:34-40; Rev 12:11). Their evil works, or sins, have been forgiven, cast into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19). Luther writes:

‘The judgment is abolished; it concerns the believer as little as it does the angels... All believers pass from this life into heaven without any judgment, and will even be the judge of others.’ (SL VII:1974,1975.)

Following the final judgment, Christ will cast the wicked into eternal hell (Matt 25:46), and lead His saints into eternal glory (Heb 9:28). Holy Scripture describes the sufferings of the damned as ‘tribulation and anguish’ (Rom 2:9), ‘being in torments’ (Luke 16:23); ‘being tormented in this flame’ (Luke 16:24), ‘being cast into unquenchable fire, where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched’ (Mark 9:43,44), ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (Matt 8:12), ‘wailing and gnashing of teeth’ (Matt 13:50), etc. Hell’s sufferings far surpass our feeble understanding since they are both continuous and everlasting, the fire burning endlessly and yet not consuming (Mark 3:29). The punishments of hell differ in degree, though, according to the quality and measure of sin (Matt 11:21-24; Luke 12:47,48; Matt 23:15). The sin that will be punished most severely is that of malicious opposition to the Gospel of Christ (Matt 11:16-24).

Holy Scripture also describes the everlasting life in glory and bliss for all true believers in Christ Jesus (Rom 5:1,2; Eph 2:4-6). This life eternal consists in the full and perpetual vision and enjoyment of God (Job 19:25-27; Acts 7:55; Matt 5:8; 2 Cor 5:1-6; 1 Cor 13:12; 1 John 3:2). Since God is a God of love, we will then experience the fullness of what love is. Since He is a God of peace, we will then experience the fullness of what real peace is. Since He is a God of wisdom and understanding, we will then know fully ‘even as also [we are] known.’ In short, all of the attributes of God, which we find so pleasant and agreeable in this earthly life, we shall then enjoy to the fullest extent. Thus far, we have had but a taste of God. Then, we shall drink of Him fully. Luther writes:

‘We have the promise and hope of heaven, and the recompense and reward of our present misery will be so great that we shall rebuke ourselves severely for ever having dropped one tear or sigh on account of this contempt and ingratitude of the world. “Why,” we shall say, “did we not suffer even worse things? I never would have believed that there could be such surpassing glory in eternal life; else I should not have so dreaded to suffer even greater things.”’ (SL II:1237; Erl., Exeg. Opp. Lat. 9,235.)